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Laurence Stybel, Ed.D., and Maryanne Peabody, MBA, founded Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc.

Honoring Chris Argyris: how to use the Argyris Technique to Improve the Validity of Your Employment Interviews.

Recruitment's Holy Trinity consists of the following:

- (1) resume reviews
- (2) job interviews
- (3) reference checks

How valid are job interviews?

Richard Arvey and James Campion (1982) reviewed fifteen years of research on the predictive validity of job interviews. His conclusion:

“Why (do) job interviews persist in view of evidence of its relative low reliability, validity, and its susceptibility to distortion?”

If the backbone of recruitment is the job interview, the backbone has serious calcium deficiency.

The rest of this article will focus on using the Argyris Technique as a way of supporting the serious flaws in employment interviews.

Who Was Chris Argyris?

In November 2013 organization psychology lost one of its most creative thinkers with the passing of Harvard University Professor Emeritus Chris Argyris. This article honors his contributions by reviewing Argyris' work as it relates to improving the predictive validity of job interviews.

For over thirty years, the late Donald Schon of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Chris Argyris worked on what they called a Theory of Action Perspective. A brief reference to some of their published books on this subject can be found at the conclusion of this article. A list of their research papers would be at least twice as long.

As it relates to employment interviews, the Perspective is based on the following empirical observations:

There is a gap between what people say (espouse) versus what people do (in-use).

Sometimes actors are aware of this gap and are deliberate about it. Observers label this conscious gap "hypocrisy."

More often, however, actors are unaware of this gap. Observers continue to attribute it to "hypocrisy" when it really is due to the structure of the brain.

Argyris and Schon believe we have one set of instructions in our brain that helps inform what we espouse. We have another program in our brain that instructs us what to do. The two programs do not talk to each other.

Not only do they not communicate with each other, to access the In-Use program of instruction in the brain, one must first disable the Espoused program.

A useful analogy would be to think of two computer programs on a personal computer hard drive. The programs might physically exist next to each other and yet they do not communicate.

To carry the computer analogy further, in the old 286 and 386 based Personal Computers of the early 1980's, the very act of accessing one program required the disabling of other programs. For example, one could run MS Word only by disabling MS Excel.

The Argyris Technique in Employment Interviews:

Current interview techniques only focus at the espoused level. Argyris would predict that there would indeed be a disappointing gap between what candidates say versus what they do when employed.

Psychologists call this discrepancy poor predictive validity.

Argyris and Schon developed an interview technique involving realistic vignettes that lead to decision dilemmas. A dilemma is a situation where there are two or more options. And all the options have negative consequences.

Candidates first are asked to read the vignette and to then articulate how they would solve the case. This procedure taps into the Espoused level and is common practice in many employment interviews.

Argyris then introduced a tape recorder to the scene and informed the applicant that the candidate's response would be recorded. It would later be transcribed and shown to the hiring authority.

When the interviewer presses the record button, it has the impact of disabling the Espoused program while enabling the "In Use" program.

Constructing Dilemmas.

Two sample vignettes are provided to give you a sense of how we design cases when conducting retained searches.

The best dilemmas are work-related and timeless. Notice how we make it impossible to guess at the sex or race of the participants in the case.

Sample Dilemma #1:

The Case of the Promoted Account Rep

In the following exercise, you will be asked to read about an actual problem that occurred in another company.

There are no right or wrong answers. We are interested in how you would deal with the problem.

You are the Marketing Director of Company A. Subordinate X is your best Account Representative but wants to move into management. Indeed, you have long been afraid that unless X is promoted, this talented person would leave your organization.

An opportunity has finally come. Subordinate X is being promoted. A new Account Rep has been hired and will be assigned to Best Customer, Inc.

Best Customer, Inc. is one of 60 accounts but it represents 40% of gross sales.

Based on your past experiences with the President of Best Customer, you expect the President will be very upset with Subordinate X's departure.

The President has mentioned to you that if it wasn't for Subordinate X, Best Customer would have moved to a competitor long ago. The President has mentioned that Subordinate X is far better than the Technical Support people that normally trouble shoot for your company.

The contract with Best Customer is going to expire in sixty days.

You are afraid that the President might not renew the contract when the news is delivered.

How would you deal with this issue?

1. Describe your objectives; how you intend to achieve them; why you selected those goals?
2. Describe some dialogue that you might expect to occur if you implement the action plan listed in your response to question 1.

Sample Dilemma #2:

The Case of the Corporate Discount

In the following exercise, you will be asked to read about an actual problem that occurred in another company.

There is no right or wrong answer. We are interested in how you would analyze the problem and its consequences.

You are the chief human resource officer of a company with corporate HQ located South of Boston along Route 128.

Many of the corporate HQ employees live in Rhode Island, and some commute from as far away as New Hampshire.

One third of employees work at operating divisions located in the following cities: Austin, Texas; Osaka, Japan; and Reading, UK.

An employee named A has a good friend who is President of Mass Glass. The President of Mass Glass has authorized a discount of 10% towards any eyeglasses purchased at any Mass Glass store.

There are five stores in Massachusetts only.

Employee A comes to you and says that the President of Mass Glass will provide a 10% discount for any employee of the company who purchases eyeglasses at a Mass Glass store. Given the costs of prescription lenses and frames, the potential savings to employees could be \$15-35 per frame.

Employee A suggests you call the President of Mass Glass. If you request the discount, he will grant it to all employees of the company.

What do you say to Employee A?

1. Describe your objectives; how you intend to achieve them; why you selected those goals.
2. Describe some dialogue that you might expect to occur if you implement the action plan listed in your response to question 1.

You Can Do This:

Every job interview is a prediction about how that candidate's performance in one artificial setting predicts future on-the-job performance. The published research suggests that job interviews fail at achieving predictive validity.

Chris Argyris and Donald Schon developed a framework for explaining hypocrisy in work settings that applies well to interview situations. We have shown how you can use the Argyris Technique in your hiring process.

We use the Argyris Technique when conducting retained searches for our clients companies.

Why don't you try it out?

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