



The Role of Metrics in the Selection Interview

After devouring a sumptuous feast of General Tao's chicken at the Piment Rouge in downtown Montreal, my fortune cookie read "The best prophet of the future is the past."

Talk about food for thought. It occurred to me that behavior-based interviewing is supported entirely on this maxim.

However, any interviewer who relies exclusively on behavioral questions is denying themselves another arguably equally powerful technique – the measurement of previous performance i.e. performance metrics – also based on the premise that superior performance is likely to be repeated.

The questioning of performance metrics is easy to incorporate into a structured interview and the job-specific metrics work, regardless of level or type of position.

The most commonly employed metrics questions in an interview setting are in the sales area, where the primary measure of previous success is the volume of sales per year.

However, most jobs have their own performance metrics: so it behooves the interviewer to investigate and establish how the on-the-job performance will be measured in the job they are interviewing for, and to use this as a base for some predictive interview questions.

Each level and category of job has its own metrics:

For a CEO the interview should be seeking quantitative data on growth, ROI, share value, etc. Some of the most common HR metrics are employee turnover, benefit costs per employee, and cost-per-hire. In R&D you can question the number of patents, number of development products that made it to market, time-to-market, and number of designs or discoveries over a specific period of time.

In a recent search for a Vice President, Business Development in the Biotech industry, the critical metric was how many licensing deals had each candidate negotiated in their previous careers. We had each of the long-listed candidates produce a career "deal sheet" describing the nature of each licensing deal they had personally negotiated, with which Pharmaceutical company, at what value and over what period of time. The "deal sheet" became the principal differentiator between those candidates who made the short list for face-to-face interviews, and those who didn't. In manufacturing, the metrics can be quite straightforward and could include output per employee, or per square foot of utilized space, unit cost, utilization of machines, downtime and days without accident.

Metrics-based questions also provide a good lead-off to a string of questions such as:

- How did you achieve this result?
- What were the biggest obstacles you had to overcome?
- How did you overcome them?
- What part of your involvement are you most proud of?
- What would you do differently next time?
- What lessons did you learn?

One metric on its own can be misleading in isolation. What is important is successive metrics, which exemplify trends in individual performance, year after year.

There are those who rely exclusively on behavior-based interviewing, but although I am a true believer in the behavioral interviewing techniques, I do believe that they should form only a part of a balanced interview, which will employ a selection of interview tools available to the interviewer and equally predictive. Why deny yourself the opportunity to question measured previous performance, in order to help better predict a successful hire?

To quote another of my favorite fortune cookies “The worst case rarely happens”. In the interviewing context the worst case is not so bad, that is, if you hire a terrible person, you terminate them quickly and find a replacement. What can really be the worst case is when you hire a marginal employee, who not only disrupts the culture and causes high performing subordinates to leave, but stays forever.

Use rigor in your selection interviews: You may not get what you want in your next key hire, but you will get what you deserve!