



UNIT - 4

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT APPLICANTS AND INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES

Staff Training Solutions

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Recognize the costs incurred by an organization when a wrong hiring decision is made.
- ✓ Develop a fair and consistent interviewing process for selecting employees.

Unit 4

Dealing with Difficult Applicants and Interviewing Techniques

Difficult Applicants

Sample BDI Questions

These are questions that can be used to gather information about a candidate's leadership skills. Both behavioral and situational questions have been included. To assist the interviewer in obtaining sufficiently detailed responses, a set of probes is provided for each behavior description question, along with some pointers to help you gather sufficient information from a situational question.

Introduce questions by saying: "Now we would like to ask you some questions concerning your background experiences. We would like you to provide as much detail as possible, so please feel free to take the time to reflect upon your answer."

- 1) Describe a time when you coordinated a group in order to complete a task or project.
 - i) What was the task or project?
 - ii) What people were involved?
 - iii) How did you get the group members to work together?
 - iv) What was the result of your involvement?

- 2) Sometimes when working with others on a project, the group experiences the frustration of stalling or not making much progress towards completing the task. Can you describe a time when you decided to take a more active role in a group project because you thought the group was not progressing quickly enough to meet the goal?
 - i) What was the task to be accomplished?
 - ii) Why was the group stalled or not making much progress?
 - iii) What did you do to help the group become more focused?
 - iv) What was the result of your more active involvement?

- 3) Give an example of a time when a group that you were working in was frustrated with a task or project, but you found a way to make the experience positive and still get the job done.
 - i) What was the task or project?
 - ii) Why was the group frustrated?
 - iii) What did you do to help the group?
 - iv) What was the outcome of the group's effort?
 - v) How were you able to turn the experience into a positive one?

- 4) Describe a time when your contribution helped a group meet its goal.
 - i) What was the goal of the group?
 - ii) Where was the group heading?

- iii) What was your contribution to the group and how did it help?
 - iv) Was the group able to meet its goal?
- 5) Give an example of a time when you gained the commitment of other people to accomplish a particular assignment or project.
 - i) What was the task or goal?
 - ii) Who was involved?
 - iii) Where was the group heading?
 - iv) Specifically, what did you do to motivate the group?
 - v) What was the outcome of the group's effort?
- 6) When working in a group, it's not surprising when people have major differences of opinion. Can you recall a time when you worked with a group of people who had major differences of opinion and you decided to intervene as a means to steer the group closer to a consensus?
 - i) Describe the situation you were involved in.
 - ii) What were the differences of opinion?
 - iii) How did you handle the clashes that did occur?
 - iv) What were the reactions of the other group members to your intervention?
 - v) What consensus was reached, if any?
- 7) Tell us about a time when you changed your approach while working with a group in order to help the group accomplish its task better.
 - i) What was the task?
 - ii) How was the group going about the task?
 - iii) Why did you change your approach with the group?
 - iv) How did your new approach help the group accomplish the task?
 - v) How did the other group members respond to your new approach?
- 8) Tell us about a time when you volunteered to help a group that was having difficulty getting organized.
 - i) Why did you volunteer your time?
 - ii) What did you do?
 - iii) Did the group benefit from your efforts?
 - iv) What did you learn from the experience of helping others?
- 9) There are times when we introduce new tasks to our co-workers or fellow students. Can you describe a time when you gave or introduced a completely new task to a group and tell us how you helped the group meet the goals of the task?
 - i) What was the task?
 - ii) How did you prepare the group to tackle this task?
 - iii) How did you present the task to your group?
 - iv) What did you do to facilitate the team to complete the task?
 - v) Was your team able to accomplish the task successfully?

- 10) Relate an instance in which you arranged for someone to take over the leadership of something.
 - i) What was the mandate of the group?
 - ii) What was your role within the group?
 - iii) Whom did you appoint to take over from you?
 - iv) How did you prepare this person?
 - v) How did the group function after your withdrawal?

- 11) Do you recall a teamwork situation in which one of the team members was not doing his/her share of the work and you decided to intervene? Describe what you did.
 - i) What was the mandate of the team?
 - ii) How had the work been distributed among the team members?
 - iii) How did this person's sub-par performance affect the team's progress?
 - iv) How did you intervene?
 - v) What were the results of your intervention?

Difficult Applicants

Silent Sam

You opened with a handshake and a smile and learned that the applicant didn't have much trouble finding the place. You've asked him/her to outline the duties and responsibilities at the present job and now you want to ask about a particularly challenging assignment.

"What was the assignment?" you ask, and there is no response. What do you do now?

Our first reaction is often to rush in with a follow-up probe, or even to move on to the next question. Don't rush the applicant. Your first technique for handling Silent Sam is a calculated pause. A pause is very powerful. Wait 10 to 15 seconds to give the applicant a chance to process your question and choose a response. Not all of us have answers on the tip of the tongue.

If you wait too long (15 to 30 seconds), it may be such a long pause that it becomes embarrassing for both of you, but at least give the calculated pause a chance before going on to other techniques.

If the applicant begins looking uncomfortable, use the "You're OK" statement, to legitimize the applicant's silence and remove some of the pressure that may be blocking the applicant's memory. Your verbal and non-verbal messages should be in tune here. Smile and use an interested tone of voice when you deliver the "You're OK" statement. Any indication of impatience will defeat the whole purpose of the statement.

What does a "You're OK" statement look like?

“I know it can be a bit difficult to come up with a specific example of a challenging assignment (or whatever type of example you’ve asked for). Most applicants need a minute or two to get their thoughts together. However, we find your answers most helpful.”

If you still aren’t getting results, try a question restatement. Restate the question using slightly different wording or emphasis. Try to avoid just repeating the question. An example might be, “What we are really getting at is a time when you were put to the test to complete an assignment. Can you recall a time like that?”

Betty Bluff

The interviewer says, “Sometimes we are all stumped by a customer question. Can you tell us about the last time you were stumped and what you did at that time?”

Betty Bluff responds, “Hmm. I just can’t think of a time when I was completely stumped. No, I always have something to say.”

Whereas Silent Sam says nothing when asked a behavior description question, Betty Bluff acts as if such situations happen to everyone but her.

Sometimes an applicant truly doesn’t have the experience. If, as you probe, you decide they aren’t bluffing, you can let them off the hook. However, if you feel they just aren’t prepared to reveal any times when they feel they didn’t perform well, try a question restatement.

In this case, the applicant has focused on being stumped and having nothing to say, but the intent of the question was to see how the applicant looks for advice when it is necessary. You may restate the question by saying, “I realize you always have some kind of reply, but I was interested in situations when you had to get back to a customer after you found out some additional information. None of us always has all the answers.”

Betty Bluff then may respond, “Oh yes, there have been times when I needed the support of more experienced people.”

Often interviewers find that summarizing and explaining intent before digging in to get the information they want produces the information they are seeking. The applicant feels listened to, and more willing to come up with the desired information.

At other times, you may want to use the “You’re OK” statement followed by the sympathetic persistence technique, such as, “I realize it’s a bit tough to come up with examples, but could you think of a recent time when you used that skill?”

You must politely persist on obtaining behavior description answers to the first few BDI questions you ask. If you let the applicant off the hook early on in an interview, you may never get true examples of past behavior and thus are not conducting a behavior description interview.

Neither Silent Sam nor Betty Bluff actually came up with answers to behavior description questions and as an interviewer, you want to be aware that the questions missed their mark.

Slippery Sue

Slippery Sue gives you an answer but it slips away from the question being asked. For example, you might ask, “Could you tell us about a time when you were really stumped?”

She may respond, “When you are really stumped, you look to your senior people for support, such as your boss or the more experienced installation mechanics. It’s always a good idea to let the customer know you are seeing to their problems, but you try to diagnose the problem before rushing to a solution.”

Here Slippery Sue gave a response, but it described how the applicant typically handles being stumped, not a specific time when the applicant was stumped. This is an experience response to a behavior description question. You can tell because the answer is not in the past tense. The answer also contains the word always; a dead giveaway to an experience answer.

One technique for nipping Slippery Sue’s experience responses in the bud is to assume responsibility. You take the rap for the applicant’s mistake, so it goes down better when you point out you are not getting the information you need.

You can say, “I’m sorry. I guess I wasn’t clear enough about the answer I wanted. You told me how you typically handle being stumped but what I really wanted to hear about was the last time this happened. Can you recall when that was?”

Here a combination of assumed responsibility and “You’re OK” techniques brought out the specifics you were looking for.

Be careful about assuming responsibility. If you use it more than once or twice in an interview, it doesn’t go down well with either interviewer or applicant. The basic format is to gently but firmly inform the applicant that you (the interviewer) are not getting the information you want and that you will persist until you do. Usually the applicant gets the message and gets on with the answers you seek.

By now you may feel like obtaining answers to behavior description questions is like pulling teeth—and sometimes it is. More often the applicants answer the questions directly, but you must be prepared to handle tough applicants when they appear.

Talkative Tom

There is another candidate that can present a problem for interviewers, and that is Talkative Tom. This is the applicant who, perhaps because of nervousness or a need to impress, talks so much the whole interview format is about to be derailed.

In interviews, it will sometimes be necessary for the interviewer to interrupt the applicant. He or she may be getting off track or stuck in reciting the details of a routine day, or perhaps just offering an opinion that has no bearing on the topic at hand.

You must briefly summarize what the applicant was saying before directing him/her back to current work experience. The order of events should be interrupt, summarize, and redirect.

Interview Preparation and Format

Interview Preparation

Employment interviews are very like appraisal interviews. Preparation is very important. Here are some tips:

- ✓ Create your question guide (containing specific questions you will ask and expected answers) and your interview guide (containing the format of the interview).
- ✓ Everyone who is conducting the interview should be familiar with the guides.
- ✓ Give yourself enough time between appointments.
- ✓ Have a room conducive to an informal interview.
- ✓ Go to greet the person and bring them back to the interview room.
- ✓ Shake hands.

Before the Interview

First, establish rapport to establish an atmosphere of comfort and trust so that applicants feel as comfortable talking about the negative aspects of their background as well as the positive. Here are some guidelines:

- ✓ Arrange to hold the interview in a private room that is comfortable and has sufficient heat and light.
- ✓ A few simple courtesies such as shaking hands, asking the candidate to be seated, and offering a tea or coffee, can go a long way.
- ✓ Avoid interruptions during the interview; this shows disrespect for the applicant.
- ✓ Place chairs in an optimal seating arrangement to ensure the candidate feels comfortable.
- ✓ Use first names only, if possible. Generally, recruiters are advised to keep any mention of titles out of the introductions as it may cause a high degree of stress.

You should also set the agenda to ensure that the recruiter maintains total control throughout the interview process. It will relax applicants by letting them know how the interview will progress, when they can ask questions and how much time will be allotted for the interview.

In a friendly but firm manner outline the purpose and procedure for the interview: “The purpose of this interview is to evaluate your job qualifications for the vacant position. In the next half-hour [or whatever the time frame is], I will be asking you several questions about your skills, past experiences, and academic background. Then I will explain the specific position you are applying for in more detail and describe our organization to you. Later on in the interview I will give you an opportunity to ask questions which I may not have already covered. By the way, I’ll be jotting down notes as we go along.”

During the Interview

Here is a basic overview of the interview.

- ✓ Rapport
 - The warm and fuzzy, but be careful what you say
 - A little bit about the company
 - A little bit about the position
- ✓ Discussion
 - Technical
 - Performance
 - Fit
- ✓ Closing
- ✓ More about job and company
- ✓ What happens next?
- ✓ Permission to check references
- ✓ Conclude and be sure not to ask more questions!

Gather information using behavioral and situational questions and their responses with probes as necessary.

The interview should be at least 30 to 45 minutes long. Management and executive interviews can be two or three hours and may even involve more than one interview, especially with non-panel members, to probe their knowledge and philosophies.

The interview panel for positions below managerial level should have no less than two people and preferably three. All members of the group should be knowledgeable about the job description. The interview panel for managerial positions to executive should have no less than three people and no more than six.

Closing the Interview

There are several important steps in the closing process. The interviewer will want to summarize all that has been said so far, and then give the candidate the opportunity to ask questions.

This is also a good time to make certain the candidate is still interested, and tell them about the next steps in the process. You will also want to let the candidate know you will be checking references, and you may want to go one step further and have them sign a reference check form stating you have permission to call on former employers. As you conclude the interview, thank the candidate for coming, shake hands, and escort them to the door of the interview room or even to the door of the building. DO NOT continue to ask interview questions after the interview has concluded.

Other Interview Techniques

Using Superlatives

When you ask Behavior Description Interview (BDI) questions, using superlative adjectives (those that indicate the greatest extent or degree of something) can be a key to soliciting effective answers from a candidate. These superlatives tend to stimulate specific events in the mind of the candidate, making it easier for them to respond, and also gives you the most or least of a particular quality you are looking for. This also implies that the interviewer expects that the candidate has indeed had one of these experiences.

Which of the following would get a better response from you?

- ✓ Have you had any trouble with a co-worker? Give me an example.
- ✓ Tell me about the co-worker you get along with least.

Moving Through the Questions

Three general principles help the interviewer move through the interview questions effectively. You want:

- ✓ Coverage
- ✓ Balance
- ✓ Tact

While you may not ask every question you have prepared, each job dimension should be probed to your satisfaction. If the first couple of questions for a competency tie it down, move on to the next topic. Spend more time on those competencies that are “must have” and less time on those that are less important.

Never move through the questions in such a way that you emphasize challenges, difficulties, disappointments, and failures. Accentuate the positive and always start with stories of successes or accomplishments. Then ease into questions on the other side of the coin.

Be persistent but know when to give in if you can't pull a response from a candidate. If the applicant is totally blank, assume any responsibility for confusion, and rephrase the question. However, if you still draw a blank, move on gracefully. You may wish to come back to it later in the interview if there is time. However, if this is a key question, no response would suggest a low assessment on interpersonal skills.

Good Note-Taking

We recommend preparing the desired answers to your questions as you develop them, prior to the interviews taking place. During the interview, take notes or record it. (Make sure to get the candidate's permission if you are recording it.) Don't try to write everything down, just the pertinent responses, and keep your notes limited to what the applicant said or did. Don't try to make judgments as you listen. There will be time for that after the interview is completed.

Interruptions

Sometimes getting the answers you want from behavior description interview questions will be like pulling teeth. You may have to interrupt the candidate to bring them back on track or to move the interview along. You will want to develop smooth and tactful interruptions that gently but firmly inform the applicant you aren't getting the information you are seeking. Three techniques can prove useful:

- ✓ A question restatement
- ✓ Sympathetic persistence
- ✓ Assumed responsibility

Calculated pauses and "You're OK" statements can also help move the interview along.

Signposts

As you work through the interview questions, prepare the candidate for transitions and new topics. Here are some examples:

- ✓ "Thank you. I think we have a clear idea of your job responsibilities in your last position. Could we just take a few minutes now to zero in on your ability to work with other members of a team? Tell us about the most enjoyable team you have been a part of."
- ✓ "Sometimes teams can be frustrating to work with. Can you describe a time when you found it most frustrating to be a team member?"

Scoring Responses

A performance-based rating scale can help you objectively analyze interview and test responses. Performance-based rating scales:

- ✓ Are easy to use since they can be attached to any question.
- ✓ Allow responses to be evaluated on the degree of completeness and correctness.
- ✓ Can accommodate every possible applicant response from worst (or completely unacceptable) to the best. It is possible to rate applicant responses that are incomplete, complete responses that also include incorrect information, and even innovative responses that haven't been tried before.

Here is an example of a performance-based rating scale.

Performance – Based Rating Scale (0 to 4 points)	
0	Completely unacceptable solution or response or all key points are missing
1	Unacceptable solution or response which would result in problems that are difficult to solve or had a large impact or 25% of a complete response
2	Acceptable solution or response which would result in easily correctable problems or 50% of a complete response
3	Acceptable solution or response which won't cause problems or 75% of a complete response
4	Acceptable solution or response which is complete and won't cause any problems

Like the resume screening guide, this helps you make an objective, defensible decision.

Checking References

There are really only two ways to handle references: thoroughly or not at all. To simply go through the motions of making calls to the names the applicant gives you is generally a waste of time.

If you decide to go the "thorough" route, here are six points worth bearing in mind.

- ✓ Don't delay. Start checking references as soon as the applicant has given you permission to do so. The longer you hesitate, the greater the risk of losing the applicant.

- ✓ Put little value on written references handed directly to you by the applicant. The written references some applicants carry with them into an interview are suspect for a couple of reasons. For one thing, letters from former employers are often written on the day of termination and may consequently have been written out of guilt. Sometimes such letters are written by the applicants themselves, and then signed by the employer.
- ✓ Ask permission to call most former employers. The most recent employers may not have bad things to say about an applicant, but this isn't to say that previous employers haven't had problems you'd like to hear about. All the more reason for calling as many of the applicant's former employers as possible.
- ✓ When possible, get references by phone, not in writing. This is for two big reasons: people tend to be reluctant about putting down negative remarks on paper, and when you're talking to somebody directly, you're in a better position to judge the sincerity and the enthusiasm of the reference.
- ✓ When filling a key position, make a personal visit to the person giving the reference if possible. It's worth the time. People are usually more candid in a face-to-face situation than they might be over the phone or on a letter.
- ✓ If you are unable to obtain references from the individuals an applicant has suggested, it is perfectly acceptable to ask if they have other references they might suggest you contact.

Your best references are previous employers, especially the applicant's immediate supervisors. They can tell you what you want to know.

Never contact a company for which the applicant is still working unless the applicant has given specific permission. To do so may jeopardize the applicant's job and is inexcusable.

During your inquiry, include the following questions:

- ✓ Specifically, what type of work did he or she do?
- ✓ How did the applicant get along with his or her supervisor, peers, and subordinates?
- ✓ What was the employee's absentee record?
- ✓ Did the applicant accept direction well?
- ✓ Why did the applicant leave?
- ✓ If you had an opening and company policy would permit it, would you rehire the applicant? If not, why not?

Listen to how the answers are given. This often conveys a lot of feelings and attitudes.

You should also develop a reference guide and use it for each reference.

Reporting the Results

At the end of the interview process, the interviewer should be able to write a one-page summary of the candidate's characteristics and suitability for the job. This summary should include an assessment based

on all pertinent characteristics used in the evaluation process. It should also include a prediction of the candidate's success in the job should he or she be chosen as the successful applicant. The hiring decision is extremely important. If you aren't making the decision, the manager who must make it should be supplied with all the facts he or she needs.

The Changing Nature of References

In some jurisdictions, getting references is very difficult. Concerns over personal privacy, litigation, and politics mean that some companies will only answer a very small number of questions, and only with a signed consent form. Some organizations route all reference inquiries through their human resources office and will only confirm the dates of employment so that you can verify information on the resume. They may or may not answer whether they would hire the individual again.

Human Rights

To discriminate, according to the Oxford Dictionary, means "to make a distinction, to give unfair treatment, especially because of prejudice." Everyone is familiar with the "prejudice" part of that definition but many are unaware that discrimination also has the innocent meaning of "making a distinction," that is, choosing between one and the other, which is what the employment selection process means. The contentious issue is making a distinction on the basis of prohibited grounds, which include race, national origin, citizenship, religion, political belief, sex, age, marital or family status, and disabilities.

Rules can vary across countries and regions. In Canada, for example, all employers, except the federal government, are dealt with according to human rights legislation in each province and territory, unless their business is "integrally bound up with a federal work, undertaking, service, or business." Federal employees and businesses primarily involved in federal work are protected under the Canadian Human Rights Act. It's extremely important that all employers are familiar with the basic provisions of their jurisdiction's human rights law.

One of the important provisions of which many employers are not aware is that there are certain questions that an employer may not ask an applicant. Once again, it is important that you determine what is legal and permitted in your jurisdiction. Many employers believe that while it is illegal to make a hiring decision on prohibited grounds, it is acceptable to ask applicants questions related to these topics during the interview or on the application form. This is not acceptable. Questions asked during an interview are not casually "getting to know each other." Legally, they are linked to the purpose of the interview, making a hiring decision.

Another myth is that it is okay to ask those questions if the employer adds, "You're not required to answer that if you don't want to." The applicant's decision whether to answer or not probably tells the employer that the answer is not what they want to hear, but can also push the boundary by entering

into very personal territory. Since applicants are already under tremendous stress to answer every question at the risk of looking bad, don't ask any of those questions. They are illegal for good reason.

Skill Application

Rapport

Company Description



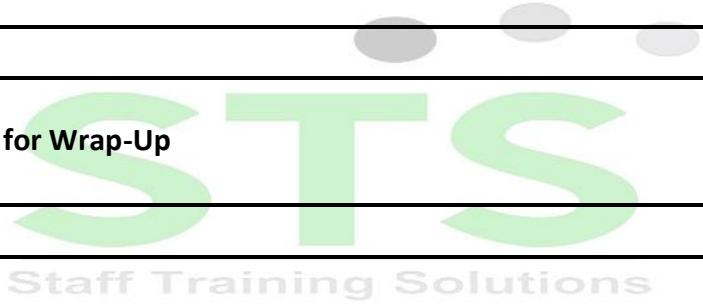
Position Description

One Technical Question with a Probe

Two Performance Questions, Each with Probes

One Critical Incident

One Other Question for Wrap-Up



A Brief Closing (that doesn't include additional information about position and company)

Pre-Assignment Review

Now that we've spent some time learning about the hiring process, let's see if we can start applying those skills to your workplace. Take a look at your pre-assignment and see how your answers have changed.

In particular, let's focus on these questions.

Question 3: What other advertising methods could you use?

Question 5: What characteristics don't apply? How can you improve this?



Question 6: What type of question did you list? Can improvements be made?

Further Reading: