How to run structured interviews

7 steps for using structured interviews in recruitment and promotions to improve gender equality and representation

A guide for hiring managers, HR, and Diversity and Inclusion leads

This guide is part of the 'How to improve gender equality' toolkit

THE **BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS TEAM**

The recommendations we provide are based on the best available evidence and the latest thinking from practitioners and experts in organisational behaviour and behavioural economics.

This guide is one of five in the 'How to improve gender equality' series:

- How to set effective targets
- How to establish diversity leads and diversity task forces
- How to run structured interviews
- How to use skill-based assessment tasks
- How to increase transparency of progression, pay and reward processes

To understand other approaches which are effective at improving equality, see our summary of evidence-based actions for employers.

For more information see the sources listed in the bibliography or contact gabiprogramme@bi.team.

Professor Iris Bohnet and Research Fellows Siri Chilazi and Anisha Asundi from the Women and Public Policy Program at Harvard Kennedy School provided academic advice in the development of this series of guides. We also acknowledge Willmott Dixon, PwC, OGUK and Bosch Thermotechnology for their input.

Checklist

1. Develop a set of questions to ask in the interview
2. Before using them, get feedback on the questions to make sure they are fair and effective
3. Develop criteria for assessing candidates' responses to questions
4. Prepare for the interview
5. Conduct the interview
6. Score the interview
7. Collect data over time to see if there are any disparities

Structured interviews matter

Structured interviews enable hiring managers to make better decisions. They can also help to avoid women and minority groups from being disadvantaged. They involve asking a pre-defined set of questions, to give all candidates the same opportunity to demonstrate their skills and knowledge. Candidates' responses are then scored using consistent criteria to ensure the same standards are applied to all.

Structured interviews have a number of benefits:

1. Panels are more likely to select candidates who go on to perform as needed on the job when they use structured, rather than unstructured interviews.[1]

2. They increase the likelihood that interviewers' attention will be evenly distributed between candidates, giving everyone an equal chance to impress.[2]

3. Pre-planning the questions and the criteria for assessing the responses allows interviewers to listen to candidates' responses more closely. This is preferable to having to concentrate on steering the conversation or trying to keep track of reactions to different interview responses.[3]

4. Asking all candidates the same questions makes it easier for the panel to make direct and fair comparisons between candidates.

5. They give recruiting managers an opportunity to identify and reformulate any questions which might unintentionally disadvantage women or minority groups as candidates' responses are recorded and trends can be examined over time.

Together, these benefits can help organisations choose the best people to hire, and avoid eliminating qualified candidates who might be excellent for the role.

This guide provides employers with a summary of the evidence on how structured interviews should be designed so that they are more effective. All recruitment approaches have strengths and weaknesses and it can help to combine structured interviews with other assessment methods in order to minimise bias. See the Skill-based assessment tasks guide for more information on other methods that could be used in recruitment processes along with structured interviews. Skill-based assessment tasks and structured interviews share some features and both are intended to minimise bias and increase fairness.

The issues with unstructured interviews

Unlike structured interviews, *unstructured* interviews tend to be more like conversations. In unstructured interviews, interviewers may ask different questions of different candidates or have no clear scoring system for determining who is best for the role. Compared to structured interviews, unstructured interviews present more opportunities for people to make unconscious assumptions about the type of person who would be right for a role. This means that interview panels may make decisions based on personal biases, such as being influenced by first impressions or favouring people who are like themselves. This can result in qualified candidates from diverse backgrounds missing out on appointments and promotions, which can contribute to the gender pay gap and inequality.

"There are strengths and weaknesses of all recruitment approaches and it can help to combine structured interviews with other assessment methods in order to minimise bias"

How to use structured interviews for recruitment and promotions

Step 1: Develop a set of questions to ask in the interview

Plan the questions you will ask ahead of the interviews. Questions should explore candidates' knowledge, skills and competencies across a range of areas relevant to the job description.[4]

Challenge the status quo. Encourage everyone involved in the recruitment process to consider what competencies are really needed for the role in future, rather than simply what is in place now.

Ask a range of questions. This gives you more information about whether the candidate is right for you.

Keep questions simple, or divide complex questions up. Questions that require candidates to juggle a lot of information at once can make it more difficult for you to get a good idea of whether they are the right person for the job. They can also disadvantage some groups.

Over time, develop a 'question bank' which includes well-tested questions you can use for similar roles in future recruitment rounds.

"Questions should explore candidates' knowledge, skills and competencies across a range of areas relevant to the job description"

Step 2: Before using them, get feedback on the questions to make sure they are fair and effective

Test questions with others. This will help you to see whether any questions do not make sense, or unintentionally place some groups at a disadvantage.[5]

Get a diverse range of perspectives. You should seek feedback from, for instance, people of different genders, races, ethnicities, cultures, ages, sexualities, disabilities and educational backgrounds.

Step 3: Develop criteria for assessing candidates' responses to questions

All interview responses should be assessed using pre-defined marking criteria. This way, all candidates are judged against the same standards.[6]

Determine in advance what you think appropriate answers should include – these should be the key elements you would like candidates to mention.

Develop the scoring criteria for the interviewers to use during the interview (see Box 1).

Ensure the scoring criteria are not too complex or long, otherwise this will make it hard for interviewers to judge responses.

Do not rule out the possibility of getting answers you had not anticipated but which are still good. This is likely to happen if your applicants come from diverse backgrounds – they may have new ways of approaching things that you might not have considered.

Example scoring criteria

A score of 0 could mean that a candidate did not mention any of the elements you would expect them to, 1 could mean they mentioned some of the elements, 2 could mean they mentioned most of them, and 3 could mean they mentioned all of them and more.

Example question:

What do you think you could bring to this organisation?

Scoring criteria:

0: Candidate provides a generic answer and does not demonstrate any awareness of the company's purpose or ethos.

1: Candidate demonstrates some basic knowledge of the organisation.

2: Candidate demonstrates good knowledge of the organisation and sector/industry. They are able to relate this to their own work experience and skills.

3: Candidate has researched the organisation and understands the organisation's mission and values. Candidate reflects on unique advantages of the organisation, compared to competitors in the industry. Candidate can explain why their own skills would support the growth of the organisation. Candidate demonstrates an understanding of how the role they are applying for fits into the wider organisation's structure.

Step 4: Prepare for the interview

Involve more than one interviewer. Getting the perspective of multiple people means that decision-making is likely to be fairer. The interview should be conducted by at least two people on a panel if possible.

Make sure everyone on the panel is familiar with the questions and scoring criteria *ahead* of the interview. Share questions and criteria in advance and give people enough time to read them through. Doing this in advance means people have more opportunity to listen to and engage with the candidate during the interview, rather than trying to understand the questions or criteria.

Meet briefly before the interview to make sure everyone has the same understanding of the questions and scoring criteria, as well as their respective roles – for instance, who will be responsible for asking which questions during the interview.

Step 5: Conduct the interview

Inform the candidate that it will be a structured interview, in which the same questions are asked of all candidates. You can explain that you use this approach to give everyone as fair a chance as possible.

Make sure the candidate knows they can still ask questions, or ask for clarification, if they are confused or do not understand what is being asked of them.

Ask the same questions in the same order for each candidate.

Do not stick rigidly to the questions if there is a misunderstanding by a candidate. You can ask follow-up questions, or answer any clarifying questions the candidate has, to make sure everyone has the information they need. This avoids missing out on the most qualified candidates due to a simple misunderstanding. As their name indicates, structured interviews do of course introduce a lot of structure, but they should not be used in a completely inflexible way.

"You can ask follow-up questions, or answer any clarifying questions the candidate has, to make sure everyone has the information they need"

Step 6: Score the interview

Interviewers should independently record and mark candidates' responses using the pre-determined scoring criteria.[7]

Interviewers should assign a score for a question, and make any notes, directly after the candidate has finished providing a response. Do not save all the scoring for the very end, as it will be difficult to remember people's responses.

Once the questions have been asked and the interview is complete, interviewers should not discuss their opinions of a candidate until they have assigned scores for all interview questions. Discussing the candidates before this point makes interviewers more likely to be influenced other interviewers' opinions, and potentially by the opinion of the most senior person there.[8] The point of having multiple interviewers is that it is closer to "the wisdom of crowds" – multiple viewpoints hopefully lead to a fairer and more accurate result on average.

After the interview, each interviewer should add up their scores across all questions to get their total score. Collate these total scores and average them. This will allow you to find the candidate with the best overall score, which will be a strong indicator of the best candidate.[9] You should then discuss the candidates on this basis.

Give feedback to the candidate in a way which leaves them feeling motivated to apply again, even if they were not successful. This may be particularly important for female applicants.

Step 7: Collect data over time to see if there are any disparities

Put in place an ongoing process for developing and improving your structured interviews.

Collect and monitor interview data. This should include measuring the composition of the candidate pool which applies, checking who passes the application sifting stage, who passes tests or interviews, and who is ultimately hired. This enables you to track whether there are any differences in the outcomes of different aspects of your recruitment process for women or minority groups across the process and over time.[10] You can check whether women are being hired in proportion with the size of the applicant pool at different grades in the organisation, and hold hiring managers to account if they are not. See the *Diversity leads and diversity task* forces guide for more information about how to guide managers to change their approach if diversity is not improving.

If you find a disparity, examine your tasks and assessment criteria and ask yourself and others where in the process biases could be causing this, and what changes could be made.

Provide candidates with the opportunity to give feedback to the organisation on the interview process. This is another source of information which can help improve the interview process and help you to understand whether candidates feel the process is fair or whether aspects could be made fairer.

What evidence have we used?

This guidance is based on the best available evidence currently. Where possible, we have used evidence based on randomised controlled trials that were conducted in the field and that measure objective outcomes.

It is important to acknowledge that high quality evidence on the issue of gender equality in the workplace is not as common as it is for many other issues. Researchers are endeavouring to generate high quality evidence of what works to improve equality.

The following list of sources informed this guide, though it is not exhaustive. The advice was also informed by practitioner and expert insight.
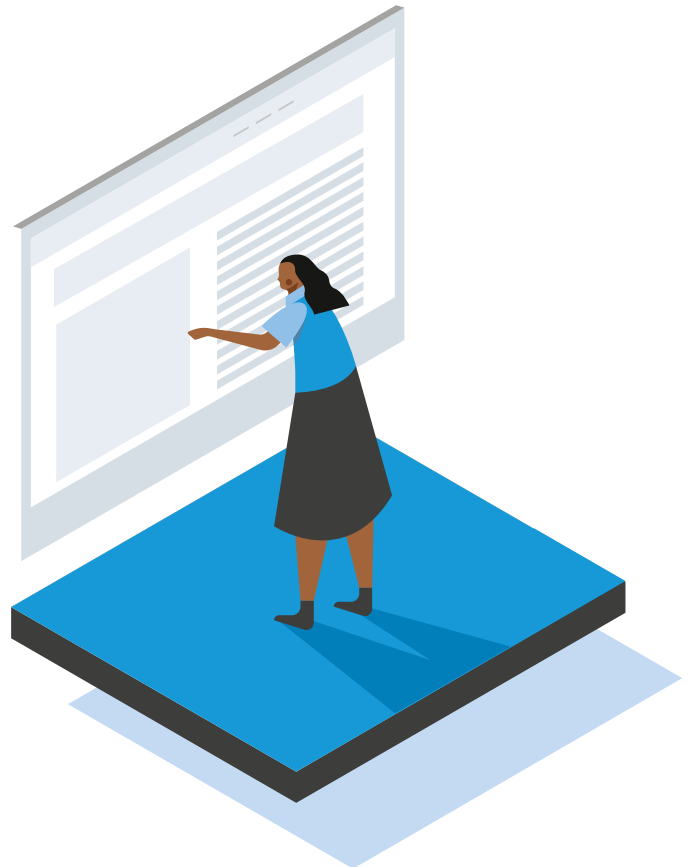
Endnotes

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Further reading

Gender & Behavioural Insights Programme by The Behavioural Insights Team.

How to improve gender equality in the workplace

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This work was funded by

Government
Equalities Office