



INTERVIEW PSYCHOLOGY

Reading Between the Lines

The Psychology of Interviews

Morning candidates score 6.6% higher than afternoon ones, and hiring managers favour excited candidates over calm ones by roughly two to one — regardless of who's actually more qualified.

Thousands of hiring decisions get made every day on the back of a conversation that lasts under an hour. Most organisations still treat interviews as straightforward — the best candidate naturally rises to the top — but that assumption doesn't hold up. Research keeps turning up psychological forces operating well below conscious awareness: what time of day the interview happens, the cultural background of interviewer and candidate, the order candidates are seen in, even how much caffeine the interviewer has had. Understanding this isn't academic box-ticking — it's how you actually get to the best candidate rather than the best-performing one.

BIAS · CULTURE

Cultural Bias in Emotional Expression

Stanford research from Dr Jeanne Tsai found that American employers systematically favour candidates who show excitement over those who stay calm — even when the calm candidate is objectively better qualified. In controlled studies, 47% of hiring managers preferred excited candidates against just 23.7% who preferred calm ones. That's a real disadvantage for candidates from cultures that value emotional restraint: 86% of European Americans believe they should convey excitement in an interview, compared to only 48% of Hong Kong Chinese respondents. This isn't conscious discrimination — it's one cultural style of presenting yourself being unconsciously privileged over another.

Hiring managers' preference: excited vs calm candidates

Share of hiring managers preferring each, in controlled studies

Excited candidates

47%

Calm candidates

23.7%

Source: Stanford research, Dr Jeanne Tsai

Who thinks you should convey excitement in an interview?

European Americans

86%

Hong Kong Chinese

48%

Source: Stanford research, Dr Jeanne Tsai

What interviewers rarely factor in is everything else a candidate is carrying into the room — financial stress, family pressure, worry about bias. Someone interviewing while anxious about redundancy may come across as less enthusiastic not because they're uninterested, but because they're cognitively overloaded. Candidates from underrepresented backgrounds often walk in already braced for bias, which adds its own cognitive load — a cruel irony, since the people who most need a fair hearing are often least able to perform under standard interview conditions.

The fix isn't to drop emotional read entirely, but to build the cultural intelligence to tell genuine enthusiasm apart from culturally appropriate professional presentation — training interviewers to notice their own preferences and building criteria that reward substance over style, especially for global or remote hiring.

“We confuse exuberance with confidence, and we prefer confidence to humility — that's only human. But it's worth checking ourselves and asking whether the quieter, more introverted candidates are getting a fair look.”

The Candidate Comparison Trap: Timing Bias

A Columbia University study of thousands of medical residency interviews found that when you interview someone matters almost as much as how you interview them. Morning candidates scored an average of 52.75 out of 100, against 49.28 for afternoon candidates — a 6.6% gap that has nothing to do with who's actually better for the job. It's more pronounced at the extremes: early-morning candidates averaged 54.47, late-afternoon candidates just 46.74, a 16.5% swing. Breaks and refreshments didn't close the gap, which suggests interviewer fatigue runs deeper than simple tiredness.

The later the slot, the lower the score

Average interview score out of 100, by time of day

Early morning

54.47

Morning

52.75

Afternoon

49.28

Late afternoon

46.74

A 6.6% gap between morning and afternoon; 16.5% between the extremes. Source: Columbia University study of medical residency interviews

INTERVIEWER FATIGUE

The Fresh Cup of Tea Effect

The first candidate of the day gets an interviewer who's alert, optimistic and full of energy. Later candidates get someone mentally fatigued and — often unconsciously — comparing them to everyone seen already. Schedule several candidates in one day and you've built a tournament where going first matters more than being good. The practical fixes are straightforward: randomise the schedule so no particular group is systematically

disadvantaged, spread interviews across multiple days, cap the number of interviews per day, build in real breaks, and use more than one interviewer to share the cognitive load.

“Some of your best talent may be getting downgraded simply because you're exhausted.”

STRUCTURE

The Structure Dilemma: The Validity Paradox

McGill University research found structured interviews are twice as effective at predicting job performance as unstructured ones — a validity coefficient of 0.63 against 0.20. But structure can cost you the authentic human insight that makes an interview worth having in the first place. Call it the validity paradox: the more you systematise the interview, the better it predicts performance, and the less it captures the human complexity behind exceptional performance.

Structured interviews predict performance far better

Validity coefficient for predicting job performance

Structured interviews



0.63

Unstructured interviews



0.2

Source: McGill University research

The answer is matching structure to purpose. Roles that need specific technical competence or consistency across candidates benefit from a structured approach; senior leadership roles or anything requiring creativity and interpersonal nuance often need more flexibility. Some organisations run a hybrid — structured competency questions first, then open exploration of leadership style or strategic thinking — to get the reliability of structure and the insight of a real conversation.

INFORMAL ASSESSMENT

The Coffee Shop Test

Some of the most revealing moments happen outside the formal interview room. Taking final-round candidates to a coffee shop and watching how they treat service staff, handle the unexpected, or hold a casual conversation surfaces character and interpersonal skill that a structured Q&A misses entirely. Used carelessly, though, this can just import a different bias — comfort with informal settings and familiarity with a particular kind of social interaction aren't the same as authenticity. Informal assessment should add to the picture, not replace systematic evaluation with a gut feel.

LISTENING

The Art of Listening: The 70/30 Rule

Conventional wisdom says candidates should talk less and let the interviewer lead. The one empirical study that actually measured speaking patterns in real employment interviews found the opposite. William Tullar's 1989 research videotaped 28 university seniors interviewing with corporate recruiters and found that successful applicants dominated the conversation more than unsuccessful ones did — unsuccessful interviews ran to roughly two-thirds the length of successful ones. Most advice on speaking ratios (60/40, 70/30, 80/20) comes from career guides and best-practice folklore, not from anyone actually measuring what happens in interviews that end in an offer.

The skill for a hiring manager isn't just listening to the answer — it's noticing how it's given. Is the candidate drawing you into a conversation, or are you the one doing all the work to drag answers out of them?

COMMUNICATION

Beyond the Words

How candidates structure an answer says almost as much as the answer itself. Strong communicators organise their thoughts logically, give enough detail without drowning the listener, and connect specific experiences to a broader lesson — a 'nutshelling' skill that matters enormously for senior roles and is routinely overlooked in a standard interview. Language choices matter too: candidates who consistently use active voice ('I developed', 'I led', 'I decided') signal ownership, while heavy passive voice can hint at discomfort with responsibility. Read these patterns in context, though — cultures vary widely in their norms around self-promotion versus collective credit.

ASKING BETTER QUESTIONS

Question Design

'Do you work well under pressure?' guarantees a yes. 'Tell me about a time you had to deliver results under real time pressure — walk me through your approach and what you learned' opens the door to something real. Moving from closed to open questions gives candidates room to show authentic problem-solving, learning orientation and self-awareness — the best questions invite a story that reveals how someone thinks, not just a résumé bullet they've already rehearsed. That doesn't mean abandoning structure, just creating enough space within it for candidates to actually lead.

BIAS · SELF-FULFILLING

The Expectancy Effect

Research from Dr Nicole Adams-Quackenbush found that a candidate's own awareness of potential bias can become a self-fulfilling prophecy — worrying about age discrimination, gender bias or cultural stereotyping creates cognitive load that then actually impairs performance, confirming the very stereotype the candidate was worried about.

- Stereotype awareness — simply knowing a bias exists against people like you.
- Domain identification — how much you personally care about succeeding in this specific area.
- Task difficulty — the raw cognitive demand of being interviewed at all.

These effects can be external — interviewers unconsciously signalling bias through subtle verbal or non-verbal cues — or internal, where the candidate's own anticipation of bias creates anxiety even when the interviewer harbours no conscious prejudice at all. That's why bias training aimed only at interviewer behaviour isn't enough on its own; transparent processes, diverse panels and clear evaluation criteria help address both the real bias and the fear of it.

WHAT TO MEASURE

The Purpose of Interviewing

Before writing a single interview question, it's worth answering a more basic one: what are we actually trying to measure? Many organisations interview without ever agreeing on that, which is how you end up with inconsistent evaluation and worse hires. The McDaniel meta-analysis found real variation in how predictive different interview approaches are — situational judgment questions came out with the highest validity, while assessing general mental ability or personality traits had surprisingly low predictive power. The lesson: focus on what an interview can actually measure well, rather than trying to assess everything about a candidate in one sitting.

- Achievement — past performance, evidence of what someone has actually delivered.
- Potential — future capability, not limited to junior candidates; everyone is on a growth curve.
- Personality and cultural fit — for many organisations, especially startups, this outranks technical competence and achievement combined.
- Technical competence verification — most critical for content, development and engineering roles; for many marketers it's more a question of platform agility.

- Values and ethics alignment — essential wherever certain behaviours are simply non-negotiable, not just a personality nice-to-have.

As marketing recruiters, we lean heavily on achievement — ARR, CAC, pipeline contribution — though it matters less the more junior the role. Personality and culture fit tends to matter most in startups, where fit genuinely determines whether someone thrives, and less in large corporations where culture barely varies day to day. Picking the right mix of these five, rather than trying to cover all of them at once, is what makes an interview process actually work.

A FRAMEWORK

The HEAR Framework

- 1** Humanise — start before the candidate even enters the room. Acknowledge the human reality of what they're facing — relocation, nerves, a non-technical panel — rather than treating them as a bundle of competencies to tick off.
- 2** Evaluate — move past gut instinct to systematic assessment against predetermined criteria, built from specific scenario questions rather than generic ones.
- 3** Assess — synthesise the evidence into a coherent picture, documenting strengths and gaps explicitly rather than relying on an overall impression.
- 4** Reflect — after every interview cycle, review which questions and criteria actually predicted good hires, and follow up with people six months in to see which insights held up.

“HEAR is simply a framework that lets you step back and ask: are we both at our best here?”

What AI Cannot Replace

AI is genuinely good at pattern recognition and consistency, but it struggles with contextual understanding, emotional intelligence and the creative judgement needed to assess things like leadership potential or cultural fit. The likely future is hybrid — AI-powered screening and analysis, with human judgement doing the actual evaluation of qualified candidates. As automation spreads, the hardest human skills to automate — creativity, emotional intelligence, complex problem-solving — only get more valuable, which means assessment needs to weigh learning agility and adaptability, not just what a candidate can already do today.

CONCLUSION

The Final Word

AI clones are already running first-round interviews and screening calls, and candidates are switching off because of it. Our own fear of failure has pushed a lot of hiring toward over-systemisation — structured interviews are statistically the better choice, but lean on them too hard and you fall into new traps of your own, missing the conversations that would have gotten the best out of a candidate. The skill isn't choosing structure or freedom once and for all — it's knowing when to switch one on and the other off.

None of this works, though, if we don't turn the same scrutiny on ourselves. Are you exhausted on your fifth interview of the day, running on empty at 4pm? Did the exuberant candidate before this one just reset your baseline, so now the introvert in front of you reads as flat by comparison? Are you judging an older candidate on whether they'll 'still be hungry' rather than on what they've actually said? The human element of interviewing can't be replaced — but it does need to be understood, whether that's through a framework like HEAR or simply asking, honestly, what the interview is even trying to measure.

“The best interviewers always find the best candidates. Funny how that happens, isn't it.”



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