How you conduct your interviews plays an important role in your ability to accurately measure whether interviewees can meet your performance expectations. In the preceding chapters, we have described the steps to prepare effectively for an interview: (1) Set goals and manage the process. (2) Identify the performance expectations that differentiate levels of job performance. (3) Develop questions to measure the behaviors that demonstrate the candidate can meet or exceed performance expectations. (4) Determine the types of responses that indicate the correct and incorrect answers so you can accurately assess whether the candidate's competencies are a good match for the job.
You can follow all of the steps up to this point and still fail to hire a talented employee if you conduct your interview poorly. A number of circumstances can detract from your ability to accurately measure the candidate:

- Misunderstanding the true meaning of a question may cause a candidate to give an answer that appears to be incorrect.
- Misinterpreting the true meaning of an answer may cause an interviewer to rate a qualified candidate as not meeting performance expectations.
- Anxiety may reduce the candidate's ability to fully comment on ways to meet performance expectations.
- Distractions such as phone calls or other interruptions may cause the interviewer or interviewee to lose their concentration or interest.
- Fatigue on the part of the interviewer or interviewee may also cause a loss of concentration or an inaccurate picture of the candidate’s true abilities.

Almost everyone who has conducted an interview or been interviewed has experienced some of these circumstances. When these events occur, interviewers tend to rely on their impressions or “gut-level reactions”—and as a result, their chances of conducting a successful interview decline. If a good selection decision occurs, it happens more by chance than by the interviewer’s skill.

Conducting a strategic interview may also require more discipline because you will need to have a strategy to minimize circumstances that prevent accurate measurement. In this chapter, we will discuss the typical problems that occur in conducting interviews and the strategies to prevent problems so that you can accurately assess whether the candidate has the competencies to succeed in the job.

Before we move to this discussion, complete Assessment 5.1. Evaluate the frequency that you use the named strategies to conduct interviews.
Strategies for Conducting an Effective Interview

1. Before conducting an interview, I develop an interviewer guide that identifies job barriers and competency requirements and corresponding questions and answers.
   - Always
   - Most of the time
   - Sometimes
   - Never

2. When conducting an interview, I follow an interviewer guide, asking all the candidates all of the questions.
   - Always
   - Most of the time
   - Sometimes
   - Never

3. When conducting an interview, I take detailed notes to recall the candidate's past behaviors after the interview.
   - Always
   - Most of the time
   - Sometimes
   - Never

4. When conducting an interview, I probe the candidate's responses to understand how the candidate has behaved, not to obtain the right answer.
   - Always
   - Most of the time
   - Sometimes
   - Never

5. When conducting an interview, I remove all distractions, both auditory and visual, so that each party can easily communicate with the other.
   - Always
   - Most of the time
   - Sometimes
   - Never

6. To reduce duplication and exhaustion of multiple back-to-back interviews, my organization uses team interviews.
   - Always
   - Most of the time
   - Sometimes
   - Never

As you read this chapter, you will learn why each of these strategies will help you to conduct more effective interviews.
Problems That Lead to Poorly Conducted Interviews

Even when interviewers have carefully prepared for interviews, they can have problems that will result in poorly conducted interviews. Typical problems include unstructured or poorly structured interviews, environmental distractions, and multiple back-to-back interviews.

Poorly Structured Interviews

Some interviewers will use the interview time to verify information on the résumé or application. We call this the “tell me a little bit” interview. For example, the interviewer might begin by saying, “I see that your last position was with Company X. Tell me a little bit about that job.” This continues as the interviewer moves through the resume, each time saying, “Tell me a little bit about that.” As the candidate responds to the requests for details about résumé entries, the interviewer may or may not interrupt to probe the candidate’s responses. Actually, the interviewer is letting the candidate’s résumé drive the interview, instead of focusing on performance expectations. While the interviewer does gather information, it is dictated in large part by the candidate’s résumé strategies rather than by the interviewer’s information-gathering strategies.

Not surprisingly, some candidates prefer interviews that focus on the résumé because they believe they have more control over the process. Interviewers who rely on résumés relinquish control because their strategy for gathering information is to let candidates do the talking and hope they will say something that demonstrates that they are qualified for the job. This approach is like looking for a needle in a haystack. You are looking for a good employee. But since you are not sure what information will demonstrate that the candidate will meet your expectations, you
end up gathering different types of information from various candidates in your search for that good employee.

Interviewers who do not follow a structured, job-driven process may also spend much of their time engaged in small talk, characterized by brief discussions on a variety of topics such as the weather, the interviewee’s travel to the company, or perceptions of the company or the local area. While conversations between strangers are often dominated by these generic topics, too much small talk in an interview takes valuable time away from assessment.

Small talk may mislead candidates about the quality of their performance in the interview. A candidate may think the easy conversation indicates the interviewer is favorably impressed and plans to offer a job. Interviewers who rely on small talk make judgments based on whether they connect with the candidate—they have nothing else to use in making their assessment. Although interviewers are not expected to hire people they dislike, liking someone is not a good reason for offering employment.

Interviewers who have not structured their process are also likely to ask different questions of different candidates. As a result, the interviewers will not necessarily use the same standards to assess all applicants for the same position. They may conduct a free-form interview, asking questions with no particular order or logic. When interviewers expect applicants to continually switch their perspectives as they jump from topic to topic, the effect can be to heighten the applicants’ anxiety and cause more measurement problems.

Environmental Distractions

Both interviewers and candidates can be hindered by a poor interviewing environment. Some environments block effective listening and communication. The interviewing room, its size,
lighting, comfort level, seating arrangements, and the presence of external distractions such as ringing phones, computer screens, and outside windows can take both participants’ attention away from their interaction. These distractions make it harder for candidates to communicate their competencies and harder for the interviewer to focus on gathering key information for a hiring decision.

A nervous but competent candidate can be easily distracted and can end up sounding incompetent. Even confident candidates can be distracted in a poor environment. Candidates often describe how a huge desk created a physical barrier that seemed to inhibit communication or how interruptions broke the flow of an interview. One interviewee described an extremely distracting environment as “a table in a restaurant next to a big-screen TV tuned in to a soap opera. A woman on the program was giving birth. The interviewer conducted the entire interview during this birthing scene, which seemed to go on forever.”

Even more than distracting, some environments can be very uncomfortable for a candidate. Women interviewees have described being interviewed in a hotel guest room by a male interviewer. “He sat on one bed, and I sat on the other. I was very uncomfortable.” Clearly, this type of environment is not merely uncomfortable—it also creates an unprofessional impression of the interviewer and of the hiring organization.

Multiple Back-to-Back Interviews

In many organizations, a number of interviewers need to interview the candidate, who typically endures multiple one-on-one interviews, one right after the other. As we noted in Chapter Two, interviewers may be asking the same questions and creating the impression that the organization is not very organized. More important, the sequence also creates an impression that
the interviewers have little respect for the candidate’s time. Many candidates report going through as many as six or seven hour-long interviews in one day. If you have had that experience, you know that you feel mentally and emotionally exhausted at the end of the day. The hiring organization seems to be saying, “We want to welcome you into our organization, if you let us beat you up first.” Clearly, this is a turnoff to high-quality talent.

Multiple back-to-back interviews can create interviewee anxiety since a candidate may have difficulty keeping all the names straight and remembering what was said in which interview. Multiple back-to-back interviews can also lead to inaccurate measurement since fatigue may cause the candidate to process a question inaccurately or even to forget a correct answer.

Interviewers such as college recruiters who interview multiple candidates in back-to-back interviews also experience fatigue that can reduce their ability to listen carefully and process candidates’ responses. College recruiters admit that they typically are not as good at evaluating candidates in their eighth or ninth interview of the day as they were in their first or second interview.

II Strategies for Conducting Effective Interviews

Effective interviews don’t just happen. They occur because interviewers use strategies to avoid the problems we have discussed. The most effective strategies include developing and using an interviewer guide, previewing the interview process for the candidate, probing to gather more complete behavioral data, reinforcing the impressions you want to create, managing the interviewing environment, and streamlining the interview process with team interviews.
Strategy 1: Develop and Use an Interviewer Guide

Developing and using an interviewer guide ensures that interviewers ask all candidates for the same job a common set of questions and that the questions are organized in a way to strengthen accuracy of measurement. An interviewer guide is essentially a plan for conducting your interview. The guide contains the materials you developed identifying performance expectations and formulating questions and answers as outlined in earlier chapters. As discussed in Chapter Two, you also need to minimize redundancies among interviewers so that the candidates are not answering the same questions in every interview. Exhibit 5.1 lists some recommendations for developing an interviewer guide.

You should develop interviewer guides for all interviews that are designed to measure candidates, including both team and individual interviews. At first glance, formulating guides may seem to be a lot of work. But consider these four advantages:

- Only the measurement section of the guide is likely to change much from one guide to the next. Although there should be different interviewer guides for different jobs, most guides will probably be quite similar except for the questions and sample responses and the logic behind them.
- You will save time when preparing for subsequent interviews and subsequent rounds of hiring for the same job. To conduct an effective interview, you need to prepare and integrate all of the material that exists in the guide. To do this each time a job becomes available would be a time-consuming task. Assuming that the core performance expectations remain relatively stable, an interviewer guide will substantially cut the time it takes to prepare for subsequent interviews.
- Using a well-developed interviewer guide reduces an organization's vulnerability to employment discrimination.
Exhibit 5.1. Guidelines for Developing an Interviewer Guide

- Begin with general guidelines for interviewers to follow in conducting their interviews.

Your guidelines should instruct interviewers to ask all questions of all candidates so that candidates will not be treated differently during the interviewing process. Add other reminders about avoiding topics that might create discrimination complaints, such as questions on age, race, or marital status. Also, suggest that the interviewers take notes describing the candidate's responses.

- Tell the interviewer how to start the interview.

Suggest that the interviewer begin the interview by providing information to the candidate about the interview process. If the candidate has several interviews scheduled, discuss who the candidate will be meeting and the general focus of each interview. For example, you might say that the human resources professional will ask questions and talk about company benefits while the department manager will ask questions to verify that the candidate understands the major duties and responsibilities of the job. In describing the general focus of the interviews, avoid details that reveal to candidates the standards that interviewers will use to assess their answers.

- Create a measurement section in the interviewer guide.

In this measurement section, list the performance expectation, the question or questions that measure it, and sample effective and ineffective answers. Often guides include only the questions or the questions and sample answers. Including each goal that needs to be achieved, what needs to get done (overcoming the job barrier) to achieve that goal, and how someone needs to behave to get it done (the competency requirement) keeps the interviewer focused on why he or she is asking a question. Having all this information allows interviewers to make judgments about whether the candidate can meet the job's performance expectations.

- Organize the questions so that there is a logical flow to the interview.

Group questions together that address similar topics. Organize the material by beginning with questions that the candidate should be able to answer easily to build the candidate's confidence. Proceed toward more challenging
Exhibit 5.1. Guidelines for Developing an Interviewer Guide (cont.)

questions, and postpone questions that focus on how the candidate's accomplishments demonstrate an ability to do the job until near the end of the interview. These are typically more difficult questions because they ask the candidate to connect past accomplishments to the job's requirements.

- Include suggestions for closing the interview.

Remind the interviewer to make sure that the candidate's questions have been answered. Include suggestions for informing the candidate of the next steps in the process. Finally, provide recommended language for terminating the interview process.

complaints resulting from interviews. Some discrimination complaints occur because applicants feel they are treated differently from others. The use of a guide shows that you treat all applicants the same and assess them against the same standards.

- Most important, using an interviewer guide requires managers to put their performance expectations on paper. The process of writing out these standards can make managers aware of inconsistencies and ambiguities they need to examine. Dealing with these issues will make managers more successful not only in selection but in other performance management tasks such as delegation, training, coaching, counseling, and assessing performance because the standards will be clear and consistent.

Better managers attract and are more likely to retain better employees. Managers know the importance of writing out their employees' performance appraisals. If this is important, isn't it worth the time to develop and define the standards that will become the basis for the appraisal?
Conducting an Effective Interview

Strategy 2: Preview the Interview Process for the Candidate

Gathering information from the candidate is the main focus of the interviewer during the interview. This section presents several recommendations for previewing the interview process so that the candidate knows what to expect and can communicate effectively with the interviewer.

- Inform the candidate at the beginning of the interview why you are taking notes.

Candidates often view note taking by the interviewer as a sign of right answers. You can unintentionally steer candidates to respond in ways they think might please you. You can inform the candidate that note taking is not a sign of a right or wrong answer but is used to help you remember key points. Taking detailed notes will help you to stay focused on understanding the candidate's behavior. Unless you keep notes of the candidate's responses, some important behaviors may be forgotten.

- Tell the candidate at the beginning of the interview that you will be probing their answers for additional information.

Probing is one of the most important parts of the interview process. It means asking follow-up questions to gather more information or details. We will expand on strategies for behavioral probing later under Strategy 3.

Tell candidates that you will be doing this to better understand their responses. Tell them that if you interrupt them when they are answering a question, it won't mean that their answer is wrong, but rather that you are simply trying to understand more fully. Your explanation will usually help candidates view probing as a way to improve their answers.

We have polled numerous candidates on how they feel when an interviewer probes their answers for additional information. Most say they prefer probes as soon as they get off track as long as the interviewer does not appear to be interrogating them. However, cultural and individual differences can influence
interviewees' reactions to probing, so it is important to explain what you are doing.

When is the right moment to probe? That will usually depend on the length of the interviewee's responses. One option is to wait until the candidate has completed an answer and then probe for more specifics. Another option is to probe by politely interrupting when the answer is not going in the right direction or lacks sufficient detail. Sometimes interviewers avoid interrupting because they feel it is rude. Professionally done, probing is a focused way to gather specific information. Failing to probe is unfair to the candidate since it allows someone to go in the wrong direction or give an incomplete answer. Even waiting to probe until the end of the candidate's response can be an ineffective use of the interview time.

- Acknowledge that you have reviewed the résumé before you begin the interview.

Using the Strategic Interviewing Approach, an interviewer does not need to review a résumé during the interview. With this approach, the job, not the résumé, drives the development of the questions and desired responses and should be the same across candidates for the same position. Résumés are not irrelevant, however, since they are usually used as an initial screening device to determine if the candidate meets the basic job requirements—a college education, for example.

Many candidates come to the interview prepared to discuss their résumés. Some may become concerned when interviewers do not ask questions about their résumés. They assume from this that the interviewer is unprepared or uninterested in them.

There are at least two strategies for dealing with this issue. The simplest is to inform the candidate as part of the introduction that you have reviewed the résumé, but that the interview will be a behavioral interview focused on the job requirements. You can also inform candidates that they can answer the ques-
tion by highlighting data from their résumé or any aspect of their background that would apply.

A second strategy is to individualize the prepared questions with the candidate’s résumé. If you do this, be sure to avoid making unwarranted assumptions or narrowing the candidate’s possible response. For example, an interviewer might say, “Give me an example from your job at Company X when you led a team that had a team member who really did not pull his or her weight.” In asking the question in this manner, the interviewer would be assuming that the candidate had a particular experience in a specific job and forcing the candidate to pick an example from that one experience, rather than to select from the total range of experiences. A better version of the question would be, “I noticed on your résumé that you worked at Company X and you led a team of marketing support staff. When you led that team, or any other team in your work experiences, was there ever a person on the team who really did not pull his or her weight? If this occurred, what did you do in this situation?”

- **Limit small talk at the beginning of the interview.**

Helping the candidate to feel relaxed and comfortable with some small talk will allow you to establish the rapport necessary for an effective interview. At the same time, as we discussed earlier, too much small talk limits the time you will have to assess performance expectations. We suggest a “Warm—Focused—Warm” approach. Begin with a warm and friendly introduction—including a limited amount of small talk. Move from there to a focused and professional demeanor during the measurement portion of the interview. While you do not have to appear unfriendly, you do need to focus on assessing performance expectations. You are gathering information, not having a conversation, so you will make few personal comments during the measurement phase of the interview. At the end, while you are closing the interview, return to the warm and friendly style to leave a positive impression.