Office of the Merit Commissioner

Behavioural Interviewing Report
Special Study

2014

UPHOLDING FAIR HIRING IN THE BC PUBLIC SERVICE

May 2014

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

This special study of behavioural interviewing (BI) identified the key elements necessary for the correct use of the method and risks that the incorrect use might pose to merit-based hiring. It also considered whether the key elements that were identified existed within the BC Public Service and whether risks, if any, were mitigated.

As part of the study, the Office of the Merit Commissioner undertook a review of BI-related research findings and contemporary literature, and analyzed findings from staffing reviews and merit performance audits related to appointments to and from within the BC Public Service. Public Service human resource representatives were consulted and the BC Public Service Agency's on-line hiring resources were examined.

There were four key elements identified which are considered necessary for the effective use of BI. The elements are summarized as follows:

- ➢ identify a reasonable number of appropriate behavioural competencies for assessment;
- ➢ develop effective lead questions and follow up with probing questions as required;
- ➢ assess responses using a behaviourally anchored rating scale, look for patterns of behaviour and use judgement to consider other contextual factors; and
- ➢ provide interviewers with in-depth and hands-on BI training.

Behavioural interviewing can be a very effective selection method; however, certain risks have been identified which could compromise its use. In summary, the risks are:

- ➢ poor design of or out-of-date competency frameworks;
- ➢ over-reliance on behavioural competencies and BI to the exclusion of other relevant position requirements and assessment methods;
- ➢ use of BI without the understanding and/or skill necessary for its proper application; and
- ➢ candidates who are more familiar with the approach may be advantaged.

Following a comparison of key elements and risks associated with BI to the model in place in the BC Public Service, the study concluded that while the competency framework in use in the BC Public Service is well-designed, there are some opportunities for improvement. The recommendations resulting from this study are:
- ➢ ensure those using BI or providing advice on its use have the necessary understanding and skills;
- ➢ provide comprehensive BI information that is easily accessible;
- ➢ consider whether BI is more appropriately used in conjunction with other assessment tools;
- ➢ review the competency framework for currency; and
- ➢ provide all applicants equal access to BI information.

Introduction

The Merit Commissioner is responsible for monitoring the application of the merit principle under the *Public Service Act*. Section 8(1) of the *Act* requires that appointments to and from within the public service be based on the principle of merit and be the result of a process designed to appraise the knowledge, skills and abilities of eligible applicants. In conducting audits and reviews of appointments over the course of a number of years, the Office of the Merit Commissioner (the Office) has observed an increasing reliance on behavioural interviewing (BI) as a principle assessment method in the BC Public Service. As this approach impacts merit-based hiring processes, further study was considered warranted.

Objective

This study is an examination of the BI method in order to identify the elements necessary for its correct use and any potential risks incorrect use may pose to merit-based hiring. The study also considers whether these key elements are in place and supported within the BC Public Service, and whether any potential risks are mitigated.

Scope and Approach

Research related to BI and contemporary literature (articles, books and reports) from the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK) and Canada were reviewed to develop an understanding of the history, application, key elements and potential risks of BI as an assessment tool. Appendix A includes a full list of references. As well, data and findings from the Office's staffing reviews and merit performance audits were examined to determine the extent to which BI has been used in the BC Public Service. In addition, BC Public Service Agency (BCPSA) representatives and human resource professionals from 13 ministries were consulted, and a review of online hiring resources was conducted to determine the current support mechanisms for BI within the BC Public Service. A draft of this report was provided to the BCPSA for review and their comments appear at Appendix B.

Behavioural Interviewing Approach

The BI technique is based on the premise that "the best predictor of future behaviour/performance is past behaviour/performance in similar circumstances" (Janz, Hellervik & Gilmore, 1986, p. 32). In this approach, during an interview, candidates are asked to describe how they have behaved in real situations in order to determine if their competencies align with the requirements of the position. Instead of focusing on hypothetical questions related to what an individual thinks they *may do,* as is characteristic of situational interviews, BI focuses on factual questions related to what an individual *has done.* While the term "behavioural interviewing" has been adopted in the BC Public Service, this approach is also commonly referred to as: behavioural event, competency-based, criterion-based, behavioural description, or critical incident interviewing.

History

In a 1973 article, Harvard professor David McClelland theorized that testing for competence would be a better predictor of an individual's university and job success than testing for intelligence or aptitude, which was the common practice at that time. The technique he developed to pilot his theory eventually evolved into behavioural event interviewing and is currently recognized as a valuable tool for both identifying the competencies required for a position as well as assessing individuals for those competencies. McClelland's early work in this area inspired other industrial and organizational psychologists to explore the use of competencies and their effectiveness in the selection process.

Concurrently, research on ways to improve the effectiveness of the traditional unstructured selection interview was underway. The research found that introducing structured elements to the interviewing process increased the reliability and validity of interviews substantially. With these findings, the focus of research turned to structured interviewing and in particular, the more widely-used formats of situational interviewing and behavioural interviewing.

Competencies and Behavioural Interviewing

Behavioural interviewing is a selection interview technique designed to assess the competencies required to perform the job. In the human resource field, competencies are commonly understood to be observable or measurable behaviours or attributes related to job performance. A number of articles attribute Richard Boryatzis, an organizational psychologist, as the first to define the term "competency" as "an underlying characteristic of an individual which is causally related to effective or superior performance on the job" (Getha-Taylor, 2008, p. 106). A more contemporary definition describes a competency as "a combination of skills, attitudes and behaviours that an individual or organization is competent at, that is the ability to deliver; perform (a set of) tasks with relative ease and with a high level of predictability in terms of quality and timeliness" (Hayton & McEvoy, 2006 p. 495). Although there are a number of opinions on what elements the term "competency" encompasses, there is general agreement that it includes those knowledge, skills, traits, motives and attitudes that can be identified and measured by observable actions or behaviours.

Many organizations have established competency frameworks as the basis for a variety of human resource functions including hiring, training, performance management and succession planning, and as a means of aligning employee behaviours with business goals. This includes a number of public sector organizations; such as the Public Service of Canada, the US Federal Civil Service, the UK Civil Service, the RCMP and the BC Public Service, which have all either developed or acquired competency frameworks. The main component of a competency framework is a dictionary or inventory which identifies and describes, in a measurable way, the array of competencies required for effective individual and organizational performance. Typically, the dictionaries are made up of core competencies that are common to all positions in the organization and/or specialist competencies that are required for some types of jobs (e.g., managerial, administrative and technical job families). Competency frameworks do

not normally include technical knowledge, skill and ability requirements which would be assessed through means other than BI.

Within some dictionaries, the competencies are described along a "noticeable difference" scale which corresponds to the hierarchy of positions within the organization: the lower levels of the scale reflect behaviours required for entry level and the higher levels describe behaviours required for senior roles. In other dictionaries, the progressive scale reflects the level of proficiency associated with a specific role (e.g., an entry-level front counter position may require a high degree of customer service), and does not necessarily correspond with the organizational hierarchy.

The set of essential competency requirements established for a specific job or job family is usually referred to as a competency model. Where organizations have an established competency framework, models are derived by selecting the relevant core competencies and/or specialist competencies from the dictionary and determining the position or the proficiency level required for successful performance.

Behavioural Interviewing - Application

By the 1990s, competencies and BI were widely accepted in the US and the UK. Surveys conducted during that period in the US showed that 75 to 80 per cent of responding organizations had adopted competency applications, and a 1995 UK survey found that 62 per cent of the organizations responding used BI questions when interviewing.

The majority of studies do not indicate that BI is more effective at specific job levels, or that it is better suited to specific employee groups or professions. As noted by Dr. Allen Huffcutt (2004), "it appears to be an implicit assumption in much of the interview literature that SIs [situational interviews] and BDIs [behavioural description interviews] work equally well for all types of jobs" (p. 262). Those research studies that do address the effectiveness of BI and situational interviews to assess candidates for specific job types have mixed results. Although there is general agreement that both approaches are valid if a structured approach is followed, the most consistent finding is that BI is the more effective interviewing technique for senior-level or complex positions.

Behavioural Interviewing - Key Elements

A seminal study led by Michael Campion in 1997 examined 15 elements of structured interviews and identified the four most important for enhancing interview reliability or validity. Since this study, other researchers and human resource practitioners have consistently cited these elements as essential to an effective structured interviewing process, whether situational or behavioural. A description of these elements within the BI context follows.

Element #1 – Identifying Key Competencies

Ideally, any staffing process starts with a thorough job analysis to ensure the appropriate responsibilities and qualifications are identified for the position and that they reflect the current reality of the organization. This analysis would include determining the competencies required for effective job performance which lend themselves to an assessment through BI. Some practitioners caution that often job descriptions (typically the product of the job analysis) emphasize the educational and experience requirements at the expense of competencies.

Once the job-related competencies are identified, careful consideration must also be given to distinguishing those which are necessary to assess at the time of recruitment: which competencies must candidates bring to the job and which competencies could easily be learned or further developed on the job. Similarly, it is important to identify which competencies will differentiate the superior performers from the average performers. The outcome of this exercise should be a reasonable number of key competencies to be assessed through BI.

Where a competency model already exists for a job family or a specific position, some form of review is required in order to determine whether the identified competencies are still relevant and if necessary, to modify the competencies to capture any changed or unique job requirements. Also, where the competency model includes reference to levels of proficiency, it is important to identify which levels are required for recruitment.

Element #2 – Developing Effective BI Questions

Effective BI questions are job-related and consist of two parts: a standard lead or primary question, and follow-up or probing questions. The lead question is open-ended and requires candidates to describe an example of their past behaviour to illustrate a particular competency. It should be designed to focus candidates on describing their response/actions in detail as opposed to the particulars of the situation.

Follow-up or probing questions are necessary to elicit complete information as well as to gain a greater sense of candidates' skills, attitudes and behaviour. These questions may be pre-planned, ad hoc or a mixture and may be open or close-ended depending on the nature of the information the panel is attempting to gather or confirm.

Skilled interviewers using this questioning technique can draw out patterns of behaviour as well as identify misleading, superficial or rehearsed answers that lack the necessary substance. It is thought that BI is subject to less misrepresentation by candidates as they are required to draw on actual experiences which can be examined in detail through follow-up questions as well as verified through reference checks.

Element #3 - Standardizing BI Questions and Evaluations

According to research findings, interviews that pose the same questions to candidates and assess responses against a prepared rating guide or scale reduce bias and increase reliability and validity. In a BI context, all candidates are asked the same primary question. Follow-up questions may be standardized or may be tailored to the candidates' responses.

Responses are evaluated in accordance with a pre-established behaviourally anchored rating scale (BARS). A simple BARS outlines behavioural indicators of acceptable and unacceptable performance for a particular competency. The indicators may be general descriptions of the type of behaviour required and/or examples of actual behaviours. Where competencies have several levels, a BARS provides indicators at each level that typically increase in complexity or proficiency. As BARS are intended to be guidelines describing representative behaviours, candidates are not expected to demonstrate exactly the same behaviour as described in the scale.

Some practitioners suggest that the best method of scoring a BI process is to consider the pattern of behaviour or evidence demonstrated by the candidate throughout the interview instead of relying on their response to a specific question to assess an area of competency. This consideration is referred to as pattern scoring.

While standardization improves the objectivity and job relevance of interviews, the research has also shown that interviewers who adhere rigidly to process risk losing the benefit of flexibility and interaction that make BI an effective approach. For the approach to be effective, interviewers must apply their judgement with respect to asking probing questions as well as determine the relevant evidence to consider and weigh when evaluating responses. At times, it may be important to take into account other relevant factors that are not necessarily indicated in a BARS when assessing responses; such as the breadth and depth of the behaviour demonstrated, whether the example is representative of typical or atypical behaviour, the currency of the examples provided, or indicators of inappropriate behaviour.

Element #4 – Providing In-depth BI Training for Interviewers

The research has established the importance of having trained interviewers facilitate structured interviewing processes. Interviewers who have received training use more sophisticated questioning strategies and standardized methods of evaluation and tend to be more consistent in their approach. In-depth training with opportunities to practice skills has been found to increase interview validity and improve accuracy.

Research shows the training curriculum for effective BI processes should focus on formulating questions, developing questioning techniques, and assessing responses including categorizing and evaluating behaviours. The best type of training involves a combination of lectures, hands-on skills practice, and role-plays.

Behavioural Interviewing - Risks

A number of criticisms of a competency-based approach to hiring are emerging, as well as specific cautions regarding the BI technique. Competency frameworks and models are susceptible to becoming dated, too simplistic, generic or overly complicated. Also, as the approach is based on past experience, candidates with high potential but who lack the depth and breadth of experience may be disadvantaged (e.g., new graduates, adults who are returning to the work place after an absence, or applicants seeking a growth or developmental position). In addition, some argue that previous behaviour may not account for future performance - a candidate may be able to demonstrate the competency but lack the motivation or the ability to apply it effectively within a new context.

Another concern is that a BI approach utilized as either the sole or a primary assessment tool may not provide a holistic sense of the candidate. As the method assesses discrete attributes, candidates who lack a specific competency but whose overall performance is superior may be overlooked. Further, as the approach usually concentrates on the softer and broader behavioural competencies; any technical or specialized knowledge, skills and abilities essential for success in the position may be discounted or disregarded completely.

There are also a number of cautions regarding the proper application of competency frameworks and BI. Interviewers may use established competencies and BI in a mechanistic or clinical way. In other words, hiring managers may employ the approach without thought or understanding. This includes assessing candidates against an identified set of competencies without consideration as to whether they are reasonable or appropriate for the specific position, or strictly adhering to process without applying the flexibility and judgement which are part of making BI an effective technique.

Further, unskilled interviewers may lack the expertise to draw out the necessary information from introverted, evasive or practised candidates. Inexperienced interviewers may also inadequately prepare,

attempt to assess too many competencies, allow insufficient time for a thorough interview, or lack the skill required to identify patterns of behaviour.

Candidates who are familiar with this interviewing method may deliver excessively prepared or rehearsed responses, which meet the requisite requirements but leave the panel without a true sense of their real behaviours. Conversely, candidates who are not expecting a BI process or are unfamiliar with it may not present their qualifications as well, or may experience difficulties recalling appropriate examples to reflect their competency.

Summary of Key Risks in Using BI

➢ Poor design of or out-of-date competency frameworks

➢ Over-reliance on behavioural competencies and BI to the exclusion of other relevant position requirements and assessment methods

➢ Use of a BI approach without the understanding and/or skill necessary for its proper application

➢ Candidates who are more familiar with the approach may be advantaged

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Mitigating the Risk

There are a few advocates for replacing BI with a broader interview approach encompassing the assessment of individual performance and achievements. However, many others continue to promote the use of behavioural competencies and BI as effective assessment tools and suggest the following as ways to mitigate some of the risk.

Organizations with established competency frameworks and models require the investment of time and resources to ensure these are both well-constructed and continuously improved. Ongoing review and updating is required to ensure the framework reflects current organizational realities and direction, and that the competencies continue to be relevant. As well, it is important that the specified competency models for individual positions are created or reviewed at the start of any staffing process to ensure that the competencies required for effective job performance are correctly identified.

BI is best used in conjunction with other complementary forms of assessment such as testing, role-plays and situational interviewing, to ensure all factors, including knowledge and skills requirements, are appropriately considered. This holistic assessment approach provides the hiring manager with a stronger sense of candidates' overall ability to perform the job while ensuring a more relevant and fair process.

In order to provide candidates with an equal opportunity to present their competencies, they need to be aware that BI will be part of the assessment process and understand the expectations associated with this type of interview. Where the process is open to external candidates, access to descriptions of the competencies should be available to minimize any advantage that internal candidates may have.

Training interviewers, which was previously identified as one of the four essential elements of BI, is also an important way to mitigate risk. It helps to ensure prospective interviewers fully understand competencies and the proper application of BI, as well as the benefits and limitations of the approach. It is particularly important that interviewers have the opportunity to observe and practice the essential questioning skills necessary to draw out full responses, minimize the effects of over-preparation, evaluate candidate credibility, and determine the authenticity of answers. Further, practical training provides an opportunity to discuss the more challenging and conceptual aspects of the process, such as applying judgement in a reasonable and fair manner.

Behavioural Interviewing in the BC Public Service

Behavioural interviewing is widely used in the BC Public Service for all types of positions, from entry to senior levels. The Merit Commissioner's 2012 Merit Performance Audit found that an interview was part of the assessment process in the majority of appointments audited and that approximately 90 per cent of those interviews included one or more BI questions. As shown in Chart 1, a significant percentage of interviews included BI questions only, while another significant percentage used a combination of BI questions and other types of questions.

Chart 1 - Types of Interview Questions (2012 Merit Performance Audit)

Mix of BI and other types of questions 47%

No BI questions 9%

BI questions only 44%
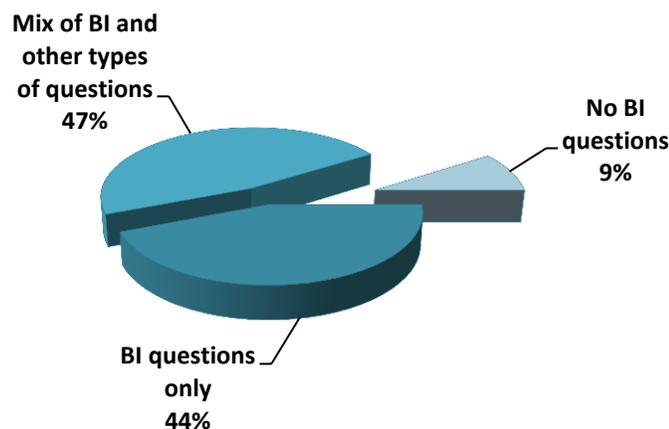
The BC Public Service Competency Framework

Discussions with BCPSA representatives and a survey of ministry human resource professionals found that the current responsibility for the BC Public Service competency framework and for providing support to hiring managers on BI is considered to reside with the BCPSA.

Competency Dictionaries

In 2002, the BC Public Service acquired a competency dictionary from the Hay Group that currently forms the basis of a corporate-wide competency framework. The dictionary covers a spectrum of behavioural competencies required for BC Public Service jobs and includes a mixture of core, specialised and leadership competencies. The competencies are grouped into four categories: leading people, achieving business results, personal effectiveness and interpersonal relationships. Each competency has a definition and a description of several progressive levels of proficiency.

In 2008, 15 new leadership competencies were added to the primary dictionary. In 2012, a separate dictionary with 17 newly developed behavioural competencies was made available for positions with an aboriginal relations focus or component.

Behaviourally Anchored Rating Scales

The majority of competencies in the primary dictionary have corresponding interview interpretation guides: a behaviourally anchored rating scale that provides a description of each competency level and the types of behaviour indicators to consider in a candidate's response. For the leadership competencies and aboriginal relations dictionary, each competency has a list of behaviours that indicate the presence of the competency rather than the level of the competency. As well, the aboriginal relations competencies list behaviours that indicate where further development may be required.

BI Application Tools and Resources

In addition to the competency dictionaries and interpretative guides, the BCPSA provides a number of BI-related resources for hiring managers, as summarized below.

➢ **MyHR** – This website includes advice and guidelines on hiring processes, including BI. It also includes links to the competency inventory, the aboriginal relations competency dictionary, and a number of other BI resources.

➢ **Hiring tools** – A number of specific guides, templates, forms and samples have been developed for the use of hiring managers, and links to the tools are provided on MyHR.

➢ **Advisors** - Within the BCPSA, hiring advisors in Service Operations and assessment practices specialists in the Hiring Centre provide advice to hiring managers on assessment approaches, including competencies and BI. On occasion, advisors may also participate on selection panels.

➢ **Hiring courses** – In 2013 the BCPSA produced four interactive eLearning hiring modules. The first three modules focus on hiring and include: "Overview for Hiring Managers"; "Getting Ready to Hire"; and "Selecting the Best". The fourth module focuses on orienting new employees.

Analysis and Observations

This study reviewed the BC Public Service competency framework and compared it to the key BI elements and risks identified in the research and literature. Findings identified through the Office of the Merit Commissioner's merit performance audits were also taken into account when considering areas of strength or where improvements might be introduced.

Key Elements within the BC Public Service Competency Framework

Element #1 – Identifying Key Competencies

The MyHR site provides guidance to hiring managers on the need to identify or confirm behavioural competencies as part of defining the selection criteria at the beginning of any hiring process. It provides a number of tools (e.g., Job Profile Writing Guidelines, Template Selection Plan, and eLearning courses on hiring) to assist with the development of selection criteria and the identification of behavioural competencies. Links to the behavioural competency dictionary are provided (restricted to BC Public Service employees) and a guide to planning and conducting interviews describes the purpose of competency levels and recruitment and target levels of performance. However, there is limited guidance to hiring managers that is specific to competencies (e.g., how to develop or modify competency models for positions, or determine which competencies are the most suitable for assessment at the hiring stage).

Element #2 – Developing Effective BI Questions

The online guide entitled "Choosing Behavioural Interview Questions" provides guidance to hiring managers in developing effective BI questions. The guide describes the nature of lead and probing questions, provides steps to developing questions and gives illustrative examples of different types of questions. A supplemental document provides samples of lead BI questions for each competency. With respect to probing questions, these resources describe this type of question as useful for gathering complete responses from candidates; however, the document does not delve into the wider value and complexities of using probing questions. For example, probing is effective to identify patterns of behaviour, draw out introverted candidates, and uncover misleading information.

Element #3 – Standardizing BI Questions and Evaluation

The MyHR site and other BCPSA sources of information advise hiring managers on the importance of asking candidates the same lead BI question and provide standardized behaviourally anchored rating scales. However, there is limited advice on how to assess responses in accordance with these scales and

limited guidance on ways to consider and treat other relevant factors that are not included in the rating scale, such as inappropriate behaviours or the use of dated examples.

Element #4 – Providing In-depth BI Training for Interviewers

At one time, BCPSA staff would travel to larger centres at the request of the ministries, to deliver a one-day course on hiring which had a BI component. In addition, several ministries had developed their own dedicated BI course. Currently, neither type of in-person training is offered and there are no requirements for hiring managers, panel members or BCPSA hiring advisors to receive training specific to the use of BI.

The eLearning training modules, produced to aid managers with hiring, cover a broad spectrum of assessment methods and practices. Given each module is approximately 30 minutes in length there is a limited amount of time to be dedicated specifically to BI material. The BCPSA has no plans at this time to develop a dedicated BI course.

Table 1 – Comparison of BC Public Service Competency Framework to Key BI Elements		
Element	**BC Public Service Competency Framework includes:**	**Areas for Consideration**
Identifying key competencies	➢ a primary competency dictionary and an aboriginal relations competency dictionary ➢ description on how to establish recruitment and target levels for competencies	➢ enhance guidance for identifying required competencies for specific positions
Developing effective BI questions	➢ a guide to choosing BI questions ➢ sample BI questions	➢ additional advice on when and how to use probing questions
Standardizing BI questions and evaluations	➢ standardized questions ➢ standardized rating scales for evaluation of competencies	➢ more detailed guidance on the use of the rating scales and the use of judgement to consider other contextual factors
Providing in-depth BI training for interviewers	➢ references to BI in optional online hiring courses	➢ training specific to the use of BI ➢ opportunities for interviewers to observe or practice BI skills

Key Risks within the BC Public Service Competency Framework

Risk #1 -Poorly Designed or Dated Competency Framework

The BC Public Service has minimized the risk of a poorly designed framework by acquiring the key components of a competency inventory and associated behaviourally anchored rating scales from the Hay Group, a reputable management consulting firm with expertise in this field. The leadership competencies and the aboriginal competency dictionary were more recently developed in-house and added to the framework; however, the primary dictionary and behaviourally anchored rating scales were adopted in 2002 and have not been updated in the interim.

Risk #2 – Over-reliance on Behavioural Competencies and BI

The BCPSA hiring guidelines and online courses recommend that hiring managers use multiple assessment tools, and describe various assessment options such as the use of a written test to assess knowledge. However, since 2009 the Office of the Merit Commissioner has observed through audits of appointments that a significant percentage of hiring processes use interviews as the sole method of assessing short-listed candidates, apart from the mandatory past work performance checks. Further, many of these interviews have relied on the evaluation of behavioural competencies without an assessment of other stated requirements such as job-related knowledge and technical skills.

Risk #3 - Lack of Understanding and Skill Necessary to Apply BI

This appears to be an area of vulnerability in the BC Public Service's established competency framework. Merit performance audit findings have identified a wide range of ways in which BI assessment tools and scoring methodologies are utilized, some of which are questionable. Further, some hiring managers have expressed discomfort in using this assessment methodology.

As noted previously, there is neither a requirement for interviewers to be trained in BI nor is there an appropriate mechanism to ensure hiring managers have a comprehensive understanding of BI and the skill and judgement required for its effective and fair use. The specialists and the hiring advisors within the BCPSA are available to advise hiring managers on BI; however, there is no requirement for these individuals to receive specific BI training. Further, the specialists have access to detailed reference material on the application of BI which is not currently available to hiring advisors or to the managers who have been delegated the responsibility for hiring.

In addition to gaps in training and accessible information on the application of BI, the BI information that is available is scattered throughout the BCPSA's hiring guides, tools and resources. This requires hiring managers to look through several different sources in order to gain an overall understanding of the BI process presenting a risk that managers will misunderstand or misapply the BI approach.

Risk #4 - Candidates' Familiarity with BI

There are several resources that address this risk within the BC Public Service competency framework. A step-by-step guide to planning and conducting interviews advises hiring managers of the benefits of providing information on competencies and preferably the interview questions to candidates prior to the interview. The MyHR website contains information on how to apply for competitions which is accessible to internal and external applicants. The information describes competencies and BI questions, as well as provides a link to the general definitions for each of the BC Public Service's behavioural competencies. There are also several videos on the interview process available including one of which demonstrates how to respond to BI questions. The information available to external applicants is more limited than that available to employee applicants, and the BCPSA cites copyright concerns as the reason for this restriction.

Table 2 – Key BI Risks within the BC Public Service Competency Framework		
Risk	**BC Public Service Competency Framework includes:**	**Areas for Consideration**
Poor design of or dated competency framework	➤ primary dictionary and associated behaviourally anchored rating scales designed by a reputable firm ➤ primary dictionary and behaviourally anchored rating scales remain in original form ➤ aboriginal relations and leadership components developed in-house	➤ review primary dictionary and behaviourally anchored rating scales to ensure currency
Over-reliance on behavioural competencies and BI	➤ description of the value of using a variety of assessment tools	➤ emphasize the importance of using BI in an appropriate context and balancing its use with other tools
Lack of understanding and skill necessary to apply BI	➤ centralized advisory services ➤ guidelines, tools and resources ➤ some BI components in online hiring courses	➤ ensure advisors have a consistent understanding of BI ➤ provide adequate training in BI for hiring managers ➤ provide consolidated and in-depth reference materials on BI
Candidates' familiarity with BI	➤ advice to hiring managers to consider providing interview questions in advance ➤ some competency information available for all applicants ➤ online video of a BI interview available to all applicants	➤ provide internal and external applicants with equal access to all information related to BI

Conclusion

This study found that there is a well-designed competency framework in place in the BC Public Service that includes a variety of resources to support hiring managers in using BI. It also identified areas for improvement which would strengthen the model, enhance its use, and instill confidence in managers and employees in the fairness of the tool.

Behavioural interviewing is a complicated assessment tool: effective and fair use of BI requires skilled interviewers who understand the nature of a competency-based approach and who can properly apply BI. As there is no dedicated BI training as part of the BC Public Service competency framework, interviewers may have difficulty developing the skill required to fully utilize the BI approach, while at the same time ensuring a consistent and fair assessment process. This difficulty is heightened by the lack of comprehensive information that is readily available to hiring managers in support of the effective application of BI. If the use of BI is to continue to be a predominant interview approach, it is important that managers who are held accountable for hiring processes are provided with the tools and training essential for the correct use of BI to ensure valid and reliable results.

In addition, other opportunities to improve the existing BC Public Service competency framework include reviewing the currency and relevancy of the primary competency dictionary and related behaviourally anchored rating scales, as well as sharing information about the BI process equally among all applicants, including external applicants. Further, it is evident that BI is not always the most effective tool for assessing all job requirements and therefore, other selection tools should be given consideration along with BI.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this special study, the Merit Commissioner makes the following recommendations related to the use of behavioural interviewing within the BC Public Service.

1. Ensure those providing advice related to behavioural interviewing, or utilizing the behavioural interviewing technique, have the necessary understanding and skills.
2. Provide comprehensive and easily accessible information for hiring managers on behavioural interviewing.
3. Ensure there is not an over-reliance on behavioural interviewing when other assessment tools may be more appropriate to assess some job requirements.
4. Review the competency framework to ensure currency.
5. Provide equal access to behavioural interviewing information for all applicants, including external applicants.

Office of the Merit Commissioner
May 2014

Appendix A

Reference List

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Appendix B

Response from the Head, BC Public Service Agency

April 11, 2014   CLIFF #5505

Ms. Fiona Spencer
Merit Commissioner
Office of the Merit Commissioner
5th floor – 947 Fort Street
Victoria, BC V8W 2C4

Dear Ms. Spencer:

I appreciate the opportunity to respond to your 2014 Special Study – Behavioural Interviewing Report which outlines aspects of the behavioural interviewing approach, history, competencies, application key elements and risks.

I am pleased the Report concludes there is a well-designed competency framework in place in the BC Public Service and a variety of resources available to support hiring managers. Behavioural interviewing has been used successfully in the BC Public Service and when used together with other assessment techniques, such as role plays, situational questions and/or simulations has resulted in appointments of individuals who are well qualified and able to do the jobs to which they are appointed.

As noted in the Report, the BC Public Service Agency is responsible for competency frameworks and providing advice and support to hiring managers. The BC Public Service has been using competency-based or behavioural interviewing since 2002 and since 2008 we have been reviewing the competency framework. Our reviews have involved a committee of Assistant Deputy Ministers resulting in the addition of leadership competencies including core competencies for strategic leadership positions. Aboriginal competencies have also been added.

There are a number of initiatives relating to behavioural interviewing and hiring in general that have been undertaken by staff of the BC Public Service Agency with more initiatives planned over the course of this fiscal year. I have taken a direct approach in communicating with employees and supervisors on merit-based hiring issues through e-mails and an article on @Work and will continue to produce a series of communications over the next few months. You noted in the Report that a series of four on-line training modules have been developed to provide hiring training to hiring managers. These courses were developed to provide an overview to hiring managers and over the next year, additional training and/or material will be developed focussing on assessment processes. More comprehensive material has been added to the training framework for hiring staff, allowing them to provide more fulsome advice related to behavioural interviewing.

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I expect efforts already undertaken as well as those that will be undertaken this year will address areas you have identified in the Report for our consideration. There are improvements that can continue to be made in assessment processes including behavioural interviewing and I am committed to ensuring improvements are made. I appreciate the information provided in your Report as it assists us in our commitment to improve merit-based hiring in the public service.

Yours truly,

Lynda Tarras
Deputy Minister