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# Necessary but Insufficient: *What We Can and Can Not Learn from the Traditional Hiring Methods*

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We begin this chapter and subsequent ones by discussing common but problematic practices in executive assessment.

**Common practice #1: Employers primarily rely on three tools—resumes/applications, reference checks, and interviews—to assess executive competencies.**

Over 90% of employers use interviews (97%), references (96%), and applications/resumes (93%) in their executive assessment processes (Furnam 2017, pp. 202–225). These methods, however, do not produce acceptable/valid results.

In the Introduction, we presented some concerning data on the traditional methods. "In a world where organizations are focusing on results, the success rate in hiring people is low" (Kinley and Ben-Hur 2013, pp. 8–14). Moreover, in the private sector, which generally has more resources at its disposal than public or nonprofit organizations, only one-third of businesses rate their company's selection process as effective (Kinley and Ben-Hur 2013, pp. 8–14).

Cognitive bias plays a big part in these dismal results. Cognitive bias is a thinking error that occurs when we misinterpret data, impacting human decision-making in all aspects of life. It begins when we ignore objective data—an evidence-based foundation—and rely on irrelevant information in decision-making. We fall prey to cognitive bias daily, for example, when we buy a product based on advertising rather than studying the data, ingredients on the label, consumer reviews, expert reviews, and costs. Advertisers know about the human susceptibility to cognitive bias and how to take advantage of it, for example, by using sex-infused advertising.

Most organizations over-rely on decision-making systems that are subject to cognitive bias, leading them to base decisions on irrelevant information rather than facts. The book (and movie) *Moneyball* describes how a low-budget

Major League Baseball team, the Oakland Athletics, transformed the traditional paradigm of player evaluation, based on scouts' intuition, and began relying on player statistics to drive its decision-making (Lewis 2004). Subsequently, the Athletics consistently made the playoffs despite having one of the lowest payrolls in Major League Baseball.

Unfortunately, organizations typically conduct executive hiring assessments in a cognitively biased fashion. Despite the availability of relevant objective data, we often encounter employers who approach the executive assessment process in an inferential manner. *Moreover, they advocate for their subjective, intuitive approach.* Clients frequently proclaim, "If I can just get the candidate in a room for a few minutes, I can tell if they will fit with our organization."

We do agree that intuition plays a part in executive assessment. Just like many baseball teams before *Moneyball*, that intuitive approach sometimes works; the employer successfully selects an effective executive based on an intuitive hunch. No process is 100% valid, so some guesswork is inevitable. Moreover, intuition is invariably part of the assessment when humans evaluate other humans. Of course, when a largely intuitive approach works once, employers begin to believe it will work again. That was certainly the case in Major League Baseball before the Oakland Athletics' success. Professional teams had spent millions on scouting systems premised on cognitive bias.

Nevertheless, leading with hunches is a poor management and decision-making practice; intuition should not *drive* the process (Cook 2016, p. 87). For example, when developing an annual budget, managers *begin* with objective data. They examine current costs and consider economic factors such as interest rates and inflation. After analyzing the objective data, managers might make final adjustments, such as projecting unanticipated expenses, based on some hunches about inflation and supply markets. The same has become true for most Major League Baseball teams. Now, all Major League teams have invested substantially in statistical analysis. They have transformed their decision-making by adopting a paradigm driven by sophisticated data analysis. Why should the decision-making approach for hiring be any different, beginning with objective data and using intuition *after* the data has provided a firm foundation?

In addition to cognitive bias, decision-making that relies on intuition in executive hiring assessments leads to several perceptual errors, which we will discuss in detail in Chapter 5. For example, one such error is known as the pre-impression effect—the subconscious process of making judgments based on initial information about the candidate (resumes and applications) without the benefit of more valid information (Springbett 1958, pp. 13–22; Dipboye 1989, pp. 54–55; Cook 2016, pp. 86–87). Ask the City Council in Metro City about the fallacy of an intuition-first approach. Their positive impressions of Landon's resume and persona were so enticing that they lost their objectivity and were blind to other evidence that may have altered their decision. In essence, they decided that Landon was the best candidate before they asked any in-depth interview questions. Pre-impression effect is common among employers. Research indicates that the application or resume colors the employer's view of candidates to the extent that they will rely on that initial view even when the

interview data counteract that information (Dipboye 1989, pp. 54–55; Liden and Parsons 1989, pp. 204–216; Cook 2016, pp. 86–87).

As illustrated in Figure 1.1, an intuition-first approach often obscures the opportunity to assess competencies directly and objectively, such as leadership style and writing skills. To be more effective, employers should begin by gathering factual data about candidates. Then, with an evidence-based foundation, *informed intuition* can play a role *at the end* of the assessment process, just as sound budget decision-making and the new analytical paradigm for evaluating players in professional baseball do.

The critical question is: how does the employer determine what competencies they can objectively evaluate, and how can they assess them before applying intuition to that final decision? For employers to be objective, they must have *directly observable data*. In other words, the employer must be able to *observe* the required competencies directly—no guesswork (O'Leary et al. 2017, p. 247). This imperative leads us to the vital principle of this chapter, which is as follows:

> **Principle #1: Do not assume. Employers must directly observe competencies to be confident that candidates have them.**

Let us use a medical analogy to understand this principle. Suppose a patient has developed a medical condition. They are experiencing lower back pain. They set up an appointment with a physician. When they arrive, the staff administer a blood test to determine whether there is an underlying systemic cause. Then, they proceed to an examining room, where the physician conducts a clinical examination to assess their range of motion and the movements that cause them pain. After that, the doctor will likely order an X-ray. Finally, depending on the X-ray results, they may refer the patient for an MRI.

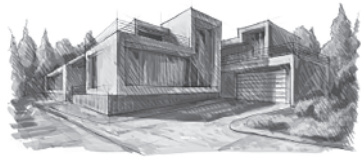
**The Flawed Blueprint–Intuition and Bias**



**Unstable Foundation**

- Built on a "gut feeling" of intuition, inconsistent information from resumes, cognitive biases, subjective impressions from interviews, inferences from references (often inflated), frequently leading to hiring the wrong candidate.
- The Result: Success rates in hiring are low. Only one-third of private sector businesses rate this process as effective.

**The Evidence-based Paradigm**



**Solid Bedrock**

- Built on validated data from screening against qualifications, direct observation from structured simulations like writing and meetings, behavioral interviews, all measuring leadership walk, not merely talk.
- The result: The evidence-based process dramatically improves the odds of a successful hire.

**Figure 1.1** Why Your Gut Feeling Is a Flawed Blueprint for Hiring Executives

Four different tests assess this medical condition. Why four tests? No one test provides complete information. Each one provides the physician with certain types of information—pieces of the puzzle. Some of that information is directly observable, and some is indirect.

The clinical test may lead the physician to *infer* the cause of the patient's discomfort, but it only provides *indirect evidence*. For example, when the clinical test reveals numbness in the patient's foot, the physician might check the blood test results for an indication of diabetes. If those results are negative, the physician might next try an X-ray. If the X-ray reveals no fracture, the physician might assume the patient has a compressed spinal nerve. That indirect evidence can help guide the physician in interpreting the MRI results, specifically by scanning the area around the vertebrae in the spinal column associated with the feet. MRI results can confirm indirect evidence by providing *direct evidence* if they demonstrate narrowing of the lumbar discs in that area. Combining the results of the four tests enhances the physician's ability to make a more accurate diagnosis.

*However, remember that this diagnosis, while likely to be correct, is not necessarily so*. The congruence of the four tests improves the chances that the diagnosis is accurate. The most effective physicians possess the experience and insight to apply intuition to their analyses. Just as with budgeting and baseball scouting, physicians should apply intuition only after objective data have been gathered and analyzed. Like budgeting and baseball, relying on objective data first will improve the chances of an accurate assessment, but it is still subject to error.

How does this analogy relate to executive assessment? *Like the medical analogy illustrated in Figure 1.2, testing aims to provide the best possible information—that is, directly observable data on critical position competencies—for the employer to make its decision*. Leading with objective data will improve the potential for

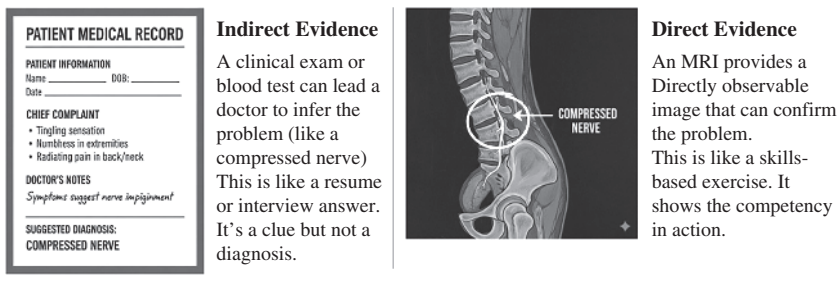



**Figure 1.2** Do Not Assume. Employers Must Directly Observe Competencies to Be Confident That Candidates Have Them

an accurate assessment. Granted, it does not ensure 100% accuracy. Nevertheless, as we shall see, an evidence-based approach dramatically improves the odds of a successful hire.

Here, we explore the limitations of each of the most popular assessment methods: (1) a review of resumes or applications, (2) reference checks, and (3) interviews (Anderson 2005, pp. 1–24). The desired outcome is that these chosen methods will provide direct evidence of candidate competencies that can predict leadership success. Do these methods ensure an accurate and comprehensive assessment? Regrettably, the answer is no.

## Resumes or Applications

Resumes are a necessary tool for evaluating executive candidates. Typically, employers use resumes or applications as an initial screening test. This test determines whether the candidate possesses the required education, experience, and certifications.

Unfortunately, those prerequisites do not necessarily translate into candidate competencies. The research on resume reviews is, at best, tepid about how well they or applications inform employers about candidate competencies (Furnam 2017, pp. 202–225). *Just because an individual candidate "checks all the boxes" on an application or resume does not necessarily mean they possess the desired competencies for the position.* Some essential activities for an executive position include writing memos or plans, assembling and delivering presentations, supervising staff, and facilitating meetings. Despite the resume indicating they were responsible for those activities, it provides no direct evidence of the candidate's proficiency. *Just because the candidate has handled similar responsibilities in the past does not guarantee they performed them well!* While one might assume the candidate can at least demonstrate their writing ability based on a resume, even that would be a perilous assumption, as obtaining assistance in developing the resume has become a common practice. Increasingly, candidates will contract with a consultant or use AI tools to write their resumes. Paradoxically, we have helped several organizations hire executives who excelled on the job but who, as applicants, presented poorly constructed resumes.

In part, the mistakes made by the Metro City Council reflected a pre-impression effect based on a resume. Smitten with the candidate's resume, they quickly gave Landon the benefit of the doubt. For example, they assumed that Landon would be a great writer, having graduated from an Ivy League University and having served as a municipal manager. The content of his resume provided indirect evidence that Landon would be a good writer. However, no testing provided direct observation of that critical competency. *Indirect evidence is often unreliable when not substantiated by direct evidence.* Patients might rightly fire a physician who scheduled them for spinal surgery based on a blood test or an office examination—indirect evidence—alone. Indirect information is superficial (Edenborough 2003, p. 11).

When employers review resumes, the distinction between intuition, or "gut feeling," and objective, factual evidence often becomes apparent. As a rule, the resume is the employer's first source of information. It usually plays a disproportionate role in the employer's assessment of the candidate. However, it does not provide direct data about that candidate's competencies. Resumes provide information about what the candidate has done—their responsibilities—not how well the candidate performed them. Falling prey to the pre-impression effect, employers can too quickly leap to conclusions about candidates based on indirect information presented in a resume, thereby obscuring their ability to assess candidates directly and objectively (Dipboye et al. 1984, pp. 118–128; Liden and Parsons 1989, pp. 204–216).

Similar impression effects play out at various stages of any executive assessment process. Whatever information occurs first has a disproportionate impact on the outcome (Hakel 1982, p. 136). After reviewing the resume, assume the employer convinces themselves that the candidate has the desired competencies. Then, when interviewing that candidate, the employer tends to filter information based on this positive yet indirect assessment, paying more attention to information that confirms the existing belief and less to information that challenges it. Researchers routinely find that expectations formed in the *pre-interview* phase (i.e., applicant credentials) become self-fulfilling. Interviewers discover no more than was expected, no unique information—they have essentially already confirmed their assessment based on the resume or application (Dipboye 1989, pp. 54–55; Cook 2016, pp. 86–87). A candidate with a less impressive resume may suffer from the opposite effect; it becomes challenging for that candidate to penetrate the employer's predetermined skepticism about their abilities.

Finally, two words of caution about resumes. First, 25–33% of candidates admit to lying or exaggerating their experience and current salary on resumes and applications (Anderson 2005, p. 4; Cook 2016, p. 4). One common resume tendency is to claim credit for something another person did, as Landon did when describing his experience with strategic planning.

Second, many executives find success today without prototypical paper credentials. Skills are becoming more critical than education. As we shall see, this trend is not conducive to a heavy reliance on resumes but does mean that direct observation of competencies—the key theme of this book—is increasingly appropriate.

In summary, resumes provide only indirect information about a candidate's competencies. Moreover, as the initial source of information the employer evaluates, resumes can skew the employer's perception and objectivity regarding a candidate's competencies. Substantial research indicates that employers often cling to their pre-impression perceptions of candidates based on paper credentials to the point of disregarding interview results (Dipboye 1989, pp. 56–57).

Yes, employers should always use resumes and applications as a screening tool in the hiring process. *However, these tools are more helpful for screening out candidates without the requisite background and experience than for revealing the competencies of more qualified candidates.*

## Reference Checks

Like resumes, reference checks are weak predictors of candidate performance (Furnam 2017, p. 211). Indeed, employers should seek a detailed reference from a trustworthy current or former employer or from staff who have reported to that executive. All too often, however, that trusted, detailed reference never materializes. In part, today's litigious climate is to blame for the tepid validity of reference checks. Many current or former employers are reluctant to share information beyond a candidate's title and dates of employment.

This reluctance to share more detailed performance information can create a common dilemma for a prospective employer. Sometimes, a hiring board or executive may have narrowed the pool to two or three candidates. A former well-respected employer provides detailed information about Candidate X. Try as they might, the hiring board or executive cannot induce any of the references for Candidate Y to share detailed information. The unwillingness of those references may reflect an underlying concern about Y, but it may not. A fear of legal liability may drive that reluctance. Nevertheless, in that case, the prospective employer will probably prefer Candidate X. Although Candidate Y may have been the best candidate, the employer will likely reject them.

Reference checks pose several other problems. They are often impractical for assessing candidates. Most candidates want to avoid their prospective employer or a representative of theirs talking to their current employer. What if they do not get the job? The fact that they were looking can undermine their credibility in their current position. Furthermore, state and federal laws govern the selection of reference information. As a result, most employers we work with now check references only after a candidate has accepted a conditional offer of employment and signed a release for a background check.

References also tend to be overly positive (Furnam 2017, p. 213). Not surprisingly, candidates generally provide a list of references who will say positive things, and the person asked to serve as a reference is often flattered or wants to be helpful to the candidate. Employers must usually read between the lines (for both oral and written references) to discern any reservations the referent may have about the candidate.

References tend to be highly subjective and focus more on the candidate's relationship with the referent than on their performance (Furnam 2017, pp. 202–225). Time and again, we have observed candidates providing references who are unfamiliar with the candidates' actual job performance. Instead, the referent has become friendly with the candidate through a shared network, such as a professional association. The referent has excellent chemistry with the candidate and is familiar with their job history; however, they lack knowledge of how the candidate manages meetings and staff, works with their board, or delivers presentations.

Furthermore, we have witnessed referents lie on more than one occasion. Sometimes, current employers want to dump an executive.

In summary, references are not a sound source of information about candidate competencies. Because of these limitations, many employers are not using them to assess competencies but to meet a standard legal requirement. *Every employer should conduct due diligence to verify the background of a key executive who will represent their organization.* Like resumes, they are a necessary but insufficient part of the assessment, mainly when part of a comprehensive background investigation *after* the employer and the candidate have agreed on a conditional employment offer. There, we will also discuss how an intensive background investigation helps ensure the organization does not unknowingly hire a candidate with a history that may be embarrassing or create liability for the employer by hiring someone unqualified, untruthful, or fraudulent.

## Interviews

Given the limited validity of resumes and applications, employers rely extensively on interviews to assess executive competencies (see Figure 1.3). While the interview is the most often used tool to evaluate executives, paradoxically, it is also the least understood (Dipboye and Gaugler 1993, p. 135; Macan 2009, p. 1). Employers often misunderstand interviews on two levels. First, they are complex human interactions that usually cloud accurate assessment. Second, over-relying on interviews precludes employers from learning about critical competencies.

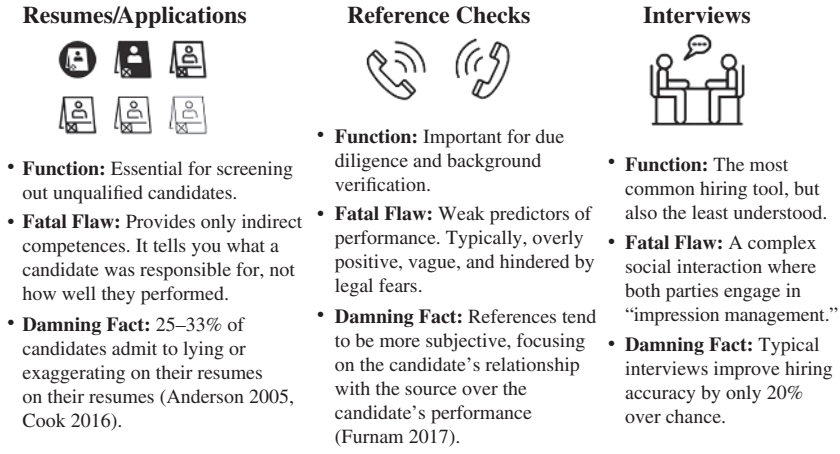



**Figure 1.3** The Traditional Toolkit: Necessary But Dangerously Insufficient

## The Interview Process Is a Complex Human Interaction

The comedian Chris Rock performs a routine in which he discusses the first few months of dating (Rock, C. 2021, August: Hi, Nice to Meet You, I'm my dating representative [Video]. TikTok-Streamonmax). He emphasizes that neither person truly gets to know the other because each has sent a delegate—a fake persona—to represent them. He argues that it takes months before partners truly know one another, as each presents themselves in the way they deem most attractive to the other.

Interviews hardly differ as each party attempts to woo and impress the other! Think about the essential nature of the typical interview. It is far from an objective exchange of information. Instead, it is a complex exchange with all the nuances, assumptions, and perceptual errors associated with complex interpersonal interactions—like dating (Dipboye and Gaugler 1993, p. 137; Bozionelos 2005, pp. 1605–1631).

Consider how each party approaches the interview. Typically, employers have competing goals. On the one hand, the employer wants to obtain an accurate assessment of the candidate's ability to perform the job. On the other hand, the employer wants to sell the candidate on the organization and generate a positive image (Dreher and Maurer 1989, pp. 257–258). Meanwhile, the candidate wants to present themselves favorably and gain a good understanding of the organization and the position.

These intentions can easily conflict. For example, suppose the employer is in a selling mode. In that case, they will likely promote the organization and do most of the talking rather than listening and assessing the candidate's competencies. However, when selling the organization, employers provide the candidate with fodder about the organization's culture and the expectations of the position. So, when the candidate shares what they are looking for in the position and the organization, is the candidate in search of the same type of position, culture, and organization that the employer represents, or are they just ingratiating themselves with the interviewer (Gilmore and Ferris 1989, pp. 198–199)?

Meanwhile, the candidates have conflicting goals: promoting themselves to the employer while also gaining a thorough understanding of the position and the organization. For example, candidates typically enter an interview with a predetermined sense of what the employer regards as an ideal candidate and then strive to present themselves in that light. At the same time, candidates may be seeking a deeper understanding of the organization. However, asking too many probing questions about the organization might signal to the employer that the candidate is not as enthusiastic about the job opportunity.

Each party is trying to read through these nuances. It is a delicate balance. Complicating this complexity of competing goals, each party may mislead the other through their words and nonverbal cues as they attempt to present their best image (Eder et al. 1989, p. 18; Cook 2016, p. 84). Furthermore, each

party tries to assess the other, but in such a manner that the other cannot recognize their intentions.

Consider the following example. CNBC published an article on the best question a candidate should ask of an employer (Liu 2024). In that article, a vice president and workforce expert at LinkedIn recommended the following:

"What is your culture of learning?"

From the candidate's perspective, are they genuinely interested in that topic? If so, they might be thinking about the organization from a long-term perspective: is this a place where they can grow and advance in position and skills? Are they seeking an inclusive organization that engages staff in developing the learning culture? Alternatively, did they read the article, or are they asking the question to impress the employer?

If the employer thinks the candidate is viable, does their answer reflect the organization's actual learning culture, or are they bluffing to impress the candidate? Is the employer more impressed with the candidate after hearing that question or annoyed that the candidate is probing an area of organizational weakness?

Researchers have documented what we all have experienced, both as interviewers and as candidates. Candidates employ impression management techniques to shape interviewers' attributions, such as ingratiation, self-promotion (claiming greater responsibility for positive events than is deserved), and claiming the moral high ground (Gilmore and Ferris 1989, pp. 198–199; Lievens et al. 2005, p. 257). Employers engage in their own influencing methods, such as exaggerating the benefits of the position and the organization. Meanwhile, both parties employ nonverbal tactics, such as smiling, nodding, maintaining high eye contact, and leaning forward at appropriate times, intended to elicit specific reactions from the other.

It would be challenging for either party to elicit an accurate assessment through these tactics, which conceal the interviewer's or candidate's true intentions. One's true persona is more likely to emerge over multiple months of dating than in a one- or two-hour interview.

The complexity and brevity of this human exchange do not deter many employers from being overly confident in their interview skills and in their ability to read candidates (Dipboye 1989, pp. 56–57; Rowe 1989, pp. 77–89; Roth et al. 2005, p. 269). We are often fascinated by the post-interview declarations made by employers, such as the Metro City Council, that a candidate is an effective team player, a strong leader, or a good fit for the organization, based on their answers to a few questions, when both sides are gaming each other. As Figure 1.4 illustrates, rather than an accurate assessment of candidate competencies, employers often base their assessments on superficial factors, such as physical appearance, vocal style, and misinterpreted nonverbal cues of the candidate—not objective data (Goldberg and Cohen 2004, pp. 369–384; DeGroot and Kluemper 2007, p. 31; and Dipboye 2005, pp. 125–126).

*The interview is the most-used assessment tool, and the least understood. It's a complex social interaction where each party sends their best version of themselves, which may or may not be who they really are.*



- **Both sides are selling:** The employer wants to attract the candidate; the candidate uses impression management to present an ideal version of themselves.
- **Superficial factors dominate:** Assessments are often based on physical appearance, vocal style, and nonverbal cues–not objective data.
- **Critical weakness:** Interviews are incapable of enabling candidates to demonstrate leadership skills. They only assess "leadership talk," not "leadership walk" (Klehe and Latham 2005; O'Leary et al. 2017)

**Figure 1.4** The Interview Illusion: A Social Construct, Not a Scientific Tool

## The Nature of Interviews—What Competencies Can They Directly Assess?

The key to understanding an interview's complex dynamics is to separate the competencies that employers can directly and accurately observe during the interview from those that are indirectly observable and thus only inferential (Dipboye and Gaugler 1993, p. 137; Macan 2009, pp. 5–7). Anything inferential is guesswork! Moreover, when employers base their decisions on indirect evidence, they are susceptible to being misled by the candidate.

Employers commonly design interview questions to address five different topics (Janz 1989, p. 159; Blackman 2017, p. 183):

1 Work Experience descriptions

2 Credentials

3 Opinions

4 Professional Knowledge

5 Critical Thinking

However, the first three topics fail to provide direct information about candidate competencies beyond oral communication skills, which candidates invariably demonstrate in their answers to interview questions. (As the candidate answers any interview questions, they reveal oral communication skills; specific command of the English language, such as vocabulary, use of grammar, staying on topic, not rambling; and their use of fillers, such as "eh," "and," or "er.")

The three topics that waste valuable interview time and enhance the potential for misreading competencies are as follows:

1 **Work experience descriptions:** This topic covers the candidates' former work responsibilities, duties, and assignments. For example, many employers want to know about a candidate's budget experience: "Tell us about your budget responsibilities when you served as Deputy Director for the X organization." Typically, a well-developed resume or structured application will elicit this same information. *Moreover, the candidate's answer will not demonstrate their proficiency in carrying out those responsibilities.* Even though a candidate was responsible for a multimillion-dollar budget, a prospective employer must learn how well they handled that responsibility. Yes, it is an impressive responsibility, *but an impressive responsibility does not mean a well-executed responsibility.* All too often, when candidates share their work experience, employers assume they have carried out those responsibilities effectively. In essence, this is the same mistake employers make when reviewing a candidate's credentials in a resume or application; it provides indirect information about competencies.

2 **Credentials:** Like work experience descriptions, the candidate's information about credentials does not verify any of their skills. Moreover, a well-prepared resume or application should include details about credentials. Sadly, that is not always the case. *It is important, particularly during screening, to ask questions about credentials or work experience descriptions to verify information that the candidate could have explained more clearly in their submitted documents.* Such verification can make or break an applicant's candidacy. For example, they may not be able to justify why they left a previous position. *Responses to questions about work history or credentials, however, should not be considered valid for assessing candidate competencies. As we explained earlier in the chapter, just because a candidate has held certain responsibilities does not mean they have executed them well.*

3 **Opinions/self-report:** "Tell us about your leadership style," "What do you see as your strengths (weaknesses)?" or "What are your professional goals for the next five years?" Indeed, opinion or self-report questions can elicit intellectually engaging responses, enabling candidates to make a positive impression. Interviewers tend to favor candidates who express a mindset or philosophy like their own (Posthuma et al. 2002, p. 8; Judge et al. 2000, p. 394). Unfortunately, the candidates' answers to such questions may be false or overstated.

   The only way to verify that the candidate's answers to some of these questions are truthful would be through reference checks (and we have already discussed how iffy those can be). Instead, the employer can only hope that the candidate's answers to opinion questions are truthful and are not simply ploys for ingratiation. (Remember, candidates often ingratiate and inflate their answers.) Even candidates who endeavor to be honest may

have a blind spot about these human tendencies. We have observed many well-meaning candidates who describe themselves as team leaders but act differently. When the interview enables skillful candidates to engage in full-blown impression management, they can easily obscure the reality of their competencies (Gilmore and Ferris 1989, p. 196; Bill and Melchers 2022, pp. 22–44).

## Directly Observable Data—Questions Focusing on Professional Knowledge

With proper question design, employers can focus on two other topics that interviews *can* directly assess—professional knowledge and decision-making and stakeholder engagement skills (Cook 2016, p. 71). Professional knowledge is a combination of managerial knowledge and technical expertise. Managerial knowledge incorporates topics such as budgeting, planning, operations, marketing, and human resource management. Technical knowledge may encompass expertise in areas such as cost accounting, training design, software development, and program evaluation.

Managerial knowledge is essential for any executive position. Top-level executives must generally understand budgeting, planning, marketing, and human resource management as prerequisites for overseeing these managerial functions. In larger organizations, executives typically have access to staff or consultants who are knowledgeable about and responsible for carrying out these functions in greater detail. Still, in such organizations, the executive must have at least a basic understanding to assess how well their staff or consultants carry out those responsibilities.

Additionally, employers may prefer candidates with a particular type of technical knowledge, especially in smaller organizations where executives often wear multiple hats, such as in a nonprofit or small business where the CEO also serves as the finance director or leads the marketing function. Profound technical knowledge is often unnecessary for a higher-level executive in larger organizations, as they will generally have staff with that expertise.

We will elaborate on how to design interview questions that assess professional knowledge in Chapter 3. For our purposes now, the employer can directly assess candidate *knowledge* with questions that tap directly into the candidate's expertise, such as the following:

1 Describe the process you would use to develop a strategic plan for the organization.

2 What can you tell us about the advantages and disadvantages of performance-based budgeting?

3 Tell us how you would go about identifying and engaging with key community partners.

4 How would you structure succession planning in the organization?

5 We are about to implement a new technology system. What do you anticipate regarding staff resistance to change, and how would you deal with that resistance?

The reader might argue that knowledge-based questions enable the assessment of other competencies. For example, when the candidate provides knowledgeable answers to questions 1 and 2, the employer might assume the candidate also has the skills to implement a strategic plan or a performance-based budget. That is not the case! Knowledge is, of course, a prerequisite for implementing such initiatives. However, it does not mean the candidate has the requisite skills to make it happen. As the Metro City Council learned with Landon, knowing is not doing. Implementing initiatives like strategic planning and performance-based budgeting requires more than knowledge. The candidate/manager must also have leadership skills that, for example, ensure staff buy into the initiative. *Interview questions cannot elicit leadership or interactive skills* (Klee and Latham 2005, pp. 108–115). For the most part, candidates demonstrate leadership skills in how they work with others to solve problems. Interviews do not enable the employer to observe how candidates work with others. *When the candidate answers these questions satisfactorily, the employer has direct evidence that the candidate is familiar with leadership methods but only indirect evidence that the candidate can effectively implement them. It is the crucial difference between leadership talk and leadership walk* (O'Leary et al. 2017, pp. 247–270) (Figure 1.5).

For instance, when answering questions 1 and 5, the candidate might detail collaborative management methods for developing and implementing solutions, such as seeking staff input, facilitating meetings, and establishing

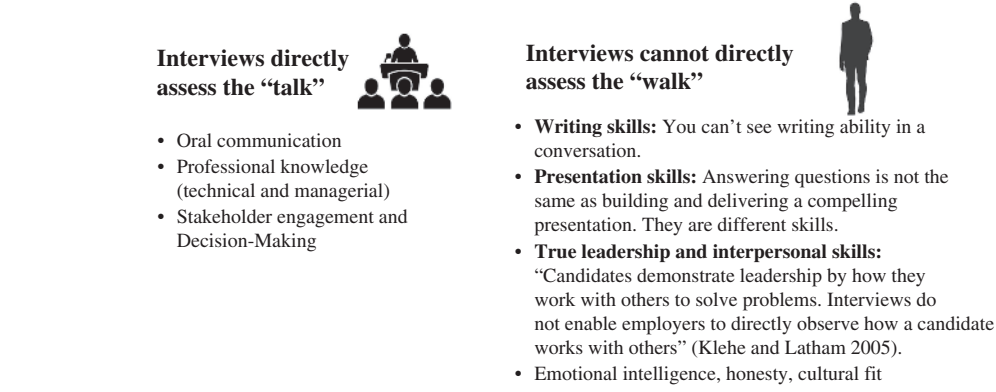



**Figure 1.5** The Interview Can Only Assess the "Talk." It Cannot Assess the "Walk"

teams. Indirectly, that is promising information—the candidate *knows* what is involved in collaborative management; however, that does not guarantee that the candidate will act in a participatory fashion or possess sound team management skills. Suppose the employer assumes such indirect information reflects leadership skills. In that case, the employer may be wrong about an essential competency for the position and the organization.

Understanding the distinction between direct and indirect information is crucial for accurate assessment and for addressing a primary employer concern: whether the candidate is telling the truth. Most candidates want to please the employer with their answers. Consequently, candidates are not always truthful in interviews (Levanshina and Campion 2007, p. 1639). Yes, some candidates tell outright lies (Weiss and Feldman 2006). Others, trying to put their best foot forward, may embellish their answers. Perhaps most commonly, candidates may think they are being accurate when describing themselves as participatory managers. However, an objective observer might disagree that that is how the candidate operates. We all have blind spots. Moreover, interviewers, even experts from security agencies such as the Secret Service, CIA, FBI, National Security Agency, and Drug Enforcement Agency, cannot reliably detect candidates lying (Ekman and O'Sullivan 1991).

*The candidate can only deceive the employer when providing indirect information.* When the employer asks the candidate an opinion question, such as why they want a position, the employer may like the answer to such a question, but the candidate's response might be false or misleading. When the employer asks the candidate how they build staff motivation, the candidate may demonstrate a sound understanding of how to create a motivational climate in an organization. That answer means they *know* what is involved in building such an organizational climate. That knowledgeable answer does not mean the candidate has ever created such a climate, or that they possess the interpersonal skills to do so. When the employer asks the candidate about their leadership style, they may demonstrate a good understanding of best leadership practices. However, that answer might reflect something other than the leadership style they habitually employ.

*In contrast, interviewees cannot mislead the employer when asked questions requiring direct evidence.* (This statement, of course, assumes that the employer knows the correct answers.) The candidate either knows that an appropriate strategic planning process requires stakeholder engagement and a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis or does not. *When employers design questions that elicit direct evidence of oral communication and knowledge, they can focus on learning about the candidate's mastery of these two essential competencies and not be easily misled into assuming that knowledgeable candidates necessarily possess competencies, such as leadership skills, that they only indirectly demonstrate.*

Given this critique, it is perhaps not surprising that researchers have found that typical interviews improve employers' chances of *making an accurate*

*assessment of candidates by only about 20% over chance* (Janz 1989, pp. 158–167; Blackman 2017, pp. 183–201). Fortunately, behavior-based and, to a lesser extent, situational questions can double the validity of interview questions (Blackman 2017, pp. 183–201).

## Directly Observable Data—Behavioral and Situational Interview Questions

Behavioral questions focus on the candidate's *past* actions, particularly in critical incidents (Cohen 2011, p. 24). Some examples are as follows:

A. What was your greatest supervisory challenge, and how did you handle it?

B. Tell us about a major initiative you took that generated staff resistance.

C. Describe a situation you have faced when the Board wanted to go in a particular direction that concerned you. What did you do?

D. Tell us about a new program you have initiated that demonstrated innovation. How did you go about initiating it?

E. How did you manage your staff during the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic?

F. What was the best decision you made in your previous position? Why was it a good decision?

G. What was the worst decision you made in your previous position? Why was it not a good decision?

In contrast to behavioral questions, situational questions ask candidates to respond to incidents they might experience in the *future* (Feild and Gatewood 1989, p. 161).

H. Let's assume the Assistant Manager consistently misses deadlines when you assign projects. How would you respond?

I. How would you handle this situation? The Board has asked you to initiate a strategic planning process. Your staff is resisting. When you inquire about their resistance, they argue that this is the latest "flavor of the day" and that it is not worth the time investment because the Board will not follow the plan.

J. The Board asks you to take on a new project to address homelessness. The organization has never undertaken that type of initiative before, and your staff is already stretched. What would you do?

K. The organization has received a large donation that will enable it to develop new programming. What type of program would you like to see, and how would you implement it?

L. Suppose COVID has morphed into a new variant that causes a spike in hospitalizations again. How would you manage this challenge with staff?

*By asking behavioral and situational questions, employers elicit a third competency from candidates that we can term "stakeholder engagement and decision-making skills."* For example, when asked, "What is the greatest supervisory challenge you have faced, and how did you handle it?" a candidate might provide an answer, such as the following:

> "My assistant director was responsible for managing three top-priority projects. All three projects were behind schedule, and his staff complained that they were unclear about their responsibilities for them. Twice, I met with the assistant director, who assured me that he would turn those projects around. No change occurred.
>
> I knew there were some political barriers to resolving this issue. The assistant director was a close friend of our board chair. After the first discussion, I updated the CEO, who told me she was reluctant for me to take any disciplinary action because of the personal connection between the assistant director and the chair.
>
> Before the second discussion, I met with the CEO again, described the situation, and pointed out that the projects would fall even further behind schedule if I did not take disciplinary action. It would demoralize the rest of our staff, who were quite frustrated with the situation. Moreover, I pointed out that the Board had begun asking questions about the status of these projects. Finally, I described all the other methods that I had tried to support the assistant director, short of taking disciplinary action.
>
> The CEO asked me to wait for 24 hours. Meanwhile, she met with the chair, who informed her that he trusted her and me in this matter and would support appropriate disciplinary action.
>
> The next day, I met with the assistant director. We discussed and agreed on the behaviors in question and mutually agreed to a performance improvement plan. I also provided a written warning that if improvement did not occur, it could lead to further disciplinary action. I kept the CEO informed about my actions. Within 90 days, the projects were back on schedule, and I received positive updates from the rest of our staff."

What competencies did the candidate reveal in this answer? Of course, as the candidate spoke, the interviewers could track her *command of English.* Moreover, the interviewers learned that the candidate *understands* (technical and managerial knowledge) the proper steps in a disciplinary process. She initially discussed his performance, which fell short of expectations, with the assistant director. She then held a follow-up meeting to develop a performance improvement plan and documented the plan.

Additionally, this answer demonstrates the candidate's *decision-making and stakeholder engagement skills* and the context in which she applied them.

**Table 1.1** The Differences Between Problem-Solving and Decision-Making

| | Problem-Solving (The "Detective") | Decision-Making (The "Judge") |
|---|---|---|
| **Core focus** | **Discovery:** Identifying the "why" and generating "how" to fix it. | **Selection:** Choosing the "best" option from available alternatives. |
| **Starting point** | A gap, an error, or a failure in a system. | A set of competing options or a strategic crossroads. |
| **The goal** | To find a root cause and eliminate a hurdle. | To commit resources and set a future direction. |
| **Process** | Analytical, experimental, and investigative. | Evaluative, judgmental, and risk-oriented. |
| **Outcome** | A solution (or a list of potential solutions). | A choice (and the responsibility for its impact). |

She was aware of the interplay between critical stakeholders, including the CEO and the board chair. She *engaged with those stakeholders* before taking action that might backfire without their support. Her *decision-making* process demonstrated concern about the situation's impact on the Board, other staff, and the project outcomes. Finally, she also volunteered her focus on outcomes, including the projects getting back on schedule and receiving positive updates from staff (Table 1.1).

Her answers might tempt the interviewer to assume other competencies beyond stakeholder engagement and decision-making, but those are not directly observable. For example, when the candidate states that she met with the assistant director to discuss and mutually agree on performance concerns and an improvement plan, the interviewers can directly observe that the candidate understands the importance of holding such discussions and seeking mutual agreement (decision-making skills). That does not, however, mean that the candidate has the interactive and problem-solving skills to manage those conversations effectively. Those competencies are not directly observable in the answer. In fact, researchers find a weak connection between candidates' interview answers and their ability to work effectively with others (Cronshaw and Wiesner 1989, pp. 269–279; Macan 2009, pp. 2–3). Research also indicates that interviews do not accurately measure constructs such as emotional intelligence, honesty, and social skills (Posthuma et al. 2002, p. 39).

*In summary, by employing a mixture of knowledge-based and behavioral or situational/hypothetical questions—in short, the types of questions used in best practice interviews—the employer can assess three critical managerial skills: (1) oral communication, (2) job knowledge, and (3) stakeholder engagement and decision-making skills. Any other competencies are only indirectly observable, which means interviewers can only infer that the candidate possesses them*

*(which most interviewers are prone to do). Interviews cannot directly validate such competencies. Moreover, by attempting to assess those other competencies in an interview, employers provide ripe opportunities for candidate impression management.*

We can understand the temptation to leap to assumptions about competencies beyond these three when employers place such heavy emphasis on interviews. Maslow's quote, "If a hammer is your only tool, then every problem looks like a nail," fits employers' tendency to over-rely on interviews to assess candidate competencies (Maslow 1966, pp. 11–12). Employers tend to become attached to familiar tests rather than using more effective methods (Kaplan 1964, p. 28; Kinley and Ben-Hur 2013, pp. 8–14). Given the limitations of applications and resumes, employers relying on the three traditional hiring methods can only hope to glean competencies not directly observable in the interview.

## Other Critical Executive Competencies That Interviews Do Not Elicit

What critical executive competencies cannot be directly observed or assessed by interviews? One way to think about these competencies is to consider what executives typically do. If we shadow an executive, we will see them engaged primarily in four key activities: (1) writing or reviewing memos, letters, emails, and reports; (2) making or observing presentations; (3) coaching staff; and (4) facilitating or participating in meetings (Porter and Nohria 2018, pp. 1–19).[1]

*Writing documents, such as memoranda, emails, and reports* Executives must author or oversee the writing of critical documents, such as memos, letters, or reports to the board, staff, or public. Interviews cannot assess this competency. Employers might assume that a candidate who is well-spoken and knowledgeable in the interview also has the skills to write an effective memo or report. Those employers would be guilty of using indirect information about specific competencies—oral speaking and knowledge—and assuming these would translate into other competencies, such as the ability to write an effective plan. That is a big assumption that is often proven false. Some executives speak well, but do not write well. Written skills are a crucial type of communication and significantly impact the organization's public image. Interviews do not test those skills.

*Making presentations* Employers might assume that a candidate who demonstrates articulate, informed responses in the interview has strong presentation skills. Not so! That is great when the candidate is knowledgeable, well-spoken, and charismatic in the interview. Those are baseline skills for effective presentations, but they are insufficient.

In an interview, candidates cannot demonstrate that they possess the skills to conduct the analysis, compile, and deliver an effective presentation. Executives must possess these skills because their presentations (or those of their

staff) are crucial for informing and educating other executives, the board, clients, and the public about key initiatives. Interviews do not elicit that skill set.

*Coaching staff* Executives are only as effective as their team. *Perhaps the biggest mistake employers make in executive assessment is to assume they can assess leadership skills in an interview. This just cannot be done.*

Again, employers often assume that a candidate who provides knowledgeable answers about leadership and demonstrates excellent decision-making regarding staff performance has the skills to interact with and problem-solve well with staff. Interviewers cannot know that the candidate possesses such competencies based on that indirect information. Candidates can demonstrate a sound leadership philosophy and knowledge in an interview. Likewise, they can also demonstrate leadership judgment if asked behavioral questions. Such leadership talk, however, does not necessarily translate into effective leadership walk—how the candidate acts.

*Interviews are incapable of enabling candidates to demonstrate leadership skills!* For the most part, executives demonstrate their leadership skills in problem-solving interactions with others. Such leadership skills include problem-solving, active listening, asking questions, and conflict resolution. Leadership skills have a significant impact on staff morale, retention, and productivity. Regularly using those skills at the top of the organization influences the organizational culture.

Nevertheless, interviews do not directly enable candidates to demonstrate those skills (leadership walk). *Leadership skills are a major competency that is always paramount in any executive assessment. However, they elude direct observation in an interview.*

*Leading/facilitating meetings* Executives do not always lead meetings they attend, but they facilitate at least some of them. When they do, they have a dramatic impact. How an executive facilitates meetings models their leadership style to key stakeholders. For example, do they dominate and dictate, or do they engage and work collaboratively? A collaborative leadership approach also establishes at least implicit expectations for how others—mainly staff—run their meetings. As a result, how the executive facilitates meetings can have a ripple effect, shaping the organization's entire culture. Moreover, meetings could often be a more productive use of time. How the executive facilitates meetings can ensure that participants use their time productively (Porter and Nohria 2018, pp. 1–19).

Again, the candidate cannot demonstrate their meeting facilitation skills in an interview. How they discuss their meeting facilitation in an interview may be entirely separate from the skill set they can wield when leading meetings. What candidate would not describe their meeting leadership as a "team approach," given that it is the buzzword they know most employers would expect? Unfortunately, many candidates who claim to be team leaders often act very differently.

Remember the case of Metro City and the interview with Landon? He impressed them with his oral communication, professional knowledge, and decision-making. Based on that *directly* observable info, the Council *assumed* he had other competencies not observable in the interview, such as leadership, writing, and the ability to implement the outcome-based strategic plan.

We conclude this chapter that began with a best practice that is a corollary of Principle #1: Employers must directly observe candidate competencies to be confident they exist, with the following best practice for employers:

> **Best practice #1: Resumes, interviews, and reference checks are necessary but insufficient for any assessment process. Employers must use other methods to assess executive competencies directly.**

Chapter 2 will explain how to gather the necessary information to maximize the benefits of the three essential methods for assessing executives. It will also lead us to consider other methods that can tap into key executive competencies that the big three cannot.

## Chapter 1: Summary

**Common practice #1:** Employers primarily rely on three tools—resumes/applications, reference checks, and interviews—to assess executive competencies.

**Principle #1:** Do not assume. Employers must directly observe competencies to be confident that candidates have them (Figure 1.6).

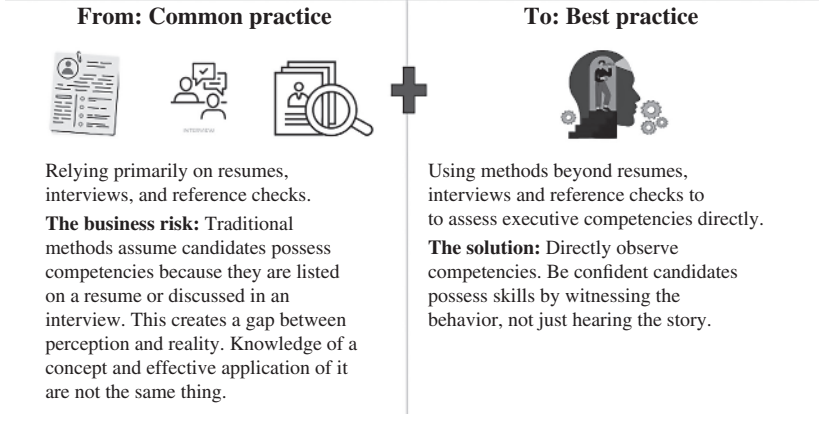



**Figure 1.6** Principle 1: Move from Assumption to Direct Observation

**Key Points:**

- Applications and resumes are essential for screening. However, they are more helpful for screening out candidates who lack the requisite credentials than for identifying which candidates have them. Employers tend to assume that candidates who check all the boxes in their applications and resumes have the requisite competencies. Nevertheless, the application and resume do not directly reveal any executive competencies.
- References can be helpful when provided by someone the organization can trust, who also knows how the candidate performs on the job. References, however, are not a consistently sound tool for assessing candidate competencies. Frequently, the person supplying the reference will provide limited information, such as the candidate's start and end dates of employment in an organization. References also tend to be inflated and focused more on the person than on their specific job performance. Still, employers should use references to verify a candidate's information after they have made a conditional offer of employment.
- Employers directly observe *three* important managerial competencies in an interview: professional knowledge, oral communication, and stakeholder engagement and decision-making skills (when using behavioral questions). They cannot directly observe other critical executive competencies, such as writing and presentation skills, in an interview. Interviews only allow the employer to observe leadership talk, not leadership skills such as conflict resolution, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills.

**Best practice #1:** Resumes, interviews, and reference checks are necessary but insufficient for any assessment process. Employers must use other methods to assess executive competencies directly.

## Note

1 Porter and Nohria's study indicates that private-sector executives devote 61% of their time to individual or group meetings. These interactions include meetings with teams and individuals (coaching staff) and presentations. Executives allocate the remaining 39% of their time to reading, writing, or engaging in electronic communication, such as email.

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