

PERCEPTION OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT OF JOB INTERVIEWS



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SUMMARY

The purpose of this pilot study was to examine the attitudes of candidates toward the environmental context of job interviews, and to identify the most important environmental factors that have and those that does not have an impact on the job interview participants. A job interview is a stressful situation in one's life that requires full concentration and strong focusing during which environmental factors can have an impact on the whole performance. Candidates generally prefer nice and placid conditions with a pleasant environment but are generally not aware of how much impact the environmental perception actually has on their performance. The author argues that environmental perception is not conscious by all means and the candidates minimize its effect on these situations. Using a randomly selected sample from a multinational company in Budapest, Hungary, a questionnaire was used to study the problem. Results show that perception of the environmental factors was present among the respondents but its effects were rated as minimal.

Keywords: Job interview, environmental factors, environmental psychological context

BACKGROUND

A job interview is often considered as one of the most stressful situations in one's life. Feeling anxiety is anyway a pervasive problem in today's stressful and fast-paced work environment (Yuen, 1998), and this pertains to job interview situations as well. A personal interview is still the most common way of the employers to come to a decision whether to offer a job to the applicant or not. Due to the fact that an employment interview is a highly evaluative situation (Heimberg, Keller &

Peca-Baker, 1986), it is not surprising that anxiety and stress is an inherent part of the interview and the whole interviewing process.

The effects of stress have been examined by many researchers but only a few studies have focused on the attitudes of applicants to environmental factors during job interviews. The aim of identifying such attitudes is to find out the most important environmental factors that have an impact on the individual as well as those that are considered as not important by the job interview participants. Candidates' stress may have serious implications,

such as low job interview score in spite of the fact that the candidate may prove to be superior on-the-job performance if hired (McCarthy & Goffin, 2004). As the applicants' main focus is on their own maximum performance in order to obtain a positive outcome (i.e. hiring), environmental surrounding and environmental factors cannot be appreciated by them as if it were in an everyday life situation. However, environment and its factors by all means influence the candidate's behavior, including verbal and non-verbal communication as well as reactions and, as a result, the overall performance.

Environmental factors such as noise, air quality, light, toxic exposures, temperature, humidity and aesthetics (Applebaum et al., 2010) have been examined in a study that measured nurses' stress level in a healing environment. The research concluded that there is a massive evidence for the statement that the physical environment affects job performance and several further factors (i.e. communication, stress level, behaviors, etc). The study lists also odor and color as additional environmental factors that may have an impact on the individuals.

Environmental psychologists emphasize understanding how individuals respond to complex everyday scenes (Ittelson, 1978). Despite of the fact that an interview may not be considered as an everyday scene or situation, it may be worth to study what is the person's (i.e. candidate's) level of awareness in these situations. Environmental perception varies with personal and cultural differences, people often interpret the same scene differently (Gifford, 2007). This, of course, pertains to job interviews as well.

Positive office environment tend to promote better performance of the applicant by enabling seamless communication with the

interviewer, and as a result, demonstrating competences and skills in a clear way. Office characteristics, such as environment generally, nice view, size, temperature and lighting of the room, plants etc. are factors that are being perceived by the candidate consciously or unconsciously.

Although the interview is being considered a situation where stress and anxiety in most cases appear, little research can be found in the related context, especially examining interview performance; and those are of small sample sizes (Ayres & Crosby, 1995; Ayres et al., 1998; Delery & Kacmar, 1998). Results of former studies are not consistent in measuring the relationship between feelings of anxiety and interview performance (Keenan, 1978; Ayres & Crosby, 1995) which derives from the fact that no appropriate anxiety assessment tool exists.

To overcome the aforementioned difficulty, research by McCarthy & Goffin (2004) explored a theoretical basis for the construct of job interview anxiety, called the Measure of Anxiety in Selection Interviews (MASI). This multidimensional measure provides an assessment of five distinct interview anxiety dimensions, namely: communication, appearance, social, performance and behavioral. One of the main findings was that all of the above five MASI dimensions showed negative correlations with the interview performance. In addition, research results demonstrated that applicants with low level of social anxiety are perceived as more socially positive (Hawkins & Steward, 1991) and more intelligent (Richmond, Beatty & Dyba, 1985). Also, the tool of MASI proved to be more predictive as compared to the non-contextualized general anxiety scales, since it predicted the interview performance with a higher success rate.

Findings suggested that techniques that reduce anxiety can increase the comfort level of the applicant and also the interview performance which may yield a benefit to the organizations, too.

Results of another research (Cook, Vance & Spector, 2000) showed that applicants with higher rate of anxiety were less likely to be offered a second interview chance as compared to those with less anxiety level. A main finding of this study was that individuals with a higher anxiety rate are less able to prove their maximum potential and may present themselves in a less favorable way.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

In the study presented here I have tried to identify the role of the aforementioned environmental factors on the average applicant as well as to study one's attitude, feelings, impression and environmental awareness on employment interview. One of the following four hypotheses regards the individual's general attitude to the interview, and three refer to the impact of the importance of environment.

HYPOTHESES

- To identify the respondents' general attitude toward a job interview:
 - Hypothesis 1.
The average candidate has a negative or less positive attitude toward the interviews in general.
- To map the attitudes of candidates toward environmental factors on job interviews:

- Hypothesis 2/A.

The average candidate regards room environment (e.g. size, temperature and lighting) important.

- Hypothesis 2/B.

The average candidate has the chance to look around in the building and/or room but finds that these factors influence his/her performance during the job interview to a little extent.

- To find the most important environmental factors that may have an impact on job interview participants:

- Hypothesis 3.

Of the room environment, the average candidate considers the temperature, the lighting and the size of the room as the most important factors during the job interview.

- To identify the environmental factors that are considered as not important by the job interview participants:

- Hypothesis 4.

The average candidate has the opinion that view does not play an important role during the job interviewing process.

METHODS

Respondent Profile

The study was carried out in the offices of a global information technology service provider company located in Budapest, Hungary. The company solves complex IT challenges and offers technological solutions to many of the world's largest companies and government organizations. The employees sampled here worked in different departments of the central premise of the organization in various roles, e.g. employees without

subordinates, leaders with subordinates and top managers. The profile of the respondents is presented in *Table 1*.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire containing 24 questions was developed by the author based on the objectives of the study. The questionnaire contained 2 major sections apart from the questions related to demographical variables.

Section 1 contained questions concerning to the subject's relation to job interviews in general and measured the experienced stress level on job interviews.

Section 2 measured the various features of the physical environment of the job interview venue and the perception of the environment during the job interview process.

This paper is limited to and focuses on the results exclusively on *Section 2* that measures the environmental factors, no data are presented from *Section 1* here. Twelve questions associated with environmental factors were selected from the whole questionnaire to be presented here.

Procedure and Tools adopted

A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed via an online website to employees working in different departments of the organization, of which 112 were returned, comprising a response rate of 75%. No responses were eliminated due to missing data which was due to the fact that there was no option to skip a question without indicating at least one answer. The front cover page of the questionnaire provided descriptive information about the purposes and aims of the study, and an assurance of confidentiality.

Participation in the survey was voluntary and had not been compensated for by any means.

The study commenced with 4 questions finding out of the subject's relation to job interviews in general. The first pertained to the number of job interviews the respondent had attended so far, the second referred to the subject's impressions related to job interviews so far, the third referred to the number of interviewers in general based on the subject's experience so far, and the fourth asked the general length of the job interviews the respondent had experienced so far.

RESULTS

First, demographic and personal data were collected about the participants. The profile of the respondents is presented in *Table 1*.

Gender and Age

55.4% of the respondents were female ($n = 62$) and 44.6% were male ($n = 50$) which is close to a rough even split between females and males.

Age of the participants ranged from 23 to 54, with a mean age of 33 years ($SD: 6.17$).

Remarkable split can be seen between the different age groups as all together 72 subjects (64.2%) were within 26-35 that represents more than half of the total sample. The size of other age groups vary between 0.9 and 14.3%.

Educational Qualifications

In terms of educational qualifications, most of the respondents were college or university BA graduates, followed by college or university MA degree holders. Remarkable is the fact that the majority of respondents (86.6%, $n = 97$) hold BA or MA degree. This is because each position available at the company is white collar, computer-based

work for which university or college degree is highly appreciated though is required only in case of non-customer service positions.

Place of Residence

Since the head office of the company is located in the Capital, most of the subjects indicated their official place of residence in the capital (62.5%). The residents originating from county towns, cities or villages vary from 3.6% – 16.1% though a considerable number of these employees also live in the

capital on weekdays (this rate was not measured in this study.)

Current Position

The employees sampled varied according to the position they held: the majority of the respondents were employees/associates without subordinates, as shown in *Table 1*.

Tables of summary related to average and standard deviation for gender, age and educational qualification (data only for significant differences) as well as correlations are also shown.

Table 1. Profile of the respondents

Variable	Levels	n	Percentage %
Gender	Male	50	44.6
	Female	62	55.4
Age	20-25 years	10	9
	26-30 years	34	30.3
	31-35 years	38	33.9
	36-40 years	16	14.3
	41-45 years	9	8
	46-50 years	4	3.6
	51+	1	0.9
Educational qualifications	High school final exam	7	6.3
	High school final exam with state vocational certificate	6	5.4
	College/University BA degree	50	44.6
	College/University MA degree	47	42
	PhD, DLA degree	2	1.7
Place of residence	Capital	70	62.5
	County capital city	11	9.8
	County town	18	16.1
	Township, village	9	8
	Foreign country	4	3.6
Current position	Employee/Associate	77	68.7
	Leader of middle level	17	15.2
	Other	3	2.7
	Top manager/leader	2	1.8

According to gender	Educational qualifications	Generally how many persons were present from the employer's side on the job interviews you have attended so far?	How important do you consider the below listed items on a job interview? Important is an item which can influence the result of the interview.	Nice view	Size of the room	Think about the last job interview you have attended. Arriving to the venue did you have the chance to look around the building or room you have been escorted to?	Room environment generally	Questions related not directly to environmental factors
Average \pm SD, Female	4.08 \pm 0.92	2.34 \pm 0.82	3.28 \pm 0.99	4.04 \pm 0.97	3.44 \pm 1.25	1.78 \pm 1.07	3.5 \pm 0.81	2.35 \pm 0.69
Average \pm SD, Male	4.44 \pm 0.76	1.97 \pm 0.70	2.89 \pm 0.94	3.53 \pm 1.17	2.95 \pm 1.08	2.21 \pm 1.10	3.02 \pm 0.83	2.48 \pm 0.80
t-test	p<0.03	p<0.01	p<0.03	p<0.02	p<0.03	p<0.04	p<0.01	p<0.39
According to age	Age	Educational qualifications	How many job interviews have you attended as an applicant so far?	Generally do you have positive or negative impressions related to job interviews you have attended so far?	Generally how many persons were present from the employer's side on the job interviews you have attended so far?	Room environment generally	Questions related not directly to environmental factors	
Average \pm SD, middle age *	38.08 \pm 5.02	4.55 \pm 0.64	3.55 \pm 1.12	2.43 \pm 0.81	1.98 \pm 0.55	3.34 \pm 0.89	2.44 \pm 0.77	
Average \pm SD, young **	28.39 \pm 2.66	4.05 \pm 0.94	2.84 \pm 1.10	2.08 \pm 0.69	2.26 \pm 0.91	3.15 \pm 0.81	2.4 \pm 0.74	
t-test	p<0.01	p<0.01	p<0.01	p<0.01	p<0.03	p<0.14	p<0.76	
According to educational qualification				Age	Current Position			
Average \pm SD, middle age*				35.09 \pm 6.02	2.25 \pm 0.56			
Average \pm SD, young**				31.02 \pm 5.82	1.97 \pm 0.59			
t-test				p<0.01	p<0.01			

Table 2. Average and Standard Deviation for gender, age and educational qualification for data only show significant differences

* age > 32 years ** age < 32 years

Table 3. Items in terms of the subject's relation to job interviews in general

Question	Levels	n	Percentage %
How many job interviews have you attended as an applicant so far?	0-2	3	2.7
	3-5	35	31.3
	6-10	37	33.0
	11-15	16	14.3
	15+	20	17.9
	I don't know / I don't remember	1	0.9
Generally do you have positive or negative impressions related to job interviews you have attended so far?	Very positive	13	11.6
	Less positive	68	60.7
	Neutral	22	19.6
	Rather negative	9	8.0
	Very negative	0	0.0
Generally how many persons were present from the employer's side on the job interviews you have attended so far?	1	17	15.2
	2	70	62.5
	3	20	17.9
	4	4	3.6
	5	0	0.0
	5+	1	0.9
Generally how long did the job interviews take that you have attended?	30 minutes or less	21	18.8
	1 hour	77	68.8
	1,5 hour	8	7.1
	2 hours	2	1.8
	More than 2 hours	4	3.6

The next 4 questions asked about the subject's relation to job interviews in general. The questions and results are presented in *Table 3*.

From *Table 3* it can be seen that most of the respondents have participated in 6-10 ($n = 37, 33\%$) or 3-5 ($n = 35, 31.3\%$) interviews, which is due to the fact that most of them were in the age range of 31-35 ($n = 38, 33.9\%$) consequently being experienced in job search and job interviews. Remarkable is the fact that the third largest group of 20 individuals (17.9%) have participated in 15 or more job interviews so far.

Most of the respondents have gained positive impressions ('less positive') about job interviews ($n = 68, 60.7\%$). As for the

gender split, the number of men and women respondents were close to equal in each of the options, the maximum difference could be detected for the 'rather positive' option (women: $n = 38$, men: $n = 30$). No significant difference was seen regarding educational split either.

The remaining two questions yield in essence additional information. 62.5% of the respondents ($n = 70$) chose the option of 'two' for the question about to the number of persons present on the job interview of the employer's side.

The last question in this section asked about the length of the job interviews the participants experienced: 77 individuals (68.8%) marked the 1-hour-long interview

Table 4. Environmental perception related questions.

How important do you consider the below listed items on a job interview? Important is meant an item which may influence the result of the interview.

Items	Levels	n	Percentage %
Room environment generally	Very important	1	0.9
	Less important	37	33.0
	Neutral	38	33.9
	Not very important	26	23.2
	Not important at all	10	8.9
Nice view	Very important	3	2.7
	Less important	9	8.0
	Neutral	40	35.7
	Not very important	20	17.9
	Not important at all	40	35.7
Temperature and lighting of the room	Very important	14	12.5
	Less important	49	43.8
	Neutral	25	22.3
	Not very important	19	17.0
	Not important at all	5	4.5
Size of the room	Very important	6	5.4
	Less important	31	27.7
	Neutral	33	29.5
	Not very important	22	19.6
	Not important at all	20	17.9

time. All the other options gained a much lower rate regarding this question.

Analysis of the environmental perception is shown in *Table 4*.

Room environment in general

Based on these results it was found that participants on the job interview regarded room environment either less important (one third of the population) or neutral (roughly another one third of the population) which indicates the fact that this item is not being regarded really essential in terms of successful performance on the interview. In other words, it can be stated that maximum one third of the respondents considers this factor as important.

The subjects are being advised by various career consulting experts to bring out the best of themselves in terms of their competencies on job interviews which means less focus on the impacts of the environment itself that may, however, influence the behavior and outcome evidently.

Nice view from the window

It was found that 80 persons (71.4%) considered nice view neutral or not important on a venue of a job interview. An interview might mean a highly stressful situation in one's life therefore one is forced to maximize his/her potential as much as he/she can in order to get the job offered which blurs the importance of the nice view.

Table 5. Environmental perception related questions

Think about the last job interview you have attended. Arriving to the venue, had you have the chance to look around the building or room you have been escorted to?		
Levels	n	Percentage %
Yes	55	49.1
No	12	10.7
Partially	33	29.5
I don't remember / It was not important for me	12	10.7
Think about the last job interview you have attended. Had you have the chance to observe the environmental factors and circumstances DURING the interview? Please only tick 'Yes' in case you were able to recall at least two out of these factors afterwards:		
- Furniture of the room,		
- Number of tables and chairs,		
- Other items in the room,		
- Temperature and lighting conditions,		
- View.		
Levels	n	Percentage %
Yes	68	60.7
No	6	5.4
Partially	24	21.4
It was not important / It was not conscious	14	12.5
Think about the last job interview you have attended as a candidate. How much in your opinion was your performance influenced by the environmental factors?		
Levels	n	Percentage %
It was influenced extremely much	3	2.7
It was influenced very much	13	11.6
It was influenced less	41	36.6
It was influenced extremely little	47	42
I don't know / I don't remember	8	7.1

Temperature and lighting of the room

As the result shows, many individuals regarded the room temperature and lighting as important of the items measured, these two features are perceived by the respondents immediately when entering a venue (building or office room), this is why they are considered as essential.

Size

Room size is being considered in most cases as neutral (29.5%) and to a lesser extent as

less important (27.7%). option 'very important' to this question which is a remarkable low number at this point. It seems that the first impressions are what count, as soon as the interview starts, participants focus only on the communication and on nothing else. Environmental related questions perceived prior and during the job interview and the impact of the environmental factors in general are shown in Table 5.

Table 5 that contained questions about how the respondents perceived environmental

Table 6. Correlation related to different variables

age / influence on the outcome	0.009
educational qualification / influence on the outcome	0.042
how many job interviews participated / positive or negative experience	0.262
how many interviewers were present /positive or negative experience	-0.260
how long the interview took / positive or negative experience	-0.221
Positive or negative experience / influence on the outcome	-0.035
age / positive or negative experience	0.163
educational qualification / positive or negative experience	0.048
age / environmental factors generally	0.081
educational qualification / environmental factors generally	0.084
age / chance to look around	0.016

factors prior and during the interview and how much impact it had on their performance. Almost half of the individuals ($n = 55$, 49.1%) confirmed having a chance to look around the building or room they have been escorted to, whereas 33 persons (29.5%) chose 'partially'.

The second question pertained to the observation of environmental factors but during the interview. The persons were instructed to mark 'yes' in case they were able to recall at least two of the factors listed (furniture of the room, number of tables and chairs, other items in the room, temperature and lighting conditions, view). 68 persons (60.7%) chose the option 'yes' (meaning they had the chance to observe the environment), followed by 24 respondents (21.4%) marking 'partially', 14 respondents (12.5%) marking 'it was not important/it was not conscious' and 6 persons (5.4%) marking 'no'. The rate of the 'yes' options with more than 60% exceeds the previous question's relevant result that is remarkable in terms of the fact that respondents mostly consider themselves to be able to look around prior to the interview and to make observations during the interview, though they are in a stressful life situation that requires full attention and focus.

In contrast, environmental factors influence respondents' performance to an extremely small extent on the interviews, despite the fact, however, that they are able to make observations, as the next question shows. 47 individuals (42%) marked this option altogether and 41 respondents (36.6%) marked a small rate.

Interestingly, more men chose the option 'it was influenced extremely little' as compared to women ($n = 27$ for men and 20 for women), whereas the option 'it was influenced very much' and 'it was influenced a little' was chosen mostly by women. There was no major difference detected in the replies of those having BA or MA degree.

As for the average respondent's age, the oldest respondents (35.2) selected the response 'it was influenced very much', whereas much younger were those participants (average age was 24) who chose the opinion 'the influence was extremely high'.

Only a few substantive correlation has been found, as Table 6 shows. Positive or negative experience related to job interviews correlates negatively with the number of interviewers (-0.260) as well as with the length of the interview (-0.221); however positive correlation has been found with the number

of interview participated previously (0.262) and with age (0.163). These correlations are not considered to be salient but are worth studying in further researches.

Remarkable is the fact that the direct effect of the environment on the perceived performance does not correlate with age, educational qualifications, positive or negative experience on previous interviews, the number and length of the interviews and the number of interviewers.

DISCUSSION

Hypothesis 1 ('The average candidate has negative or less positive impression pertained to the interviews in general') has not been proven based on the results of this study.

Table 3 reveals that an average candidate had participated in several job interviews and has had positive impressions about the interviews in general. The applicants most frequently face two interviewers from the employer's side, and the interviews usually take one hour. The fact needs to be stressed at this point, that stress interview was not mentioned in the list which might have influenced and tintured the final result.

Hypothesis 2/A and 2/B ('The average candidate regards room environment, e.g. size, temperature and lighting important, has the chance to look around in the building and/or room but finds that these factors influence his/her performance during the job interview to a small extent'); and *Hypothesis 3* ('Of the room environment, the average candidate considers the temperature, the lighting and the size of the room as the most important factors during the job interview. ') was not completely proven. From *Table 4* it can be seen that an average candidate

considers the room environment either neutral or less important, and does not feel that the view is important at all. On the other hand, he/she finds room temperature and lighting less important and size of the room neutral or less important.

Table 5 shows that an average candidate has the chance to look around in the building or in the office after arriving to the venue, is able to observe the environment and circumstances during the interview, but – at the same time - has the opinion that these factors had influenced the performance extremely little.

The results of the present study show that despite of the various interview types and circumstances, venues and offered positions, the majority of the candidates do not have negative impressions about the interviews. This may be a positive feedback for employers, interviewers and persons involved in the recruitment process as they seem to be able to create good conditions not being offensive or too tough for the applicants. A job interview does not mean a situation or conversation between two equal partners since the applicant is the one who needs to convince the employer about his/her competencies and skills which are needed for the job in question.

Questions related to environmental perception show that applicants arriving to a job interview are active in environmental perceptions; moreover feel that some of the factors are important in a situation like that. On the other hand, they are convinced that these factors do not influence their performance too much. This fact and result are not unexpected since most of them are not aware of the environmental conditions. Environmental psychologists and the employers themselves are in charge of creating

a positive office environment that can help the candidates to demonstrate his/her skills and competencies to a maximum extent.

Limitations

The current study had been conducted only in one multinational organization dealing with IT services. The sample of respondents had been randomly selected from those with previous participation in at least one job interview. As a result, a variety of job interviews – e.g. stress interview, assessment center, committee interview, etc. – could not have been sampled. The questions of the survey addressing the various environmental factors were quite general and the option of ‘neutral’ answer was not explained. The survey reflected the last job interview the respondent participated in, therefore the distortion of the

individuals’ memory could not be measured. Additionally, the present study focused exclusively on the environmental impacts, therefore no further stress-generating factors were examined which might have influenced the applicants’ feelings or attitudes. In addition, not even the potential stressful character of the environmental factors had been directly assessed, thus we only may infer which might have been (and which not) the really stressful features. A more comprehensive survey needs to be adapted in future research.

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ÖSSZEFOGLALÓ

KÖRNYEZETI TÉNYEZŐK PERCEPCIÓJA AZ ÁLLÁSINTERJÚN

A tanulmány célja egyrészt az állásinterjú részt vevő jelöltek környezeti kontextussal összefüggő attitűdjének vizsgálata, másrészt azon legfontosabb környezeti tényezők azonosítása, amelyek erős vagy gyenge hatást gyakorolnak a részt vevő személyre. Az állásinterjú a vizsgált személy életében teljes koncentrációt és figyelmet megkívánó stresszhelyzetnek tekinthető, amely során a környezeti faktorok befolyásolják az összteljesítményt. Az állásinterjú részt vevő jelöltekről általában elmondható, hogy a tetszetős, nyugodt körülményeket és az esztétikus környezetet preferálják, ellenben nincsenek tudatában a környezeti észlelés teljesítményt befolyásoló hatásának. Jelen tanulmány szerzője szerint a környezeti észlelés nem tudatosul minden esetben, a személyek ennek hatásait minimálisnak tekintik. A kérdés vizsgálata kérdőíves kutatással történt egy budapesti multinacionális vállalat véletlenszerűen kiválasztott mintáján. A kapott eredmények alapján a környezeti faktorok percepciója megfigyelhető volt a megkérdezett személyek esetében, ám azok hatásait minimálisra értékelték.

Kulcsszavak: állásinterjú, környezeti tényezők, környezeti pszichológiai kontextus

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