

10

Selection – the classic trio

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter readers should be able to:

- devise application forms;
- draw up a shortlist of candidates;
- conduct a selection interview;
- make effective use of employment references;
- advise on the effectiveness of traditional selection tools.

In addition, readers should be able to understand and explain:

- the theoretical advantages and disadvantages of different selection methods;
- employer objectives in the use of interviews, references and application forms.

Research in employee selection

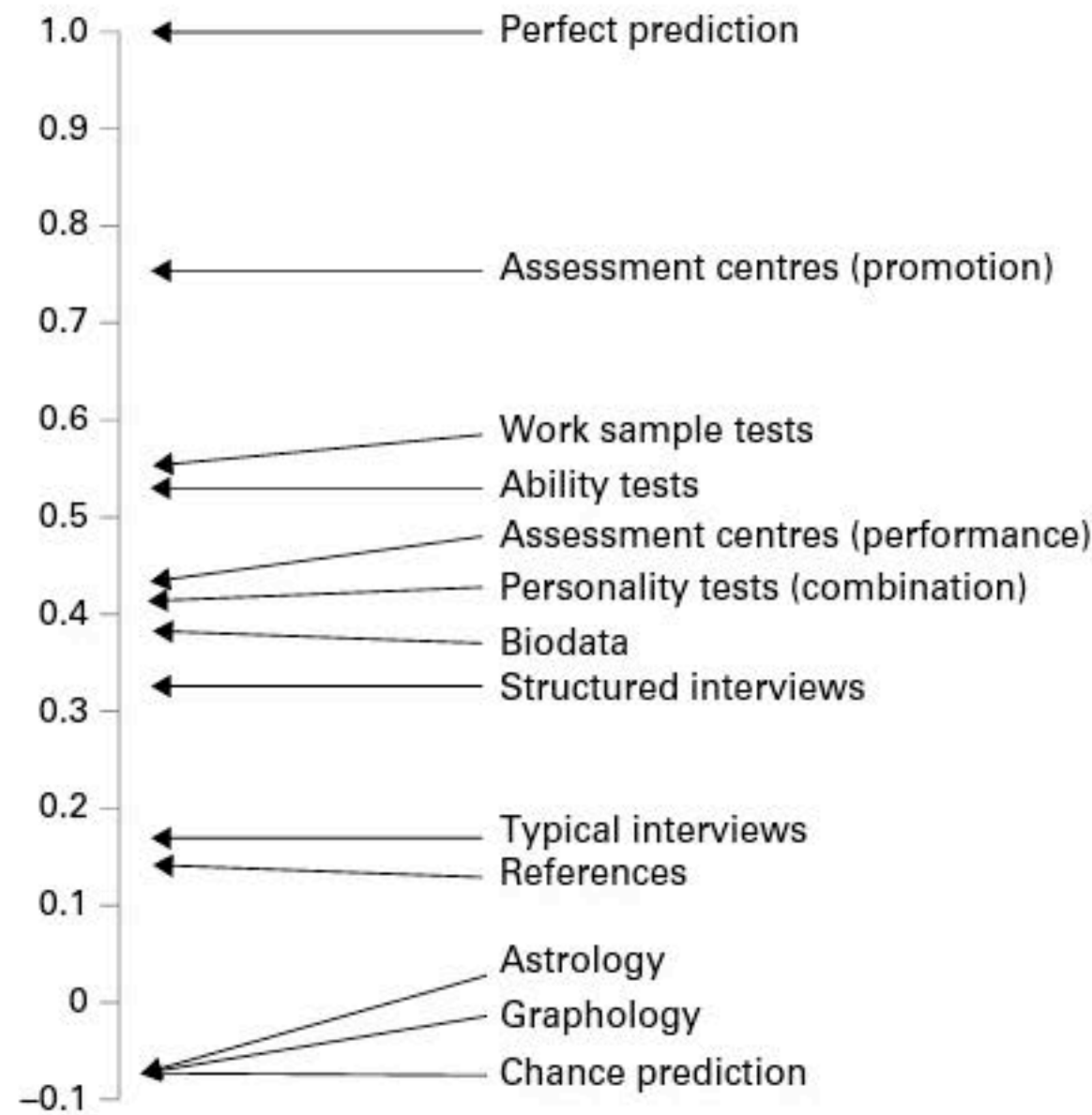
The choice of appropriate employee selection techniques is a field in which there is great divergence between the recommendations of academic writers and day-to-day practice in organisations. When applying for a job, most people expect to have to fill in an online application form, attend one or more interviews and then receive

an offer of employment subject to satisfactory references being provided by the referees they have named. These three methods are labelled ‘the classic trio’ by Mark Cook (2016). It is the expectation because in most cases this is the approach taken by organisations. What is interesting is that this traditional approach continues to dominate in the face of apparently conclusive evidence that other tools of selection have far greater predictive power and are fairer to most candidates (Highhouse and Brooks, 2017: 268).

There is a long tradition, going back to the beginning of the last century, of academic research into the relative merits of different selection tools. For the most part, the field has been dominated by occupational psychologists who have worked with a shared set of assumptions concerning personality traits and their relationship to job performance. Foremost among the approaches undertaken have been validity studies, in which a selection process that results in the appointment of several individuals is observed. The scores given to candidates at the selection stage are recorded and compared with their actual performance on the job some months or years later. Different selection methods can then be compared according to how accurately they predict job performance (ie the extent to which candidates who score particularly well at selection achieve higher levels of performance than colleagues who impressed less at the selection stage).

The unit of measurement used in these studies is the correlation coefficient – a measure of how closely scores at the selection stage correlate with those awarded for later performance. Were a selection process found to have resulted in a correlation coefficient of 1, it would have predicted the relative performance of employees with perfect accuracy. Conversely, a correlation coefficient score equal to 0 indicates the absence of any predictive accuracy at all – the employer might as well have picked candidates at random. A modest validity study looking at a small group of employees chosen using one selection tool, while interesting, is not especially helpful in allowing generalised judgements to be made about the predictive qualities of any particular selection method. However, over the years many hundreds of such studies have been carried out in many countries, which can be combined and assessed together using computer programs. It is the results of such exercises, known as meta-analyses, that have apparently confirmed what many have long believed, namely that traditional methods of selection such as interviews are markedly poorer at accurately predicting job performance than more sophisticated techniques such as personality tests and assessment centres. The results of meta-analyses are illustrated in Figure 10.1. More recent meta-analytic studies have given a rather better press to structured interviews, but provide continuing evidence of the poor predictive powers of the traditional formats that are the more commonly used (see Buckley and Russell, 1999; Rynes *et al*, 2000; Salgado, 2001; Dipboye *et al*, 2001; Cooper *et al*, 2003; Smith and Smith, 2005; Morgeson *et al*, 2007; Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham, 2010; Banks and McDaniel, 2012; Cook, 2016).

Despite the presence of this research and the accompanying bad publicity for traditional selection methods, there is plenty of evidence to show that they remain very widely used in the appointment of new employees. Successive surveys looking at recruitment and selection practices show that interviews of one kind or another are almost universally used, that application forms are completed by candidates seeking work in over 80 per cent of organisations, and that references are taken up either before or after interviews by at least three-quarters of employers (Cook, 2016: 18; CIPD, 2007e, 2009b, 2013, 2017b). The current picture would thus appear to

Figure 10.1 Meta-analyses, various selection methods

SOURCE: Smith *et al*, 1989

confirm the observation made by Robertson and Makin (1986) that in the UK, as elsewhere in the world, 'the frequency of a method's use is inversely related to its known validity'.

However, what is particularly interesting in these surveys is the response of employers when asked to reflect on which selection techniques they find to be most useful. For all grades of staff, a very clear majority state that the interview is the most important tool for them in making selection decisions. There is thus clearly a great gulf between the considered views of academics and practitioners about the relative usefulness and value of different selection methods. Possible reasons for this disagreement will be explored in relation to each of the selection methods described in this and the subsequent chapter. It is, however, useful to make one or two general observations at this stage.

First, it should be pointed out that the 'classic trio' are the most straightforward and least expensive of the range of selection methods available to employers. The use of reputable personality and ability tests requires costly training or the employment of trained consultants, to which is added the cost of the tests themselves. The potential expense of an assessment centre is clearly far higher and is not in any case a practical option for small organisations or for the selection of relatively low-skilled personnel. Second, it is important for employers to have an eye on the effect the selection methods they use have on candidates and potential candidates. Such matters have not historically concerned academic researchers, who have preferred to concentrate on the predictive qualities of each tool, but when a selection process is candidate-driven (ie, labour markets are tight and people have choice about where

they work) a favourable applicant experience can make all the difference between someone accepting and rejecting a job offer. Such evidence as we have points strongly to a preference on the part of job applicants for traditional approaches, especially face-to-face interviews (Nikolaou *et al*, 2015: 84–5). Furthermore, because application forms, interviews and references are so commonly used, they are expected by job applicants. Too much innovation in the selection procedure might be disorienting and thus reduce the effectiveness of a candidate's performance. In certain situations, the prospect of being judged by the selection methods with the highest validity may actually dissuade good candidates from applying. This is particularly true of assessment centres, which can require attendance at a two- or three-day event and which often include assignments that are perceived as being tough.

The reluctance from the candidates' perspective springs from the lack of control they can exercise over the process when the more scientific approaches are adopted. Not only, therefore, are we more comfortable with the classic trio because we expect them and have experienced them before, we also prefer them because we think we understand how they work, and feel that they give us a greater degree of influence over the selection decision.

Mention should also be made of criticisms that have been made of the psychological research itself. Iles and Salaman (1995: 219–24), Searle (2003) and Iles (2007: 99–100) suggest that the assumptions on which much validity research is based are open to question. In particular, they take issue with the notion that personality is on the one hand readily measurable, and on the other necessarily stable over time. In other words, they question the very basis on which psychometric studies of selection are based. They also draw attention to the fact that job content varies to a great extent over a period of years, or even months, and that the individual attributes candidates display when selected may be less and less relevant as time passes and the nature of the job develops and changes. It follows from this argument that what is important at selection is finding an individual who generally 'fits in' with the culture and values of the organisation and is sufficiently well qualified to undertake a range of possible tasks. The aim is thus less to 'match' a personality with a job than to screen out people perceived as likely to be dishonest, lazy, difficult to work with or unsatisfactory for a variety of other reasons.

The use of graphology

An interesting example of the use of selection methods that are neither scientific nor systematic is the use of graphology, or handwriting analysis. Despite firm evidence of its poor predictability (Smith *et al*, 1989: 86–8 and Ben-Shakhar, 1989), it appears to be used surprisingly widely. In the UK it is rare for employers to admit to its use in selection, although some have confirmed that they use it as one of a range of techniques (Cooper *et al*, 2003: 149–52). However, on the continent it is much more common. A good number of French companies use it in employee selection, whilst some employers in Belgium, Switzerland and Spain also apparently believe it to have an effective role to play (Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham, 2010; Steiner, 2012; Cook, 2016: 19).

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A possible reason for the use of graphology is its apparent 'reliability' as a selection tool. People's handwriting tends not to change to any great extent during their adult life, although it can be made neater with effort. It is also a 'reliable' method in so far as different graphologists have been found to reach similar conclusions about a candidate's personality when given the same handwriting sample to analyse – not a situation that typically occurs when several people interview the same candidate at different times.

However, reliability should not be confused with validity. There is also evidence to show that graphology is a poor diviner of important personality traits and is thus probably a poor predictor of job performance. According to Smith *et al* (1989), when tested, graphologists were unable to distinguish between real and faked suicide notes, and failed to identify which of a range of handwriting samples had been submitted by people diagnosed as neurotic. Further research reported by Watson (1994: 208) and Edenborough (2005: 29–30) supports this view, leading them to conclude that, as yet, there is insufficient evidence to support the use of graphology as part of a fair and objective selection procedure.

Activity 10.1

Performance-based selection

Read the article by Lou Adler entitled 'Outside chance' featured in *People Management* (10 March 2005, pages 38–9). This can be downloaded from the *People Management* archive on the CIPD's website (www.cipd.co.uk).

In this opinion piece, Lou Adler draws on many years of recruiting experience to suggest ways in which decision-making about who to hire can be improved in organisations.

Questions

- 1 What, according to Adler, are the major common errors made by recruiters when selecting staff?
- 2 To what extent do you agree with Adler's five easy-to-learn principles for improving employee selection decisions?
- 3 What other action could be taken by organisations seeking to improve their capabilities in this area of practice?

Application forms

Surveys report that application forms are used in some shape or form by over 70 per cent of employers in the UK (Steiner, 2012: 750; CIPD, 2013: 19; Cook, 2016: 18). In many larger organisations and in the public sector they appear to be used for all jobs except those at very senior management level. Application forms are almost

always now completed online and submitted electronically, but their content and purpose has not changed to any great degree from the days when they were completed manually and submitted in the post. The alternative is to allow or encourage applicants to compose their own curriculum vitae or CV. This practice is widespread in the private sector, but only permitted in 50 per cent of public and voluntary sector organisations. Many employers make use of both approaches, accepting CVs as well as application forms, the CV being the preferred approach in smaller organisations. It might have been expected that the use of CVs in job applications would become rarer with the widespread introduction of online applications in recent years. However, this does not appear to be the case. CVs remain very commonly used in several sectors (Murphy, 2008c; Suff, 2011b; Cook, 2016: 18).

From an employer's perspective there are advantages and disadvantages both to application forms and CVs. In principle, the CV is preferable because it gives applicants the freedom to sell themselves in their own way. They are thus able to tailor their applications to their own strengths and are not restricted to fitting relevant information into boxes of predetermined size. Some application forms, because they are so restrictive in their design, may lead to excellent candidates being overlooked. An example might be a form that contains a set of questions and several blank spaces under the heading 'Present employment'. In putting so much emphasis in the form on this aspect, the likelihood is that otherwise good candidates who are not currently in full-time employment will be disadvantaged. A similar problem confronts an applicant who, while in work, is unhappy and is perhaps seeking a new position after just a few weeks or months in this employment. Indeed, a poorly designed application form has been shown to put many applicants off applying in the first place (Jenkins, 1983).

However, CVs can be criticised for giving job applicants the opportunity to sell themselves to a potential employer by including material in their applications that is wholly irrelevant to the position being advertised. Similar 'contamination' effects can occur when a CV is particularly attractively presented or structured, leading unwary selectors, perhaps unconsciously, to favour applications from otherwise unimpressive candidates over those of their better-qualified rivals. In extreme cases, candidates engage in sophisticated 'impression management', going to great lengths to dazzle with well-bound, professionally produced CVs with career and other achievements highlighted and a judicious mix of leisure interests. There is also a tendency to 'soup up' achievements and to overstate the extent and type of experience that the candidate really has. We are now seeing the emergence of the use by candidates of video résumés, which are typically sent as attachments to emails when people make speculative applications. Employers also sometimes use this approach as the basis for initial screening. Its growth is probably inevitable, but not necessarily a good thing from a fairness perspective or from the point of view of making accurate predictions about future job performance (Hiemstra and Deros, 2015). Perceived unfairness is the reason that many public sector organisations refuse to accept CVs at all, and why one survey found that a majority of managers believe them to give an inaccurate representation of candidates' skills and personalities (Carter, 2013).

Perhaps the best solution is to design separate application forms for each vacancy advertised. This gets round the problem of inappropriate design and allows specific questions to be posed relevant to the job in question. With the development of more sophisticated software, word-processing and printing equipment, such an approach should be used more frequently, but as yet there is little evidence to suggest that

employers have moved away from the standard organisation-wide form that has long been used across the whole range of jobs on offer. Individualisation would also permit the inclusion, where appropriate, of opportunities for candidates to write longer descriptive answers to more involved questions.

Whether the application form used is standard or unique to the job advertised, it will fill a number of distinct functions. According to Smith and Robertson (1993: 81–2) these are the following:

- to enable a shortlist of candidates for interview to be drawn up;
- to provide information that can be drawn on during the interview;
- as a means by which information about good but unsuccessful candidates can be filed away for future reference;
- as a means of analysing the effectiveness of the various alternative recruitment media used (see Chapters 7 and 8);
- as a public relations tool enhancing the employer's image as 'an efficient, fair and well-run organisation'.

Employers also use forms 'to capture sensitive information in a non-intimidating way' as a means of undertaking equal opportunities monitoring and gathering sensitive medical information (IRS, 1999: 8).

It follows that the best application forms are designed so as to fulfil each of the above functions as effectively as possible. The first three factors require the presence of clear, concise language and a layout that allows candidates sufficient space to include all relevant information. The public relations function is best served by the use of good quality paper and typesetting, or if electronically submitted, user-friendly software.

A typical application form includes questions asking for basic biographical information, previous work experience, educational background, vocational training undertaken and future career aspirations. Asking candidates to include a photograph used to be common, although in practice candidates often failed to do so, and is now much less common. Another development in recent years is the request for information concerning gender and ethnic background to enable organisations to undertake equal opportunities monitoring. More often than not, this is included on a separate form that is detached or removed from the original prior to shortlisting. Great care now also has to be taken when asking questions about health, as this can lead to suspicions that an employer plans to screen out people whose health record is poor, a practice that can amount to a breach of the Equality Act 2010 in some circumstances. The question of nationality, by contrast, is usually included in the main body of the form to allow the employer to discuss matters relating to work permits with candidates at their interviews.

There are a number of questions commonly included in application forms that are controversial and that are often the subject of heated discussion among recruiters. Examples are those asking applicants to state their age or date of birth, and those asking them to list their hobbies and interests. The latter is a peculiar type of question because it usually has no relevance at all to the ability of candidates to fulfil the requirements of the job. It is also very likely indeed to be answered untruthfully, candidates taking care to include only mainstream or 'politically correct' interests. If candidates' main hobbies are eating fast-food, watching adult movies and smoking illegal substances, they are unlikely to include them in the response.

Standard application forms

Application forms, whether completed online or manually, vary considerably. However, most tend to take the same broad approach and contain the following:

- personal details (name, contact address/numbers, date of birth, driving licence, work permit, etc);
- higher education (dates, courses, expected and achieved results);
- prior education (A levels, number and dates of GCSE passes at C and above, grades in English and maths, number of GCSE A grades);
- work experience (dates, jobs, responsibilities and achievements);
- geographical location (preferred work locations);
- personal interests/achievements (spare-time activities, specifically those that included organising and leading or those requiring initiative and creativity);
- evidence of 'planning, implementation and achieving results' (specific examples required together with an estimation of 'how you measured your success');
- evidence of 'influencing, communication and team work' (specific examples required with a statement of why the outcomes were satisfactory);
- evidence of 'analysis, problem-solving, and creative thinking' (specific example of a problem required, together with information about alternative approaches that could have been used in solving it);
- additional information (space for the candidate to write what they wish plus a question about where they heard about the vacancy);
- specific skills (languages, IT packages, etc);
- career choice (a requirement for candidates to state their reasons for applying and evidence of their suitability);
- health declaration;
- referees (two);
- availability for interview;
- equal opportunities monitoring form.

The question of age is more interesting, not least because it is possible to bring an age discrimination claim before an employment tribunal. The law serves to restrict the extent to which age can be used as a selection criterion, but it does not outlaw such practices altogether. Employers remain free to continue discriminating on grounds of age when they can objectively justify so doing, the test being that the practice in a particular case constitutes 'a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim'.

Perhaps these are further situations in which there is a case for designing different applications for different jobs. The question about age or date of birth would then be included only when judged strictly necessary.



PAUSE FOR THOUGHT

Where do you stand in this debate? Can you think of other circumstances in which it might be appropriate to request information about date of birth?

In the next chapter we examine the use of weighted application forms and biodata. These are methods that enhance the role of application forms in the selection process and that have been found to have relatively high validities when compared with other selection methods.



Activity 10.2

Fraudulent applications

Read the article by Steve Smethurst entitled 'Faking it' featured in *People Management* (16 June 2005, pages 35–6). This can be downloaded from the *People Management* archive on the CIPD's website (www.cipd.co.uk).

This short article reports the views of various commentators on the subject of untruths being included by job applicants in their CVs and on application forms. It concludes that the problem is widespread, but that employers can take steps to reduce the extent to which it affects them.

Questions

- 1 What proportion of CVs are thought to contain inaccurate information that makes candidates look more impressive than they are?
- 2 Why do you think so few employers carry out checks to ascertain the truth of the information that candidates submit?
- 3 What measures does the article suggest could be taken? How far do you think these would reduce the extent of fraud and why?

Shortlisting

The next stage in the traditional approach to selection is to boil down the applications received to a shortlist of candidates to invite for interview. Here again, as so often in employee selection, there is a potential tension between the relative merits of methodical and more informal approaches. All descriptions of best practice advocate a systematic approach to shortlisting whereby a list of criteria is drawn up from the person specification. Each application form is then judged and scored against these standards. Torrington *et al* (2014) suggest that the drawing up of criteria is best done by a panel, but that the shortlisting itself should be undertaken on an individual basis, each panel member looking at all application forms separately and drawing up his or her own list. Any candidate chosen by all the screeners is then invited to interview,

while any discarded by all is rejected. Panel members then debate the merits of the remaining applicants with regard to the requirements of the person specification until a consensus is reached about who should and who should not be interviewed.

The argument in favour of such an approach is its inherent fairness. It discourages selectors, either consciously or unconsciously, from discriminating unfairly on the basis of factors unrelated to the content of the job. It thus reduces the chances of well-qualified candidates being screened out on account of peculiar handwriting, marital status or place of birth. Research studies cited by Cook (2016: 5–7) found evidence of unfair discrimination on grounds of sex occurring at the shortlisting stage through the stereotyping of men and women as suitable or unsuitable for particular jobs. It goes without saying that it is easier for individual managers who are racially prejudiced to screen out members of ethnic minorities if there is no panel to whom they must justify their actions.

Having put the case for a systematic approach, it is also reasonable to point out the drawbacks. The main problem arises if the criteria drawn up are too exacting, leading to the screening out of good candidates who fail to respond to questions on the application form with precisely the answers required. An example might be a situation in which the agreed criteria include a requirement for shortlisted candidates to have had some years' experience in a particular role or at a specified level in an organisation. A typical case might be one in which applicants for a personnel management job are required to have worked for a minimum of three years in a senior HR role in manufacturing. While relevant and justifiable, such a parameter might lead to the rejection of the best candidate on the grounds that he or she has only two years' experience as a general manager in a service industry.

There is thus a strong case for allowing a degree of flexibility in the screening of application forms and for avoiding too narrow or bureaucratic an approach. If a candidate looks interesting, for whatever reason, it does no great harm to invite him or her to interview. To reject purely on the basis of an arbitrary set of criteria may be theoretically justifiable, but might well not be in the long-term interests of the organisation.

Wood and Payne (1998: 77–81) advocate a simple scoring approach that, they argue, allows recruiters to sift hundreds of application forms at a rate of less than two minutes per form, while maintaining a high degree of fairness. Their starting point is the presence of an agreed list of competencies being sought for the job. Each candidate's application form is then rated on a three-point scale (A, B or C) against each competence, A indicating strong evidence of the competence being sought, B indicating moderate evidence and C indicating little or no evidence. Once two C scores have been awarded the form is rejected. Those with most As are then shortlisted for interview.

One of the most controversial contemporary practices in shortlisting involves managers and HR officers checking out an applicant's online profile and activity as part of a screening process. There are no really reliable statistics available as to how often this happens in practice, but anecdotal evidence suggests that it is very common indeed. It only appears to form part of formal organisational processes in a minority of organisations, but informal assessments of this kind are made by managers when shortlisting much more often (Davison *et al*, 2016: 17–18). Aside from the ethical questions that this practice raises, there are also legal ones relating to data protection and potential unlawful discrimination on grounds such as disability and age.



PAUSE FOR THOUGHT

How systematic are the approaches to shortlisting used in your experience? What examples of stereotyping have you come across?

Online sifting

As was explained in Chapter 7, among the disadvantages associated with online recruitment is the sheer number of unsuitable applications that employers can receive when jobs are advertised to a potential audience of several million internet users. According to Parry and Tyson (2008) this is by some margin the most significant problem for employers who use online recruitment – many of their respondents had experienced difficulties dealing with large volumes of applications from unsuitable candidates. The problem is particularly acute in areas such as graduate recruitment, where employers actively seek to encourage applications from people who have yet to gain much work experience and thus employ broad criteria (a wide-trawl rather than a wide-net approach). In such circumstances some form of electronic screening technologies needs to be used so that the costs associated with shortlisting do not become prohibitive. Several approaches are commonly used, although the evidence suggests that to date they have only been adopted by a minority of organisations (see CIPD, 2009b; Suff, 2011b).

Online application/biodata forms

These require job applicants to complete an application form that is questionnaire-based. Its first purpose is to collect straightforward factual information about achievements and personal career history (eg class of degree, years of relevant work experience, current salary, etc). Second, forms usually ask direct questions designed to establish how far the candidate possesses the attributes or competencies the employer wants for the job in question. Once completed, the candidate submits the form and it is scored electronically. Those that do not reach a threshold score are rejected electronically (but hopefully with courtesy), while the others are sent on into the employer's database. IRS (2003d) describe online application procedures that include 'killer questions' designed to sift out unsuitable candidates before they have even completed the form. If one or two of these are answered 'wrongly' the procedure terminates and the candidate is directed to another site.

Online personality questionnaires

These are generally established psychometric tests developed by reputable providers that have been adapted for use online from their original paper and pencil formats. Their advantages and disadvantages as tools of selection are debated in Chapter 11. Our purpose here is to explain how they can be used as a means of screening out (or screening in) candidates who make applications via a website. As with online application forms, personality questionnaires can be scored electronically, with those

candidates who do not meet the employer's criteria being sifted out within a few minutes of completing the test.

There are drawbacks to the use of personality tests in this way. First, they are not completed within a set time limit. This allows the candidate greater opportunity to think carefully about what answer is sought and to give that rather than an answer that is truthful. Second, the employer cannot know that it is the candidate himself or herself who is completing the inventory. Finally, as has been pointed out by McHenry (see Lamb, 2000: 12), online testing gives no opportunity for face-to-face feedback, which has always been considered good practice in the administration of personality tests.

Online ability tests

The fact that online tests can be completed by anyone, and not necessarily the candidates themselves, is a particularly acute problem in the case of online ability testing (Scott and Lezotte, 2012). However, this has not stopped some test providers from developing tools of this kind. As with the other forms of test identified above, these allow poorer candidates to be screened out, meaning that only those achieving the highest scores proceed to the next stage. Two methods seem to be used as a means of reducing the likelihood of 'cheating' (see IRS, 2001d: 9). First, the tests are designed to be 'game-like in appearance and functionality', so that applicants are not necessarily aware that they are in fact screening tests. Second they are deliberately designed to be enjoyable exercises so that individuals will want to complete them and will be less inclined to get someone else to do so on their behalf. Whatever drawbacks such tests have at the shortlisting stage, they remain potentially useful later in the selection procedure when candidates can be asked to complete them while sitting in front of a terminal on the employer's own premises.

CV-matching software

The fourth approach differs from the first three in that it makes use of IT to screen out CVs submitted by candidates rather than a form designed by the employer. Here, use is made of software that searches for key words in each CV that is submitted (examples would be 'teamwork', 'initiative', 'self-confidence' or 'leadership'). Those that mention enough of the key words identified as being desirable by the employer are then sent on to the recruiter for further analysis. Those that mention none or insufficient of the key words are rejected electronically with a polite but definitive email.

This whole concept is highly questionable professionally as it introduces a strong element of chance into the shortlisting procedure. Good candidates are rejected simply because they have used one word rather than another, while poor ones slip through the net by chance, having chosen a lucky turn of phrase. It is only really justifiable when an employer receives far more CVs electronically than it can begin to cope with. In such circumstances, there is no practicable alternative if applications are to be considered and then answered at all. It is the HR equivalent of a highly popular sporting event for which demand is so great that organisers are forced to allocate tickets via a ballot. In due course no doubt much fairer and more objective systems will be developed using artificial intelligence. But for the time being employers who use these systems need to be aware that they could readily be accused of unfairness and may be denying themselves the opportunity of interviewing first-rate candidates.

Self-test questionnaires

The final approach differs somewhat from the first four in that the employer does not use the results of online testing for shortlisting purposes. Instead a questionnaire is provided that prospective candidates complete, but that is designed to encourage those who score 'poorly' to select themselves out by refraining from making an application. Questionnaires of this kind are 'marked' electronically, allowing email-based feedback to be given. A candidate who does not answer the questions in the desired way is then advised that their application, were they to make one, would be unlikely to succeed.



Activity 10.3

Shortlisting graduates online

Read the article by Victor Dulewicz entitled 'Give full details' featured in *People Management* (26 February 2004, page 23). This can be downloaded from the *People Management* archive on the CIPD's website (www.cipd.co.uk).

In this opinion piece Victor Dulewicz of Henley Management College makes a number of very serious criticisms about some employers' practices when using online shortlisting for candidates applying to join their graduate schemes.

Questions

- 1 In what ways do the practices described in the article fall short of those you would expect to see adopted by professional graduate recruiters?
- 2 Aside from the ethical issues, what business case could be made to persuade these employers to reconsider their approaches?
- 3 In his penultimate paragraph Dulewicz bemoans the failure of recruiters to implement a joint approach to graduate recruitment in which candidates would all take the same tests and complete the same application forms. What would be the advantages and disadvantages of such a scheme from the perspective of graduate employers?

Problems with interviews

As was stated above, there is plenty of apparently authoritative research in support of the claim that traditional selection interviews are poor predictors of future job performance. The term 'traditional' refers to typical, unstructured interviews in which different candidates may be asked quite different questions. The traditional interviewer thus gathers information in a relatively unsystematic manner, and may reach judgements about candidates on a number of different grounds. Anderson and Shackleton (1993) and Petzall (2013b), drawing on a wide variety of academic studies from several countries, summarise the reasons put forward to explain why such interviews have been criticised for their poor predictive validity. The following list is based on their summaries:

- *The expectancy effect.* Undue influence being given to positive or negative expectations of a candidate formed from his or her CV or application form.
- *The self-fulfilling prophecy effect.* Interviewers asking questions designed to confirm initial impressions of candidates gained either before the interview or in its early stages.
- *The primacy effect.* Interviewers putting too much emphasis on impressions gained and information assimilated early in the interview.
- *The stereotyping effect.* Interviewers assuming that particular characteristics are typical of members of a particular group. In the case of sex, race, disability, marital status or ex-offenders, decisions made on this basis are often illegal. However, the effect occurs in the case of all kinds of social groups.
- *The prototyping effect.* Interviewers looking for or favouring a particular type of personality, regardless of job-related factors.
- *The halo and horns effect.* Interviewers rating candidates as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ across the board and thus reaching very unbalanced decisions.
- *The contrast effect.* Interviewers allowing the experience of interviewing one candidate to affect the way they interview others seen later in the selection process.
- *Negative information bias effects.* Interviewers giving more weight to perceived negative points about candidates than to those that are more positive.
- *The similar-to-me effect.* Interviewers giving preference to candidates they perceive as having a similar background, career history, personality or attitudes to themselves.
- *The personal liking effect.* Interviewers making decisions on the basis of whether or not they personally like or dislike the candidate.
- *The information overload effect.* Interviewers forming judgements based on only a fraction of the data available to them about each individual candidate.
- *The fundamental attribution error effect.* Interviewers incorrectly assuming that some action on the part of the candidate is or was caused by an aspect of his or her personality rather than by a simple response to events.
- *The temporal extension effect.* Interviewers assuming that a candidate’s behaviour at interview (eg nervousness) is typical of his or her general disposition.

What are we to conclude from this litany of criticisms? The most tempting and apparently rational conclusion would be to consign the traditional interview to the personnel management dustbin on the grounds that selection decisions reached in this manner are inevitably infused with subjectivity, prejudice and displays of cognitive dissonance. However, such action would be hasty. A different conclusion is an acceptance that the validity of some traditional interviews is probably higher than others. In other words, we might acknowledge that interviews in which the above traps are avoided are likely to have greater predictive power than those in which they feature strongly. It follows that it may not be the interview as a selection tool that is faulty so much as the interviewer. With thought, care, experience and training it should then be possible consciously to avoid making many of the basic errors that have been described.



PAUSE FOR THOUGHT

Where do you stand in this debate? Is it the traditional interview that is faulty or is it the typical interviewer who is responsible for giving the method such a bad press?

The survival of the traditional interview

Another reason for hesitating before abandoning traditional approaches to interviewing is their continued popularity as tools of selection among both managers and candidates. Despite the presence for a number of years of evidence that suggests they are extremely poor predictors of performance, they continue to be the most favoured and frequently used of the available selection techniques. It is wise, therefore, at least to consider whether managers may in fact be right to continue advocating the interview.

A number of alternative explanations can be put forward to explain the survival of traditional interviewing, some of which have already been touched on. One possibility is that managers have simply remained unaware of the research evidence amassed over the years. Another is that they are aware of the defects of traditional interviews but feel them to be counter-intuitive and therefore discount their relevance. Others accept some of the research evidence but regard themselves as exceptions (ie good, intuitive interviewers who avoid making the classic errors).

Another explanation is the relatively low cost of carrying out simple one-to-one interviews and the consequent perception that their efficiency outweighs their ineffectiveness as predictive techniques. In some cases it is also true that unstructured interviews are used as one of a range of selection tools, and that their principal role is to confirm impressions or clear up points left unresolved from the other selection methods used. However, the most straightforward and significant explanation is that interviews are not only arranged for the purpose of enabling managers to make predictions about future performance on the job.

According to Herriot (1989a), there are in fact three key objectives for selection interviews, of which only one is their function as tools of assessment. The others are labelled 'mutual preview' and 'negotiation'. The mutual preview function refers to the opportunity the interview gives both employer and applicant to meet face to face and exchange information unrelated to the prediction of performance, but nevertheless essential to any recruitment and selection process. In particular, it gives candidates the opportunity to ask questions about the job and the organisation as part of the process whereby they decide whether or not they wish to take the job. Interviewers also have the opportunity to inform candidates about the duties they can expect to undertake and the role they would be expected to fill, were they successful. It must be appreciated that in order to make effective choices about whether or not to accept the position on the terms offered, any candidate needs sufficient information about how the type of work and the organisational environment compare with those of existing or other employers.

The negotiation function is another part of the selection process that can only realistically occur by means of an interview. Here we are concerned with the processes

that have to be gone through prior to the issuing and subsequent acceptance of a contract of employment. According to Anderson and Shackleton (1993: 42), matters up for negotiation include start dates, relocation procedures and allowances, training provisions and all other terms and conditions of employment.

Blackman (2017), while fully accepting the range of biases that serve to make unstructured interviews poor predictors of subsequent job performance, takes a more balanced view than most researchers working in employee selection. She presents evidence to suggest that unstructured interviews are sometimes an effective means of assessing certain personality traits such as agreeableness and personal integrity. It is also surely true that an organisation looking to employ a first-rate sales person will be well able to judge core sales skills by asking interviewees to sell themselves in whatever way they consider most effective.

A further role played by an interview is that of a labour market public relations exercise. There is every advantage to be gained from sending candidates away (a) believing that they would like the job if subsequently offered it, (b) determined to seek other positions within the organisation if other opportunities present themselves, and (c) willing to speak well of the organisation because of the efficiency, effectiveness, fairness and courtesy displayed towards them. The interview provides the only real opportunity for organisations to carry out this PR function with any degree of success.

Poor selection, on the other hand, leads to damaging, negative PR. If individuals depart perceiving that they have been treated unfairly, incompetently or harshly, they are likely to share their experiences with others. As the word spreads, it almost inevitably becomes embellished and distorted with repetition, which is exactly what we find in the field of consumer affairs. In 1986, the Ford Motor Company discovered that people who are pleased about their cars tell an average of eight others, whereas dissatisfied customers boast about their experiences to at least 22 others (who in turn tell 22 others, and so on). The result is that, in the realm of products and services, organisations lose customers; in the field of selection, organisations lose potential talent. It is not even absurd to believe that individuals treated badly as candidates might withdraw their business from the offending organisation, and that they might encourage others to do so as well. It can thus be contended that giving no interview, as much as giving a bad one, is likely to lead to such occurrences. People expect to be interviewed, and will not feel that they have had a fair hearing or respectful treatment if one is denied.

It can therefore be concluded that the interview has a number of distinct objectives, and that these can be summarised as follows:

- to predict future job performance and behaviour;
- to focus on aspects of behaviour and performance that cannot easily be addressed by other methods;
- to supply information to the candidate;
- to persuade suitable candidates to accept the job offered and join the organisation;
- to create goodwill for the organisation.

For these reasons, whatever the potential dangers of relying too heavily on traditional interviews, there is no practical substitute for some form of informal face-to-face

meeting between employer and candidate. The interview is the only way in which the range of fragmented information about candidates gathered from the use of other selection techniques can be integrated into a meaningful pattern.

Varieties of interview format

Interviews and interview questions come in diverse forms. For this reason, when one is about to be interviewed, it is very difficult to predict exactly what will be involved or the general approach to questioning that will be taken. An obvious variable is the number of interviewers – will the interview be conducted by one person, by two, or by a panel?

The one-to-one interview has the advantage of informality and thus helps reduce the artificiality of the process. The intimacy makes it relatively straightforward to gain an interviewee's trust and thus to encourage them to relax. In the view of Munro Fraser, this is the most important objective of any interview:

The first requirement of a selection interview is that interviewees should feel at ease and that they should talk freely and frankly. In practically every case, this depends on the skill and experience of interviewers. If they behave in a formal manner, asking questions and appearing to evaluate the answers, they cease to be an interviewer and become an interrogator. There will thus be little chance that the interviewee will behave in a normal manner, and the amount of information he supplies will be minimal.

(Munro Fraser, 1979: 140)

However, against this are the considerable drawbacks of cosy one-to-one interviews. First, there is the danger alluded to above of information overload. It is very difficult for one interviewer simultaneously to encourage openness by relaxing the candidate while concentrating on what he or she is saying and considering what question is best to ask next. What is gained in informality is lost in effectiveness. Second, having just one interviewer greatly increases the possibility of unfair bias in the final decision. Many of the problems with traditional interviews discussed above – particularly the halo and horns effect, the similar-to-me effect and the personal liking effect – are far less likely to play a part in the evaluation of candidates if multiple interviewers have to justify their thinking to one another.

While drawbacks can be ameliorated to an extent by the presence of two interviewers, it is only in the panel format that information overload and unfair bias are excluded to a satisfactory degree. However, the panel interview (when up to five or six interviewers are present together) suffers from the very artificiality and formality that are such positive features of the one-to-one and two-to-one formats.

Panel interviews are also difficult to arrange, as so many people have to make sure they are available at the same time over a day or two while a series of candidates are seen. According to Anderson and Shackleton (1993: 75), they are also frequently controlled poorly, leading to the presence of unprofessional practices. Perhaps the best solution of all is the sequential interview, in which the candidate is interviewed by several people over a period of time, but only sees one or two at a time. In principle, such an approach is the best of both worlds. The danger here, however, is that each interviewer or duo simply ask the same questions as each other. The result is a

bored candidate and less information on which to make selection decisions. Sequential interviewing thus only lives up to expectations when different interviewers agree in advance which areas of questioning each will cover.

Blackman (2017: 186) cites several examples of employers experimenting with a multiple interviewee format, whereby one interviewer interviews two or three candidates simultaneously. This approach has the advantage of reducing the amount of management time used to carry out interviews, but research evidence on the approach suggests that information overload tends to impede the interviewer's judgement and that the format has very limited predictive validity as a result.

Public sector v private sector approaches

In 2007 IRS Employment Review carried out an extensive survey of selection practices used in UK organisations. One of the most interesting findings was the difference in approaches used in most public sector and private sector organisations. In pretty well all areas public sector employers take greater care to adhere to approaches that are commonly defined as constituting 'best practice', but which also tend to be more bureaucratic and more costly than the less formal approaches used in some, but by no means all, private sector organisations.

Nowhere is the contrast greater than in selection interviewing. For example, it is very rare indeed for anyone applying for a public sector job to be interviewed by a single person on a one-to-one basis. IRS found that only 3 per cent of public sector organisations ever use such an approach, while 100 per cent make use of panel-based interviews. In the private sector there is a much greater variety of practice. In the service sector 35 per cent of employers use one-to-one interviews, the figure being 47 per cent in the manufacturing sector.

There are also big differences in other areas. In the public sector, interviewing duties are much more likely to be carried out by line managers without the presence of an HR manager. Moreover, in 81 per cent of cases it is the line manager who is expected to 'take the lead in the interview process'. Here, too, practice is far more diverse in the private sector. Managers in the public sector are also twice as likely as their private sector counterparts to be trained in interviewing practice via specialised, in-house training courses.

(SOURCE: Murphy, 2007a)

Varieties of interview question

Another way that interviews vary is in the type of questions asked. While there are many approaches, three types are given particular attention in the literature: hypothetical, behavioural and stress questions.

Hypothetical questions

Also referred to as problem-solving or situational questioning, this method involves asking candidates how they would react or behave in specific situations. The problems posed will usually be examples of those that might be encountered in the job in question, but there may be situations in which examples from outside work could be used in an attempt to obtain evidence of the candidate's customary reactions to pressured or unusual circumstances. The obvious problem, of course, is the opportunity that such questions give the quick-witted candidate to think of the best answer, or that which is expected. When asked how you would react if a customer complained loudly about sloppy service, it is very easy to say that you would deal with the situation calmly and cool-headedly by taking the complainant to a private area and listening carefully to their points, before judiciously offering discounts or complimentary products. The extent to which people would really manage the situation so professionally and effectively remains open to question: it is far easier said than done.

There is also the problem of asking candidates about situations that they cannot have encountered and would not be expected to deal with anyway without relevant training. In such cases honest candidates will say 'I don't honestly know', or 'I would ask head office what to do' – but such answers are likely to gain them little credit. Others will make up a plausible response without having any idea about whether they have answered correctly. To that extent, hypothetical questioning can be said to introduce an unsatisfactory element of chance into the interview. Perhaps it is best to use hypothetical questioning only in order to test basic knowledge about the tasks that make up the job in question, and not to ask about social situations or those that are particularly complex.

Examples of hypothetical questions that might be used for an HR post are as follows:

- A customer reports the loss of a wallet or purse. A manager subsequently finds a wallet that matches the description in a locker allocated to a member of staff. What would you do if confronted with this situation?
- Absence rates in Department A are three times higher than in Department B. What steps would you take to analyse the reasons and reduce absence in Department A?
- A female member of staff comes to talk to you confidentially. She claims to have suffered harassment from two work colleagues who have used intimidating language with a sexual content. What do you do?

Behavioural/competency-based questions

Increasingly commonly used, and often more effective, are questions that focus on past events in a candidate's life, the aim being to establish whether or not they have the attributes or competencies required for the job. These are also referred to as patterned behaviour description interview (PBDI) questions, which seek to focus the candidate's attention on critical incidents from his or her past. In so doing, the interviewer hopes to hear of occasions when the interviewee has demonstrated those abilities or behaviours that are most relevant to the job for which he or she is applying. An example might be a job in which decisiveness was seen as a crucial attribute.

A behavioural question would then involve asking candidates to describe an occasion when they took a particularly difficult decision or were forced to make an important decision without having as much information as they would have liked.

In putting this question, the interviewer is looking for hard evidence that candidates have acted with sufficient decisiveness in the past. The assumption is then made that, put in a similar situation, they would display the same behaviour in the future.

When asking behavioural questions, it is often necessary to home in on the detail of a critical incident by seeking supplementary information. Once the candidate has given a broad description of a relevant occasion, the interviewer probes more deeply by asking, ‘What exactly happened?’, ‘What was your personal contribution?’ or ‘Tell me more about how you reacted’. Only when hard evidence of the behaviour in question has been gained can the candidate be deemed acceptable on that count. It is harder to make up answers to behavioural than hypothetical questions because of the need to give believable answers to the probing supplementaries. They also have the advantage, from the interviewer’s point of view, of providing a good basis on which to justify an appointment or promotion. When asked why someone was unsuccessful, it can simply be pointed out that there was no hard evidence given of sensitivity, persuasiveness, creativity or whatever other attributes were deemed important for a job holder to possess. A very positive review of behavioural interviewing is provided in Jean Barclay’s (2001) account of her research into the subject, while Murphy (2007b, 2008d) and the CIPD (2017b) report increased usage of these types of approach among UK employers. Competency-based interviewing now appears to be the most commonly used selection method in the UK.

There are few disadvantages of this approach to interviewing recorded in the research literature although, as was shown in Chapter 6, there are criticisms of the competency frameworks that underpin many of the questions that are asked. However, problems can arise when the behaviours asked about in the interview are not strictly those required to undertake the job effectively. It is actually very difficult to pick three or four key attributes or personality dimensions for any one job and, as a result, different interviewers often end up asking very different questions. There is thus clearly a need to base such questioning on the contents of agreed person specifications, or ideally on discussions with a current holder of the job in question.



PAUSE FOR THOUGHT

Would you like to be interviewed using behavioural questions? What are the advantages and disadvantages from the perspective of the candidate?

Stress questions

A third type of question apparently used quite regularly is one that is disparaging or aggressive. These ‘stress’ questions can also involve deliberately contradicting something the interviewee has said. Sometimes, one suspects, this practice has no real purpose and is carried out only because it is hugely enjoyable for a particular type

of sadistic selector. However, some argue that stress interviews are necessary in some circumstances in order to observe, at first hand, reactions to stressful or uncomfortable situations. There is also no clear agreement as to what exactly is encompassed by the term 'stress' in these circumstances. Some people might find being asked to 'sell themselves' highly stressful, while others will not blink an eyelid when given a thorough interrogation.

In general, this author would argue that there are precious few circumstances in which there is any case for deliberately putting a candidate under undue stress. Reactions are likely to be as artificial as the behavioural patterns of individuals in any kind of selection interview; moreover, candidates are being asked to produce spontaneous responses in unfamiliar circumstances when, in practice, they would have the opportunity to think about options in advance. There is also a grave danger that the interviewee will react badly, assume that the interviewer has acted unprofessionally and share their negative experiences with others. In this respect the stress interview can be said to generate bad labour-market PR.

Of course, not all interview questions fit neatly into one of these three categories. There is a case for asking easy-going and chatty questions to which there are obvious answers in order to put candidates at their ease and hence glean more meaningful information. Such approaches are particularly useful at the start of interviews when candidates may be less than forthcoming, because they are apprehensive.

However, at all times, there are certain basic rules to follow in posing interview questions. According to Goodworth (1979: 51–61), these include the following:

- Ask open-ended questions, ie those starting with the words 'what', 'when', 'why', 'where', 'which' and 'how'.
- Avoid direct (or 'closed') questions to which the candidate can answer simply yes, no, or 'That's right'.
- Avoid asking questions that reveal the answer you want. An example given by Goodworth is, 'We place great faith in our house magazine as a medium of communication – are you in favour of house journals?'
- Avoid engaging in arguments with interviewees. Restrict yourself to restrained and courteous discussion about issues of importance in the job.
- Ask one question at a time. Avoid the temptation to string two together, as this will confuse the candidate.

Structuring interviews

The one constructive and consistent message that emerges from the large body of research into selection interviewing is the finding that structured interviews have considerably higher predictive validity than their unstructured equivalents, and recent years seem to have seen some growth in the number of employers taking up this approach (CIPD, 2007e: 13; Cook, 2016: 18). However, academic commentators differ in their interpretations of how substantial an improvement is made by structuring. Smith *et al* (1989: 9) suggest that structured interviews have validity coefficients of approximately 0.3, although they also refer to studies that have found them to have greater predictive qualities. Anderson and Shackleton (1993: 49–51), Eder and

Ferris (1989: 16–18), Rynes *et al* (2000) and Cook (2016: 78–9), on the other hand, give structured approaches a far better press. They quote meta-analyses that suggest validity coefficients in excess of 0.6 – as effective as any selection technique can ever reasonably be expected to be.

The term ‘structured interview’ in the context of selection interviewing has a number of distinguishing features:

- questions are planned carefully before the interview;
- all candidates are asked the same questions;
- answers are scored according to agreed rating systems;
- questions focus on the attributes and behaviours needed to succeed in the job.

While structuring interviews in this way may be a highly effective method of improving their predictive quality, it is not necessarily conducive to the creation of a relaxed atmosphere in which the candidate can easily open up. There is evidence to suggest that, unless handled carefully by trained interviewers, structured interviews can be unsatisfactory:

The main disadvantage of using a structured interview is that its rigidity can limit the information-gathering process. Instead of exploring an applicant’s responses by further questioning during the interview, the process is often rushed in order to get through all the questions on the schedule, and the assessment of the individual can be inaccurate as a result. Also, since the interviewer takes the lead, he or she may dominate the process, denying the applicant sufficient time to provide a considered and accurate response.

(Du Plessis, 2003: 179)

The artificiality of these approaches may also dissuade candidates from entering into a two-way exchange by asking their own questions. In short, the mutual exchange and negotiation functions are less well served than the assessment function. There are two compromise solutions that help ameliorate these problems: semi-structuring and mixed approaches.

Semi-structuring

The interviewer can opt for the approach referred to by Anderson and Shackleton (1993: 72) as ‘focused’, in which there is a degree of structuring, but also a greater degree of flexibility than a fully structured approach would allow. Dipboye *et al* (2012) also discuss the possibilities offered by hybrid approaches of this kind. Here the interviewer might plan a series of topics to cover in the interview but follows up what individual interviewees say with supplementary questions. A degree of spontaneity is therefore made possible that permits the candidate some control over the direction of the interview. Meaningful two-way exchange is thus retained.

Mixed approaches

The interviewer can use different questioning techniques at different stages in the interview. Hence, at the start, in order to facilitate mutual exchange and to help the candidate relax, unstructured spontaneous questions are asked. Later, in order to maximise the effectiveness of the assessment function, a greater degree of struc-

turing is introduced, with all candidates asked the same questions. Unstructured approaches are then returned to in the final stages when the negotiation function becomes significant.

Applicant reactions

In recent years, as some labour markets have tightened and employers have had to work harder at attracting talented and experienced staff, researchers have focused more extensively on the recruitment aspects of selection interviewing. Several projects have thus been carried out looking at the perceptions of applicants and at which forms and types of interview experience give them the most favourable impression of the organisation.

Among the qualities that applicants rate highly is warmth. They like an interviewer who appears friendly and supportive rather than distant and cold. The research shows that candidates greatly appreciate being interviewed by someone who is informative, who answers their questions frankly and gives them a full picture of the job and the organisation. Candidates are suspicious of interviewers who seem to be overselling the job, because they assume that they are covering something up. They also tend to be put off by interviews that are very heavily structured and give them little opportunity to put their own case in the way that they want to. Aside from being personable and informative, applicants also want to be assured that their interviewer is competent and is clearly listening to what they are saying.

Body language thus matters a great deal, as does effective preparation on the part of interviewers. These studies provide further evidence of the gains that can be made for organisations who invest time and money in training their interviewers. Perhaps the most dangerous beast of all is the arrogant manager who believes he or she is a 'natural' interviewer and whose style cannot be improved with training or thorough preparation.

(**SOURCES:** Whalley and Smith, 1998: 96; Rynes *et al*, 2000: 260–6; Nikolaou *et al*, 2015)

Activity 10.4

Selecting people to work with children

Read the article by Catherine Waldon of the NSPCC entitled 'Questions of trust' featured in *People Management* (7 March 2002, page 27). This can be downloaded from the *People Management*

archive on the CIPD's website (www.cipd.co.uk).

This article raises a number of interesting and important issues about the selection of staff to work in schools, children's homes and other

(Continues)

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children's organisations – situations in which choosing the wrong person can have extremely serious consequences.

Questions

- 1 Why do some people have concerns about the equal opportunities implications of in-depth preliminary interviewing of the kind advocated in this article?
- 2 What kinds of interview and interview questions do you think would be most appropriate to ask candidates applying to work with children, and why?
- 3 Aside from interviewing, what other methods of selection should be used when recruiting for these kinds of jobs?

Remote interviews

Telephone and particularly video interviews using Skype, Viber, WhatsApp and other systems are becoming increasingly common, being used mainly by employers as a quick and relatively cheap method of deciding which candidates to invite to a formal face-to-face interview. The CIPD (2017b: 28) reports that 65 per cent of employers now use this approach for some of their jobs, a substantial growth being recorded in the use of such approaches in recent years.

Aside from cost, the main advantage that supporters of telephone interviewing point to is a supposed reduction in the opportunity for unfair bias on grounds of race, age, disability and other factors that might be unlawful to take into account or simply mean that good candidates are rejected for insignificant reasons. The extent to which this is true is debatable, and there appears to be little academic research that backs it up. When speaking to someone on the telephone that we have not met, we have a strong tendency to picture someone in our minds based on the characteristics of his or her voice. These impressions are often wildly inaccurate, as we later find out to our surprise when we meet someone who we have only got to know on the telephone (the same is true when a radio presenter we are very familiar with appears on television). The suggestion that telephone interviewing reduces the extent to which interviewers leap to conclusions about people must be questionable. In fact they are often more likely to gain an inaccurate impression.

A rather more sound, evidence-based argument is that telephone interviews tend to be more business-like, interviewers and interviewees focusing on the key questions from the start. There is less general chit-chat and hence a greater focus on the job role itself. It is also argued that the quality of someone's argument comes through more clearly by telephone than it does in a face-to-face interview, because interpersonal factors such as the way someone looks, is dressed or carries themselves physically cannot get in the way of judgements about what they are actually saying.

Research carried out by Joanne Silvester (reported by IRS, 2002b) found that candidates were consistently rated more poorly in telephone interviews than when interviewed face to face. Interviewers, it would seem, are happier to be critical of

someone they have not met personally. This strongly suggests that there is a likelihood of unfair bias occurring where some candidates are interviewed by telephone for a job, while others are seen face to face. The latter invariably achieve greater success rates.

The development of video-based communication systems such as Skype opens up new possibilities in selection interviewing. In particular they permit interviews to take place without interviewers and interviewee being present together in the same room. Considerable cost savings are achievable as a result, particularly when candidates are based a fair distance away or in another country. As yet, however, as any user of Skype will be aware, the quality of the pictures and the reliability of the whole system still has much further to go before it can genuinely be said to replicate the quality of a face-to-face meeting. Until substantial further advances are made, it is not going to be wholly satisfactory from either party's point of view to rely on Skype in a selection interview situation, except when there is no alternative. It may be the case, for example, that a particular candidate who an organisation is keen to consider cannot attend on the day set aside for interviewing, or is based overseas. In which case it makes sense to interview via Skype. The same is true, of course, if someone is being tested on how effectively they present themselves when communicating via Skype. As a rule, however, while Skype marks an improvement on telephone interviewing and has huge potential for the future, its current utility in selection interviewing remains limited. At present such research evidence that we have strongly suggests that candidates prefer to meet face to face and that both interviewers and interviewees communicate less effectively with one another when interviews are carried out remotely (D'Souza *et al*, 2017)

Employment references

The reference letter of recommendation or testimonial is the third of the three selection techniques that make up the 'classic trio'. Like interviews and application forms, it is very widely used (by over 90 per cent of employers in the UK) but has been found to be of limited value by researchers (see Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham, 2010: 56–8; Cook, 2016; Furnham, 2017). As a predictor of job performance, it has low validity and has often been found to contain more information about its author than about its subject. A number of reasons have been put forward to explain the limitations of references. According to Cooper *et al* (2003: 154), they are 'highly subjective' and 'open to error and abuse' because 'the flow of information is between two people who are unlikely to meet and about an applicant who will never know what is written'. The implication is that employers, when asked, are generally disinclined to regard the giving of a fair, considered assessment of a former employee to be a high priority. The result is carelessness and a reluctance to put a great deal of time or thought into the writing of the reference. Interestingly, only around half of all reference requests sent out by post ever receive a response (IRS, 2001e: 11). Furthermore, a number of specific problems have been identified:

- A tendency to give individuals a similar rating when asked about different aspects of their work and personality. If asked to comment separately about

someone's social skills, conscientiousness, initiative and attendance records, referees tend to rate candidates as good, moderate or poor on all counts.

- A tendency to give good ratings. It is comparatively rare for employers to receive poor references. While this could be simply because candidates name only people who, they believe, will write a positive assessment, there is also evidence to suggest that employers are generally reluctant to mark someone down in a reference report. A range of average or non-committal ratings or statements thus often indicates a weak performer.
- A tendency, when given a five-point scale, to rank individuals in the centre. Employers seem reluctant to give excellent ratings.

Suff (2008) reports the results of research that suggests that employers are 'lukewarm' about the effectiveness of references and rarely find them to be useful when making selection decisions. A great deal of time and effort is put in by some employers to chasing them up, only to find that they have little practical value. Negative or even semi-negative comments are very rarely made, while many employers now have a policy of only providing factual information and making no comment about someone's suitability at all. This state of affairs has undoubtedly arisen because of the Data Protection Act 2000, and rulings made by the Information Commissioner in favour of unsuccessful candidates who have asked for copies of their references. In short, the law now makes it very difficult for a reference-writer to know for certain that what they write will remain confidential. Fear of further litigation under defamation or discrimination laws means that a very cautious approach tends to be taken.

As was the case with interviews, given these damning research findings it is reasonable to ask why references retain their near-universal appeal for employers. Here, too, the answer probably lies in the function that references fulfil. According to the CIPD (2017b: 28), only 16 per cent of employers take up references before a provisional selection decision has been made. The aim is therefore less to assist in the prediction of job performance and more to do with double-checking factual information and seeking confirmation of general impressions gained during the selection process. The reference provides one more piece of information, but is rarely crucial in determining who will get a job.

There are three exceptions to this. The first is the case of internal candidates. In large organisations where people compete for in-house promotions, references are likely to play a more fundamental part in the selection process. In such situations both the selector and the referee will take the process of writing references more seriously. Second, the same kind of influences also come into play in the case of applicants for jobs in professions occupied by relatively few people. Here, although job transfers are occurring between organisations, the chances are that referees know those responsible for the selection of candidates. As a result, references are generally more reliable than they are when the writers and recipients are anonymous to each other. Examples include academic and senior medical appointments. The third exception is the case when a reference reveals that candidates have been less than honest in statements they have made in interviews or on their application forms. Common examples include misleading information about dates of employment, salary, seniority and reasons for leaving previous jobs. Where references bring dishonesty of this kind to light, they can be crucial in determining that offers of employment

are not made. Perhaps the most useful question of all is 'would you re-employ this person?' If former employers answer negatively, there is a need to probe further and find out why.

There are a number of improvements to the process of reference-gathering that researchers have found increase the quality of the information gathered. The first is to contact former employers and named referees by telephone. Doing so is less anonymous and thus increases the chances of a candid and balanced assessment. Confidentiality vis-à-vis the candidates themselves is also ensured, making disclosure and litigation impossible (unless verbatim notes are made and retained). Provided that the questions asked over the phone are precise and job-related, this approach can work well. It also has the advantage of making it harder for ex-employers to avoid giving references. According to Suff (2008) 48 per cent of employers take up references by telephone, but it appears generally to be much used as a fallback rather than as a formal part of regular procedures.

The second widely mooted improvement is to design structured assessment forms that relate specifically to the skills and experience necessary to perform well in the job under consideration (Furnham, 2017: 212). As with structured interviewing, this requires much more preparation than the placing of a pre-printed form in an envelope. It requires separate forms to be constructed for different jobs, with questions related to the criteria agreed in the job specification.

The third means by which references can be made more useful is to request more than just one or two. Asking a candidate for permission to approach half a dozen referees increases the chances of receiving meaningful information. It also makes it harder for the candidate to name only people who are likely to give unblemished reports. It is for this reason that applicants for positions in the security services are asked to name several referees, including employers whom they left many years previously. Cook (2016: 104–5) gives a positive review to the practice of including peers as well as former supervisors in the list of people to whom references are sent.

It is also possible to improve the quality of references simply by providing the referee with plenty of information about the role in the form of a job description and/or person specification, together with guidance notes about how to fill in the forms or what areas to cover. Research also suggests that a questionnaire-based approach that includes forced choice questions about a candidate's preferred approach to working can help improve validity, as can questions that ask specifically about how well the candidate performs in various areas relative to his or her peer group (Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham, 2010: 58–9).

Perhaps the best approach to the use of references, like so many tools and techniques in human resource management, is not to have too great expectations about them. They are not a panacea; nor are they a substitute for managerial judgement. They have very great limitations, but can nevertheless be useful and informative provided they are treated warily. If they are approached in the full knowledge that they are less than perfect and likely to be overgenerous towards candidates, they have a positive role to play in selection. The danger is relying too heavily on them.



Activity 10.5

Burden of proof

Read the article by Anat Arkin entitled 'Burden of proof' featured in *People Management* (24 February 2005, pages 30–2). This can be downloaded from the *People Management* archive on the CIPD's website (www.cipd.co.uk).

In this article contributions made to an online discussion forum set up by the CIPD are set out and discussed. Contributors debated the future of the job reference in the context of 'today's litigious society'.

Questions

- 1 What are 'tombstone references' and why have they become more common in recent years?
- 2 What, according to the article, are effective ways of eliciting full and accurate information from referees?
- 3 Why is it argued that we tend to be more cautious about giving full and accurate references than we need be?

Criminal record checks

One of the more significant, time-consuming and sometimes controversial recent developments in selection practices is the need, for some roles, to undertake formal checks on a job applicant's background in terms of criminal records before a job offer can be made. In England and Wales applications are made to the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS), Scotland and Northern Ireland operating similar regimes using different disclosure institutions. Whenever a job involves its holder in working either with children or vulnerable adults a request for 'standard' disclosure needs to be made. This will list all previous convictions, including those that are spent, as well as any warnings, cautions or reprimands held on the Police National Computer. A request for 'enhanced disclosure' has to be made where job holders are involved in caring for, training or supervising children or vulnerable adults, or where a job puts people in sole charge of these groups. Enhanced disclosure includes further information held by local police forces as well as that held on the national computer database.

The number of checks carried out each year is currently running at around three million, leading to frequent delays on the part of the records bureaux, which cause inconvenience to employers and would-be employees alike. According to Suff (2008) over half of the employers responding to an IRS survey complained that delays in getting access to an individual's record were causing difficulties for them, including cases of new recruits withdrawing because they are not prepared to wait any longer to hear if their applications have or have not been successful. Of greater concern are situations in which the agencies make mistakes and send the wrong person's record, often someone with a similar name or who has lived at the same address.