Why Job Interviews Don't Work to Assess English

Many employers trying to determine if applicants have the English skills for their jobs rely solely on interviews. Even some widely used international English language tests use interviewers to assess speaking skills.

Intuitively this method seems as though it should work, but it is not reliable.

One important reason is that all but the most highly trained interviewers unconsciously adjust their questioning to meet the level of the interviewee's speaking ability. This means that interviewees come across as more proficient in English than they actually are and comprehension problems are missed that will haunt the employer later.

Another problem is that interviewers are only human and so results will be affected by factors having nothing to do with English ability such as—

- Whether the interviewer is having a good or bad day

- Reaction of the interviewer to the interviewee (and vice versa). Often there is unconscious positive or negative prejudice relating to factors that have nothing to do with English language ability, whether it's an unfortunate haircut or having similar interests and opinions.

- Distraction. The typical interviewer is trying to cover many points to see how well the interviewee matches to the job. Trying to look at English ability at the same time leads to overload and makes it even more likely the interviewer will adjust speech to interviewee ability level as described above.

Interviews cannot be considered an objective, reliable measure that can stand up to later challenges of unfairness or even EEO complaint filings by interviewees. Nor do typical interviews involve the interviewee actually completing the types of tasks they will have to tackle in everyday workplace situations.

A better solution when assessing English proficiency is the goal is using *TOEIC*® tests. Their objective nature allows ready, fair comparison of job applicant skills. They involve completing tasks that will be encountered in any workplace, such as understanding meeting request details, responding to phone messages, and suggesting solutions to workplace problems.

Speaking tests are recorded on computer and split into individual questions that are then evaluated by multiple raters who are highly trained and monitored and who have no prior information about the interviewee.

If you're trying to evaluate the English skills of non-native speakers, start with *TOEIC* and save interviews for after this initial screening. It will narrow down the number of interviews you have to conduct and make the hiring process more efficient even while it makes it more reliable. Contact us to learn more about administering *TOEIC* at your organization.

—Lia Nigro