According to new studies, traditional interview methods don’t work. Here’s what you should do instead.

By Nick Montgomery, chief research officer at TalentEd, and Katy Smith, product manager
If your school’s applicant evaluation processes rely on subjective measures — such as interviews, resumés and cover letters — research suggests you may be overlooking the best candidates.

A recent article from *The New York Times* highlighted the ineffectiveness of unstructured interviews. Based on research from Yale and Carnegie Mellon, the article shared the results of an experiment where evaluators were given access to students’ past GPAs and upcoming course loads and asked to predict those students’ future GPAs. The predictions from evaluators who did not conduct interviews were more accurate than those who did, suggesting that unstructured interviews may give evaluators inaccurate perceptions of candidates’ abilities.
The value and limitations of teacher interviews

If the interview is not a good predictor of job performance, why does it persist? Obviously, it is a perceived opportunity for the school district to evaluate the candidate. It is also an opportunity for the candidate to evaluate the district. On this latter point, the National Association of Elementary School Principals recognizes an interview also provides a chance to share more about the district. Interviews provide schools and districts the means to build a rapport with candidates, which can be especially important in districts experiencing teacher shortages. K-12 leaders rightfully hold tight to every opportunity to put their best foot forward with each candidate.

Though the value of interviews as a rapport-building opportunity is evident, the ineffectiveness of interviews at predicting performance is troubling. “Anybody can say anything in an interview,” said Sherry Christian, coordinator of human resources at Niagara Catholic District School Board in Ontario. “Personal evaluations are only as good as the evaluator. We always try to get the right evaluator — someone with experience interviewing candidates — but you can’t always trust that’s accurate.”

Sherry notes that considering a candidate’s history and accomplishments can inform hiring decisions, but when dealing with large candidate pools, sometimes even that’s not enough to identify the best of the best.

“Sometimes we have 10 candidates that all have the same credentials — so what defines them? What tells you which one will be a better teacher?” she asked.

Those aren’t easy questions to answer — particularly without additional context — which may explain why evaluators in the The New York Times experiment still preferred to conduct interviews, even after learning that doing so reduced their ability to make accurate predictions.

A variety of cognitive biases likely play into this preference, such as the tendency to find stories in sparse data — including interview interactions — overconfidence in one’s ability to glean valuable information from a candidate, and the tendency to want more information even when more is not better.
Adopting more effective interview methods begins by replacing unstructured interview styles, such as those used in the Yale study, with structured interviews — where questions and acceptable answers are specified in advance. Structured interviews provide a more valid indicator of job performance and eliminate hypothetical and general questions, such as “what’s your biggest weakness?”

In education hiring, the most effective teachers are those who can tell a specific story about a past experience with a particular research-based element of effective teaching — a characteristic which can be uncovered using behavior-based interviewing (BBI).

BBI is designed around the premise that past behavior is the best predictor of future performance. This interview method uses questions that require much more than a simple yes or no response. They require the candidate to discuss past problems and how they were resolved.

The interviewer assesses responses to see if the candidate has experience with the problem, took appropriate action and learned from the result.

Still, when you have 78 applicants — like Cheryl Stockdale in the comic on page 2 — knowing how to use an effective interview technique such as BBI isn’t enough. How do you prioritize which of those 78 candidates to bring in for an interview?
Data-based screenings empower objective selection of interviewees

A research consortium including the Northwestern Evaluation Association (NWEA), the University of Chicago, and other highly regarded institutions and experts in the fields of research, education, psychometrics and predictive analytics, worked with more than 89,000 teachers across the U.S. and Canada to understand patterns of teacher characteristics and how they relate to educator effectiveness. They uncovered four domains that indicate which teachers will most likely have the greatest impact on student growth:

1. Teaching skills — whether a teacher has the professional judgement necessary to be successful in the classroom.
2. Cognitive ability — how well a teacher is able to apply his or her teaching skills in complex situations.
3. Attitudinal factors — the likelihood that a teacher will sustain and persist over time within a school system.
4. Qualifications — a teacher’s educational background, academic credentials, teaching positions and career accomplishments.

To select interviewees that meet their standards in each of these categories, schools across the U.S. and Canada have turned to the Teacher Educators Professional Inventory (Teacher EPI®) — a first-of-its-kind, data-based teacher candidate assessment tool, developed in partnership between the research consortium and education talent management solutions provider TalentEd.

“The Teacher EPI measures all the different dimensions, not just personality or classroom readiness,” said Chris Tatum, director of secondary personnel at Amarillo Independent School District in Texas. “We used other assessments in the past — personality surveys and things like that — but they weren’t comprehensive.”

The Teacher EPI uses candidates’ answers to 100 assessment questions to match candidate characteristics to school and classroom needs. This gives school and district leaders an objective analysis of applicants and a prediction of how they’ll impact student achievement, which — alongside their own observations and instincts — hiring managers can use to identify best-fit educators.
Putting it all together to hire top-notch teachers

Robust hiring processes that identify the best teachers available can deliver quality and efficiency at each stage of the hiring process. Tools like the Teacher EPI convert an overwhelming applicant pool into a ranked list of candidates for interviewing. Structured interviews identify the strongest candidates within that ranking of top performers. Together, TalentEd’s predictive analytics for screening and BBI for final decisions enable school systems to hire high-quality candidates efficiently while maintaining a human touch.

“We’re dealing with people’s most valuable resource: their kids,” Chris said. “We’ve got to make sure that we get the right people.”

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