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## What is a job interview and why do organizations use it?

### The role of a job interview when selecting employees

Mark and Rachel just graduated from the same university with a degree in mechanical engineering. They are ready to enter the labour market and start their quest for the ideal job. They both have identified a handful of organizations that have a good reputation and are looking for engineers with a background like theirs, but it is their first time applying for “real” jobs. What will the hiring process look like for them? Here is a snapshot of what they might be expected to face.

Initially, Mark and Rachel will be asked to formally apply to each position (most likely online) and to provide information allowing the hiring organization to engage in an initial screening procedure. They may be asked to send a resume, a cover letter, proofs of their education credentials, and perhaps a list of references. This initial screening stage

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has two objectives: First, the organization wants to ensure that applicants like Mark and Rachel possess the minimum requirements to perform the job, before investing further time and resources assessing their candidacy. Second, if they apply for the same position, Mark and Rachel will compete against each other and likely against other job applicants for the same position (or positions). If the ratio of the number of applicants on the number of jobs available is quite large, the organization may not have the resources to assess all applicants in depth. It thus has to make quick screening decisions based on limited information in order to eliminate the least qualified candidates and to focus only on a smaller pool of promising individuals.

If Mark and Rachel pass this first hurdle, they may be asked (on some occasions) to complete tests to further assess personal characteristics that the organization deems important for joining their team. This can include assessments of cognitive abilities, personality traits, work style preferences, integrity, or values. But what is usually at the core of the selection process is the job interview. Surveys conducted around the world are unanimous: most organizations include some form of job interview as part of their hiring process<sup>[1]</sup>. It is therefore very unlikely that Mark or Rachel will ever get a job offer before interviewing with one or more representatives from the hiring organization.

As we will see in more detail later, interviews can take multiple forms, can be more or less effective at identifying the best candidate for the position, and can leave positive or negative memories for those who experienced it. Yet, independently of all this, the job interview always has a special status for all organizations: It is a gate through which almost all job applicants have to pass before they become organization members. The interviewer (or interviewers, in some cases) is the gatekeeper, whose role is to verify that the applicant

is worthy before he or she can enter. In other words, if the organization is a high-end nightclub, the interviewer is the bouncer deciding if party-seekers at the door correspond to the profile of clients that the club wants. Despite the important role of job interviews, both applicants and interviewers are often non-experts who enter the interview room with mixed feelings. They understand the importance of this encounter for their future (or the future of their team, department, or organization) and thus want to demonstrate professionalism, impress their interaction partner, and make optimal decisions. At the same time, they may be uncertain about what to expect from the interview, experience anxiety about how to behave, and worry about making mistakes.

The goal of this book is to present an overview of the job interview that can be useful to a variety of audiences that have an interest in interviews: applicants currently on the job market, professional Human Resource (HR) managers, managers who are not HR experts but have to act as interviewers to select future employees, or psychology and management students who want to understand how interviews really work. Unlike the majority of interview-related books available on the market, the present text is not a “how-to” guide designed to help applicants “beat” the system with rehearsed answers to popular interview questions. It can, nevertheless, be helpful to better understand what could be expected from an interview and how to best prepare for it. It is also not a book written by a management *guru* or seasoned interviewer describing his or her view on the best interviewing technique based on personal experiences (although I have experience interviewing applicants). Rather, it is a summary of the accumulated evidence about job interviews based on decades of theoretical and empirical research performed by psychology and management scholars from all around the world.

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Throughout this book, I will present scientific facts about the psychology of job interviews. Some of those facts may appear intuitive to readers, whereas others may contradict popular beliefs or personal experiences and hopefully push them to rethink some of their interviewing practices. Although I may use some technical concepts here and there, I will refrain from using scientific jargon or from reporting some of the complex statistical analyses behind my arguments. However, I provide readers with references to some key academic articles, in case they wish to pursue such (possibly difficult, yet) enriching additional readings. I will also illustrate these facts with numerous examples and practical recommendations that will help job applicants to successfully prepare for their interviews and interviewers to conduct interviews and make optimal selection decisions. For instance, throughout the book we will follow Mark and Rachel in their experiences as applicants interviewing for various positions. We will also see what happens (or could happen) on the other side of the table, with interviewers from various organizations (fictive ones, although mostly based on real cases).

### The pursuit of “fit” between applicants and organizations

The job interview sometimes has the reputation of being similar to a police interrogation, in which the applicant is seen as a suspect and the interviewer is portrayed as an investigator trying to uncover evidence of problems associated with past work experiences. I do not pretend that interviewers never act as police investigators (some of them do!) nor do I suggest that applicants never lie or hide things that may hurt their candidacy (they sometimes do, as I will discuss in the fourth

chapter of this book). However, I argue that this reputation is largely unwarranted. Most of the time, the job interview is simply a social interaction between two (or more) individuals who want to exchange information or signals about their qualities<sup>[2]</sup>.

Both applicants and interviewers send signals to each other. For job applicants, the interview is a platform to present their knowledge, skills, abilities, and past experiences or accomplishments, ideally aligning those qualities and successes with the position they are applying for. Similarly, interviewers use the interview to describe the features of the job; the team or department the applicant may be joining; or, more broadly, the values, mission, or objectives of the organization. In parallel to sending signals, applicants and interviewers also interpret and analyze the signals they receive. Applicants evaluate the information about the job to verify that it corresponds to their profile and meets their career ambition. They also gauge the information about the team and organization to estimate whether they would enjoy working in such an environment. At the same time, interviewers assess whether the applicants' qualities correspond to what the organization is looking for.

On the applicants' side, the information collected and interpreted will be instrumental in making a decision on whether or not they want to pursue their applications and eventually accept a job offer. On the interviewers' side, the goal is to decide who among the interviewees would be the best employee for the organization. Usually, interviewers do so by establishing two subjective indicators of "fit"<sup>[3]</sup>. First, they estimate the level of person-job fit (or P-J fit). Interviewers thus evaluate whether applicants possess the qualifications (e.g., education, skills, experience) that correspond to the job requirements – that is, whether they will be able to effectively

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perform the tasks and activities associated with the position. Second, they estimate the level of person-organization fit (or P-O fit). Interviewers thus evaluate whether an applicant's personality, values, and interests correspond to the team's or organization's values and culture – that is, whether they are likely to thrive in the organization and remain loyal employees.

Let's go back to Mark and Rachel, our young job applicants. In each of the organizations in which they will interview, the interviewer (or interviewers) will ask them a series of questions. Ideally, these questions will provide them with opportunities to talk about things like who they are as individuals and what their qualities and qualifications are. Mark and Rachel have received similar educations and hold the same engineering degree. Their technical skills and knowledge are thus relatively similar. Yet, they are very different people. They have different personalities: Mark is very conscientious and hard-working, but is an introvert when dealing with others; Rachel is much more extraverted, but can sometimes jump to conclusions too fast when working on a task. They may also have different "soft" skills: Rachel is a natural leader and great communicator, whereas Mark is a problem-solver and is very creative. Interviewers will use the information gathered during the interview to assess whether Mark's and Rachel's qualities fulfill the requirements of the specific job they applied for (i.e., if there is a good P-J fit). They will also try to estimate whether Mark or Rachel as a person would be comfortable working in their unique work environment, and if their values and objectives correspond to those of the organization (i.e., if there is a good P-O fit). Interviewers will consider Mark or Rachel for the position only if they meet those two objectives (to a larger extent than other candidates do).

Assessments of P-J and P-O fit during a job interview are based on interviewers' perceptions and judgments, and are thus subject to biases and decision errors. As I will discuss in the next chapters, there are ways for organizations and interviewers to reduce the subjectivity and biases associated with the interviewing process. However, it is important to understand that job interviews do not guarantee making the best hiring decision all the time. They only allow an organization to predict the future success of an employee with some level of accuracy.

## The prediction of future work behaviours and performance

One of the major objectives of all selection methods is to predict (as precisely as possible) the likelihood that an applicant will behave in accordance with the organizations' expectations and effectively perform job activities if offered a position. This applies to all forms of assessments or tests used by organizations, including job interviews. Yet, it does not mean that interviewers will look into applicants' eyes and magically deduce what will happen in their future, like a wizard would do with a crystal ball. An interviewer is not a wizard and should not try to act like one! Taking the path of guesses or intuition-based decisions is dangerous. Research clearly suggests that hiring decisions based on intuition or gut feeling are likely to be suboptimal, even when performed by seasoned interviewers<sup>[4]</sup>. Predictions in the context of selection should rather be interpreted as an uncertainty-reduction attempt to make an informed decision.

So let's say that last week Mark and Rachel both applied for an engineering position at a company called TopTech.

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Today, they both will be interviewed by Sonia, the local HR manager. To understand how Sonia's potential predictions work, let's take Mark as the illustration here. Sonia does not know Mark, and they have never met before the interview. This means that, at the time of Mark's application, Sonia had no prior information in order to make a decision about Mark's suitability for the job and to predict his future job performance. If she had to make a decision about hiring him (or not), this decision will be based on pure chance (equivalent to flipping a coin and hiring Mark if the coin shows heads). Let's set such a chance-level decision as the "0" on our prediction scale. Let's now imagine a (very unrealistic) situation in which Sonia has the power to hire Mark, jump five years into the future to see how he performed in the company since he got hired, and then come back to today. This situation would lead to a decision under perfect information (or no uncertainty) because Sonia "knows" what will happen to Mark in the future. Let's set this as "100" on our prediction scale. Every piece of information that Sonia collects about Mark during the selection process should help her to make a better prediction on our scale. Evaluating the information provided in Mark's resume will already make Sonia's prediction higher than 0. Similarly, Mark's answers in a job interview will help make this prediction rise more on our scale.

In personnel selection research, this prediction scale is called *predictive validity*. Scholars have accumulated evidence about the predictive validity of various selection methods<sup>[5]</sup>. Some methods have a relatively poor predictive validity. For instance, using graphology (i.e., analyzing someone's writing to assess personal character) is estimated to be around 2/100. Looking at the number of years of education only gives a predictive validity of 10/100. Some other methods

have an average predictive validity, like a measure of the conscientiousness aspect of someone's personality (i.e., around 30/100). The best predictive validities are usually somewhere between 50/100 and 60/100 – for instance, with a cognitive ability test (e.g., an IQ test) or a work sample test (e.g., a brief activity that exactly simulates job activities, like a typing test for a secretary).

As you have probably noticed, even the best selection methods are still relatively far away from a perfect 100 score. Why? All those methods assess individual characteristics of the applicants. Although those characteristics can have an important impact on the performance of an employee at work, performance will also depend on a multitude of unforeseeable external factors. Such factors may include the colleagues they work with, the quality of their direct supervisor, the existing procedures or rules in the organization, the reward and compensation systems in place, the economic context, etc. Therefore, finding selection methods that have a predictive validity close to 100 is extremely unlikely. It is impossible to perfectly predict the future success of an applicant (at least not with the tools currently at our disposal). This has two important implications that organizations and managers have to understand: (1) Unfortunately even the selection methods with the highest predictive validity will sometimes lead to *bad* hiring decisions. However, (2) the proportion of *good* hiring decision in the long run will be much higher (and the proportion of *bad* decisions lower) when using valid (as compared to less valid) methods. In other words, relying on a well-designed and well-conducted (i.e., more valid) selection process will not protect organizations from making a few hiring mistakes, but it will guarantee a larger number (or proportion) of optimal hiring decisions over the course of multiple hires.

## What makes interviews good predictors of future performance?

What about job interviews? There is not one clear predictive validity score for interviews, simply because an interview can be designed and conducted in very different ways. Unlike standardized tests that are generally designed and administered in a consistent way following a strict protocol, interviews can vary in length, type of questions asked, or approach to evaluate applicants' answers. As such, interviews can demonstrate very poor (i.e., as low as around 15/100) or very high (as high as 60/100) predictive validity<sup>[6]</sup>. In other words, a poorly designed and conducted interview will provide very little insight into the applicant's potential to perform in the organization. However, a well-designed interview conducted appropriately can be an excellent instrument to assess an applicant.

The characteristics of a well-designed and well-conducted job interview will be discussed in the next two chapters. Yet, it is important for the reader to understand the reasons why some interviews work better than others. Well-designed interviews are better predictors of job performance largely because they have higher *construct validity* and higher *reliability*. I will describe these two concepts and their importance below, and illustrate them with the example of Sonia interviewing Mark and Rachel.

The construct validity of a job interview refers to the appropriateness of job-related characteristics that one aims to assess via questions asked to the applicant<sup>[7]</sup>. In other words, are interviewers asking the appropriate questions? To ensure high construct validity, interviewers have to follow a series of steps when designing interview questions. First, they have to understand the specificities of the job they are

hiring for, and determine the knowledge, skills, abilities, or competencies necessary to perform that job. This step is usually relatively easy for line managers, who are experts in the job activities (by performing the job themselves or supervising those performing it). However, this step can be daunting for HR specialists, who often hire for a large number of jobs and may not be very familiar with every single one of them. The second step involves translating those requirements into interview questions, making sure that every key requirement will be properly evaluated by asking one or several questions. This task is usually complex for line managers, who sometimes can be unsure about the best way to formulate questions. This is why it is recommended for line managers and HR specialists to work together to determine the job requirements and then translate them into interview questions.

How does it work in practice? Sonia, the HR manager, has to interview Mark and Rachel (and likely other applicants) for a junior mechanical engineer position at TopTech. Sonia is not an engineer herself and is thus unsure about the necessary skills or abilities for that position. She will get in touch with Danielle, the manager in charge of the engineering team. Sonia will ask Danielle about the key job activities and the qualities a good engineer must possess. They will agree, for example, that the ideal applicant must possess advanced knowledge in technology, physics, and maths; be a good communicator; and be able to think critically, analyze complex information, and solve difficult problems. They will then translate those qualities into interview questions – for instance, by designing a question that will assess communication, such as “Tell me about a time when you had to explain something complex (a complex concept, technical features, etc.) to someone who was not familiar with it. What was the complex issue and how did you proceed?”

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They will also make sure that all the key qualifications that the new hire must possess are assessed by at least one interview question.

The reliability of a job interview refers to level of consistency reached by multiple interviewers assessing the same applicant<sup>[8]</sup>. This means that two different interviewers conducting the same interview with the same applicant should reach similar conclusions about the applicant's suitability for the position. If they don't, this suggests that there is a problem with the way the interview was designed and/or conducted. Another way to understand the concept of reliability is to use the example of baking. Imagine that you are trying to bake delicious muffins together with a friend. One of the key tools necessary to perform this ambitious task is a weighing scale, which will help you to use the right quantity of flour and sugar. Imagine that you put a bowl on your scale and fill it with sugar until your scale indicates 200 grams. Then you hand the bowl to your friend and ask him or her to check the quantity again with the same scale. However, this time the scale indicates 275 grams. You can ignore this problem and continue your preparation, with a high risk that your muffins will end up not as delicious as you expected. Or, you can acknowledge that there is likely a problem with your tool and need to resolve it before moving on. In that case, changing the weighing scale may be the best solution.

The same idea applies to interviewing. Sonia and Danielle just finished two 1-hour interviews with Mark and Rachel, asking them a total of 10 questions each. They agreed that each question would be worth up to 10 points, for a total of 100. After the interview, they meet in Danielle's office to discuss their conclusions. Danielle starts the conversation. "I was really impressed by Mark. I think he was probably the best candidate we have seen so far."

Sonia is shocked: “What?!? I think he was not bad, but certainly not our best candidate. Rachel did better, I think. I gave Mark a total of 60/100, and Rachel 75/100. What about you?”

Danielle says, “I gave Mark 85/100 and Rachel 65/100. I would honestly hire him right now if I could. I gave him the maximum score for half of the questions. I think he could have done a bit better on a few others. But he was really a nice and handsome guy. I can imagine him being my successor in a few years.”

Sonia disagrees: “Maybe he is a nice guy, but he responded quite poorly on a few important questions, like the ones about problem solving – and especially on his motivation for the job. Rachel did much better at those questions.”

Danielle is not convinced: “Again, I disagree. I gave him 9/10 for the motivation question. I think he was very knowledgeable about what we do in the company.”

Sonia responds, “Yes, he clearly knew what we manufacture here. But that was not what the question was about. It was supposed to assess how motivated he was to join us and stay here for the foreseeable future. I gave him a 6. Rachel was much more convincing to me!”

In this example, there is a clear lack of consistency between Sonia’s and Danielle’s ratings. They obtain very different scores for Mark (and Rachel), both for individual questions and in the total score. Their interview obviously lacks reliability. There can be multiple reasons for why this is the case. Most importantly, the scoring system is probably unclear. Although they have points to allocate, the way this is supposed to be done has likely not been precisely defined and not standardized enough. This leads to situations where the same response from Mark is interpreted in very different ways by Sonia and Danielle. For instance, Danielle allocates 9 points for motivation, while Sonia gives only 6 points. It

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also appears that our two interviewers had different views of what some questions were designed to assess (which may also come from a lack of construct validity for those questions). Finally, Danielle's judgment may have been influenced by non-job-related factors, such as Mark's looks.

In summary, high-quality job interviews are those that will be designed and conducted in ways that insure high *construct validity*, high *reliability*, and indirectly, high *predictive validity*. Such interviews have many advantages for organizations. Most importantly, they help assess all job applicants in a consistent and efficient way, thus ensuring the highest likelihood of hiring the best job applicants. They also limit potential biases and judgment errors that can put the organization at risk – for instance, if it is sued by an applicant who is rejected and believes that the decision is unfair (or illegal).

## Overview of the remaining chapters

In the next chapters, I will present ways to design (Chapter 2) and conduct (Chapter 3) job interviews that limit some of the problems highlighted above, and thus improve the reliability, the construct validity, and indirectly the predictive validity of job interviews. I will also describe how job applicants react to selection decisions and what can be done to limit negative reactions from not-selected applicants. I will then describe the strategies and tactics that applicants can use to influence interviewers' evaluations, and how interviewers attempt to convince applicants that they should join the organization (Chapter 4). Next, I will discuss the decision phase of the interview (Chapter 5). In this chapter, I will highlight potential biases and errors that interviewers can make, and how to avoid them (or at least limit their impact). Finally, I will conclude with an overview of

recent and future trends for job interviews, notably the potential role of new technologies (Chapter 6). Throughout this book, I will also describe cultural and legal differences that may impact the appropriateness of interviewing techniques in different regions or countries. Although the majority of interview-related research to date has been conducted in North America and Western Europe, I will also describe and incorporate existing evidence of interviewing (or, more generally, managerial) practices from other regions of the world.

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