



INTERVIEW TECHNIQUES

A practical guide to interviewing

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Introduction

The aim of this guide is to provide an overview of the different interview styles and formats, providing interviewers with an objective guide to their strengths and weaknesses.

Whilst we all have an understanding of how to interview people, gaining a deeper understanding of the techniques involved can only help each of us to hone our craft.


About

Neon River is a headhunting firm that specializes in working with internet, software, games and broader technology companies across Europe.

We hire leaders across all key functions.

Internet

-  Streaming
-  Online Retail
-  Travel
-  Marketplaces
-  Fintech
-  E-Learning

-  IT Services
-  Open Source
-  SaaS
-  Digital Transformation

Software

Games

-  Console and PC
-  Online Gambling
-  Mobile and Free-to-play

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Outcomes

A well constructed interview process brings several tangible benefits;

- It enables you to assess candidates effectively, massively increasing the chance that it is a successful hire
- It saves you time by eliminating unnecessary or ineffective interview steps
- It helps you to close candidates as they are more likely to enjoy being part of your process

An interview process is composed of different elements;

Stages

How many rounds of interviews candidates must take before reaching offer stage

Stakeholders

The people who will be actively involved in interviewing the candidates

Formats

The particular setting for each interview - e.g. one-on-one, panel, group etc.

Techniques

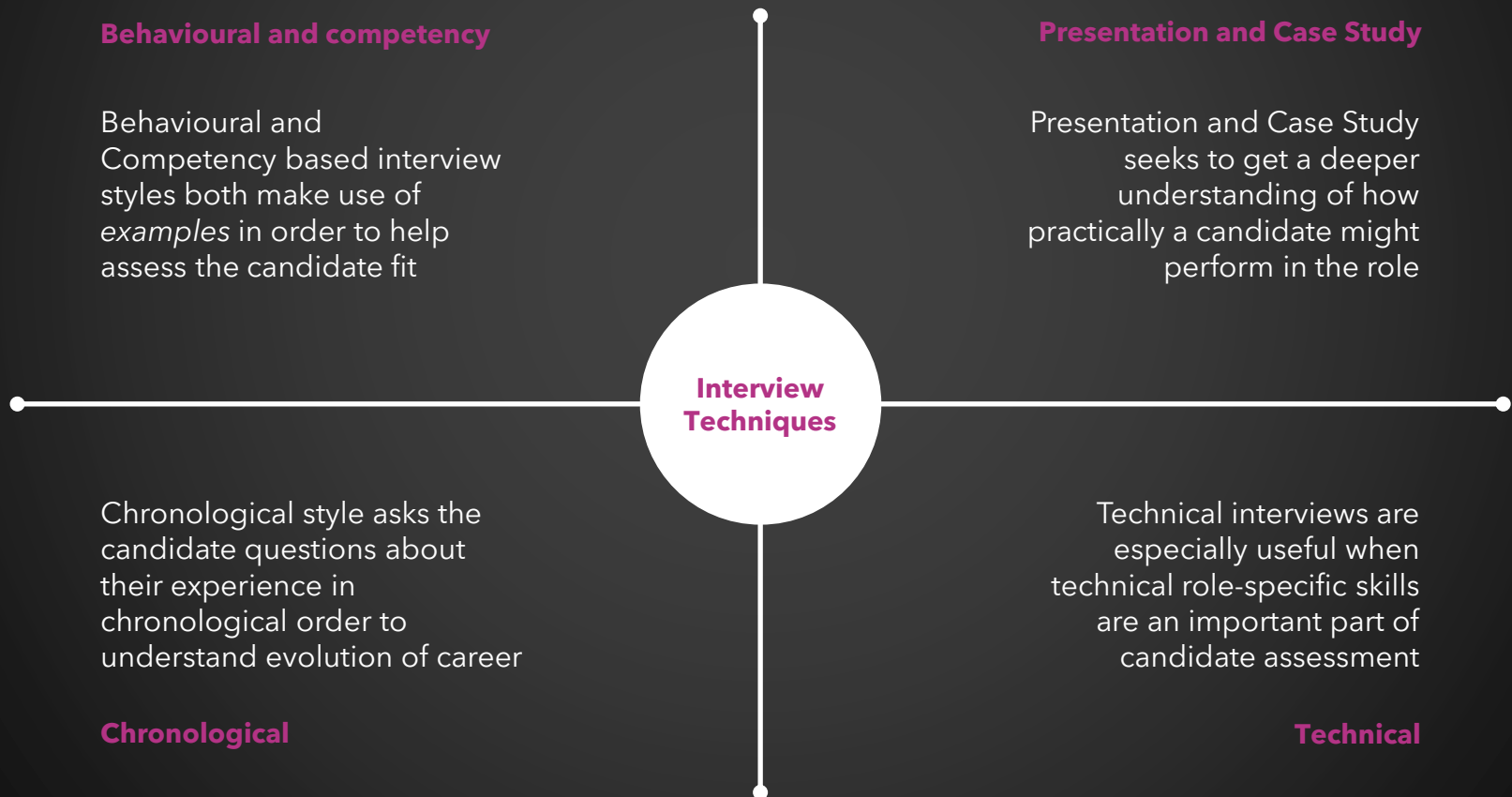
The style of questioning adopted by the interviewer/s in each session

Whilst this guide focuses on Formats and Techniques, defining a coherent set of interview stages and including the right stakeholders in your process are also important elements of an interview process.

Too many stages and stakeholders can lead to indecision and slow interview processes that are less attractive to candidates.

A Framework: Interview Styles

Depending on the nature of the role being recruited, different interview styles bring tangible benefits;



Interview Styles: Behavioural and Competency Based

Behavioural and Competency based interview styles both make use of *examples* in order to help assess the candidate fit.

The difference is that behavioural interview questions focus on values and cultural fit, whilst competency based interview questions focus on specific skills needed to perform well in a particular role.

Behavioural

Uses examples to understand cultural fit and candidate values

"Tell me about a time you failed to meet a work objective, and how you dealt with that situation?"

"Have you ever had to deal with a difficult client?"

Competency

Uses examples to understand role-specific skills

"Tell me about a time you helped to grow a customer account?"

"What is the most successful product you've helped to build?"

Pros and Cons



Helps you to understand the candidate's personality and style



You can focus your questions around the key areas of fit



Cultural fit is extremely important for all hires



Don't overuse this style with senior candidates - there's a risk it could seem patronizing to someone with a strong track record

STAR and CARL

Most interviews will involve behavioural or competency based interview questions. This style of question seeks out examples and stories which tell the interviewer about the skills or values of the candidate.

STAR is a framework that can be helpful when answering behavioural or competency based interview questions. It stands for;

Situation: Describe the scenario in which your example took place

Task: What were you trying to achieve?

Action: What did you do?

Result: What was the outcome?

Using this framework helps to keep your answers concise and focussed around areas that are likely to be of interest to the interviewer. Always try to describe results in terms of tangible outcomes if possible.

CARL is a similar framework to STAR for answering behavioural or competency based interview questions. It stands for;

Context

Action

Result

Learnings

The main difference compared to STAR is the "L" - the focus on learnings. This is an important extra dimension.

It can also be an effective way to emphasize some positives even though the example itself is a difficult situation.

Interview Styles: Chronological

The Chronological style asks the candidate questions about their experience in chronological order. This could be across the whole career of the candidate, or perhaps the last 10 years of their experience, or last five roles.

Chronological interview questions tend to focus on helping the interviewer understand the context of each role that you had;

*What did your employer do?
What were you responsible for?
Who did you report to?
How was your performance measured?
Did you manage a team?
What were your key achievements in the role?*

Pros



Gives the interviewer a good sense of the detail of a candidate's experience



Effective for assessing candidate seniority

Cons



Can seem a little formulaic and predictable if overused



A chronological approach doesn't necessarily focus on the key skills / values needed for the role

Interview Styles: **Technical**

Technical interviews are especially useful when technical role-specific skills are an important part of candidate assessment. They are a natural fit for roles like engineering or data science leadership positions.

Often recruiters, HR professionals and commercially focussed business leaders find it difficult to technically qualify candidates. A technical interview would therefore typically be conducted by someone who is an expert in the function in question. This can be a valuable part of an overall interview process.

Technical interviews probably shouldn't be the first interview step.

Having a broader first interview with the candidate, where you can get them more interested in the role and company before technically assessing them is usually a good idea.

Pros



Often vital for qualifying the candidate fit for technical roles



A practical test that is very difficult to "game"

Cons



Nearly all candidates don't enjoy being tested, especially senior ones



May not be as appropriate for leadership positions. Often a good fit for individual contributor roles

Interview Styles: Case Study / Presentation

Many interview processes have a case study or presentation stage as a key part of the process. This is somewhat similar to technical interviews in that they seek to get a deeper understanding of how practically a candidate might perform in the role.

Case study or presentation stages are often a better fit than technical interviews for senior candidates. They can also be a better way of practically assessing candidates for roles that aren't overly technical in nature - for example sales or marketing leadership positions.

Example Case Study #1

A CMO candidate is given data about the performance of different acquisition channels and asked to present about how to optimize the company's advertising strategy

Example Case Study #2

A VP Sales candidate is asked to present about how they would approach the role in their first 90 days.

What would they prioritise in the role?

Pros



A great way to test the candidate's thinking and communication skills

Cons



Risk of candidates pulling out if not fully engaged in the process

Case study stages are usually best saved for the end of the recruitment process and your lead candidate/s. They are quite intense for the candidate and require preparation.

Structured and Unstructured Interview Styles

Structured

The interviewer is prepared with premeditated questions.

The interviewer will ask the candidates the same questions.

The key advantage of a structured interview style is that it reduces personal bias and ensures that all candidates are assessed in a fair, consistent manner.

At times they can seem rigid, and don't allow the conversation to flow in interesting or unexpected directions.

Unstructured

The interviewer does not prepare questions in advance.

The interviewer will have more of a casual conversation with the candidate and ask questions in areas they feel are most interesting or relevant.

Provides the maximum flexibility to the interviewer, enabling them to take the interview in the direction they feel is most useful. It's also likely to be more interesting for the candidate.

It's easy to become side-tracked and miss important details if your interview style is too unstructured.

Interview Formats: One-on-One and Panel

One-on-One

One-on-One interviews are the most traditional and popular interview style. In this format, the candidate meets one interviewer and the interviewer asks a set of questions to the candidate.



Most common style and less intimidating than others



Easier to create rapport with the candidate



Allows the interviewer enough time to assess the candidate thoroughly



No second opinion on candidate perceptions



Can be time consuming and create process fatigue

Panel

Panel interviews are similar to One-on-One interviews but with more than one interviewer.



You can save time by having multiple stakeholders assess candidates at the same time



Interviewers can check their perceptions of the candidate



Can feel intimidating to candidates



May not give each interviewer enough time to ask questions

Interview Formats: Group and Informal

Group

Group interviews are those where multiple candidates are assessed in the same interview together.

Typically these are used for graduate or lower level positions.



Easy to compare candidates to one another



Indiscreet as candidate anonymity will be removed - inappropriate for headhunting processes



Good for assessing communication styles and cultural fit



Quieter, less confident candidates who are high performers may not perform to their abilities here

Informal

Informal interviews are designed to be more conversational and less intimidating than formal interviews. They can be a good way to assess the cultural fit.



A good way to assess the candidate's soft skills and the cultural fit



Will clever candidates really be "off-guard" in an "informal" interview?



Helps to create rapport with the interviewer



Not a good format for assessing technical skills



Can be time consuming for the interviewer

Open Questions

Open questions gauge how a candidate thinks or approaches a particular subject.

Usually they don't have a "yes or no" answer.

They can be a great way to test how a candidate thinks, and their ability to spontaneously answer thoughtful questions.

"How do you see your sector changing in the next 5-10 years?"

"Do you think that marketing is an art or a science?"

"What are the downsides of agile development methodologies?"

Whilst open questions are unlikely to be the entire basis of an interview, they can provide very useful insight on the candidate.



General tips for interviewers

Making a good impression

Maintain eye contact with the candidate when they answer questions. Show that you are listening to them.

Give them time at the beginning or end of the interview to ask questions.

Remember that you are there to sell the role and company to candidates as well as assess them.

Building rapport with candidates is key; the emotional connection a candidate has with a potential employer is an important differentiator.

Be conscious of your body language - folded arms can make it seem like you're not engaged. Be enthusiastic and friendly.

Managing an effective recruitment process

Plan out your interview steps in advance. Think about the key skills and cultural fit you are looking for and how you assess that via different steps.

Be conscious that candidates suffer from process fatigue, and become less engaged when interview processes become overly long. Even the most senior hires can usually be effectively assessed in 3-4 interview stages. Keep your processes tight and with just the key stakeholders involved if possible.

Remember that interviewing is just part of the solution. Effective referencing (both formal and "backdoor" references) is a key tool when assessing the candidate fit. Make sure you reference your lead candidate (or candidates) thoroughly.

General tips for interviewees

Do's and Don'ts

- ❑ Don't offer to "walk the interviewer through your background". This is risky - you may well end up giving them too much information about things they don't care about and not enough time to ask the questions they want. Let the interviewer drive the agenda according to their preferences.
- ❑ Do prepare interesting questions ahead of the interview. You'll likely be asked if you have any questions and preparing thoughtful questions is a good way to show that you care and are well prepared.
- ❑ Don't be negative about former employers. This will reflect badly on you.
- ❑ Do remember that every interviewer is a gatekeeper. Make sure you bring the same energy and enthusiasm to every interview step - no matter whether it's the most important interview in the process or not.
- ❑ Don't stress yourself out ahead of interviews unnecessarily. For in person meetings, make sure you arrive early in plenty of time and for videoconferences make sure that you are set up on the relevant platform. There's nothing worse than being flustered in an interview because you were late or the technology wasn't working properly.



Which interview style is best?

Often it's best to use a combination of interview styles, tailored to the individual situation. A "hybrid" interview style might use elements of the chronological, and behavioural or competency based questions. It might involve asking some open questions to test how a candidate thinks or approaches a particular subject.

The interviewer also needs to think about how to put together a sequence of interviews that enable the candidate to be effectively assessed. That interview process also needs to be attractive to candidates and encourage them to join the interview process.

Chronological interviews

Gives a good understanding of overall experience

Appropriate for candidates at all levels

May not focus on the most important areas of fit

Competency based interviews

Highly flexible and enable you to focus on key areas

A good way to test cultural fit

Might seem patronizing if overused with senior candidates

Technical interviews

Good for engineering, data science and other highly technical roles

Often best in the middle of an interview process

Be conscious that technical assessments can make roles seem junior

Case Studies

A great way to test the candidate, and a good fit for non-technical roles

Often best as the final step in an interview process

Quite a lot of work for the candidate - this is an intensive session

Two Example Interview Processes

VP Engineering

- Someone with strong technical depth who will be credible with the team
- Needs to have strong leadership, hiring and project management skills
- A strong leader and organizer to complement a technically focussed CTO

1st interview

Meet the CTO (line manager). Test experience and chemistry at a high level and answer any questions they might have.

2nd interview

Meet broader members of the team - e.g. the Chief Product Officer and VP HR.

3rd interview

Technical interview with a member of the engineering team to test technical depth.

4th interview

A further interview with the CTO, and meet the CEO.

The candidate is referenced formally after verbally accepting an offer. The hiring company has taken backdoor references on the candidate before this to confirm their qualities.

VP Sales

- A sales leader who is both an effective manager but also hands-on in closing deals
- Needs to have a strong track record of achieving commercial objectives in the context of an entrepreneurial company
- Knows how to build a high performing commercial machine

1st interview

Meet the CEO (line manager). Test experience and chemistry at a high level and answer any questions they might have.

2nd interview

Meet broader members of the team - e.g. the Marketing Director and CTO

3rd interview

A second interview with the CEO, covering any concerns or questions that either party might have

4th interview

The candidate presents to the CEO and management team on how they would approach the role in their first 90 days.

The CEO wisely stays close to the candidate throughout the resignation process to help mitigate against potential counter-offers.

Following up with candidates

One of the major causes of frustration with candidates in interview processes is poor follow-up from potential employers.

By following up with candidates in the right way, you can build better relationships with your candidates and give yourself a competitive advantage over any other processes they might be considering.

Best Practice

Comments

Prompt feedback

Quick feedback suggests that you are a fast-moving, dynamic business. Slow feedback suggests a slow culture.

Detailed feedback

What did they do well and are there any areas that need to be further explored?

Process visibility

What are the further interview steps and when are they likely to take place?

Understand their alternatives

Are they in other interview processes? How do they feel about them? This helps you to adapt your process accordingly.

Help them to prepare

Candidates appreciate it when you help them to prepare for interview steps - e.g. giving them insight on the different interviewers.



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