A Genre-Based Analysis of Job Interview Presentations

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Abstract

Job interview presentations represent excellent opportunities for employment seeking candidates to promote for themselves and show how they meet the requirements of the advertised vacancy. This brief paper presents a schematic structure, based on observations of actual job interview presentations. It delineates information on how these presentations unfold, the issues covered and the responses given.

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Introduction

In today's world, jobs have become very competitive. An unlimited number of individuals may apply for an announced vacancy. Yet, only one person may be required to fill in the advertized vacancy. This vacancy could be a position for a company manager, a head of department, a dean for a college, or a chancellor for a university. The choice of the most suitable candidate for a position will, of course, very much depend on the match between the candidate' qualifications and the requirements for the post. Surveying the literature on job presentations and how they unfold, the researcher encountered some anecdote tips and general information given by some websites as to how to give a successful presentation for a job interview. These are mainly based on the writers' experiences and personal views of what these presentations should be like. The researcher also found some research on enhancing students' academic presentation skills (Syntnikova, 2012), conference presentations (Carter-Thomas and Rowley-Jolivet, 2003) and an analysis of interactions between job candidates and interviewers (Lin, Tan, Taib, and Ling, 2012), which are different in nature and content from open presentations delivered for the purpose of filling a high ranking vacant position. Although, according to Bye, Sandal, Vijver, Sam, Çakar, and Frank, (2011, p. 161), the employment interview is a much researched topic in the field of applied psychology and a common tool for evaluating job applicants in many countries," yet, no information is found on the structure of open job interviews; open to all stakeholders from the institution(s) the candidate is applying for work with.

The Context

Job interview presentations can vary a great deal in terms of form, structure, and content, but their communicative ends are the same. For example, a fresh university graduate's job presentation (i.e., interview) may only be attended and managed by one person or a handful of persons. Such interviews will not require the same skills expected from a candidate applying for the position of head of department, dean of college or chancellor of a university. In the latter cases, the vacancy requires extensive experience, demonstration of leadership skills, full knowledge of institution's state-of-the-art, etc. One function of such presentations is to offer vital feedback and support to top decision makers in the process of selecting the most viable and suitable candidate for the vacant position. Put differently, it is upon the recommendations made by the audience that a specific candidate is nominated for the job. This audience comprises employees from all levels in the institution: some may be clerical staff and others may be academics from all disciplines. This variety serves different purposes: some assess the candidate's research agenda, quality and relevance of previous service and experience, soundness of candidate's arguments and conclusions.

Rationale for the Study

This study, which follows a grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1992), was conducted to probe into job interview presentations with the viewpoint of making available detailed information and descriptions of their rhetorical structure, how they unfold and their content. The outcome of the study is expected to benefit novice and inexperienced high ranking job candidates through giving them detailed guidelines about how to prepare for such presentations, what to cover in them, what questions to expect from the audience and how to respond and engage with these questions. In other words, it covers pre-presentation tasks, during presentation and post presentation activities.

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Method
The researcher attended 10 presentations delivered by international shortlisted candidates applying for three key positions with a private university operating in the United Arab Emirates: 4 applying for the position of department head, 3 applying for a dean's position and 3 for a university chancellor position. The researcher took notes of the details of all the presentations. These notes covered the way the candidate was introduced, how s/he started the talk, the powerpoint support slides used (if any), the issues the presentation touched on, how these were related to position requirements and supported by evidence, how the talk ended, and what issues were focused on during the open question session at the end of the presentation.

Results

Structure of Presentations: How do presentations unfold?
- Introducing the candidate & giving him/her the floor
- Candidate capitalizes on pertinent experiences to the vacancy (Knowledge Transfer (KT))
- Filling the gap (Knowledge Application (KP))

- Questions & answers (Checks of KP)

Before embarking on elaborating what is involved in these moves, it is in order to cover the pre-presentation stages. These include: 1) Knowledge Acquisition (KA), 2) Knowledge Creation (KC) and 3) Knowledge Documentation (KD). All job applicants not only should exhibit full knowledge of the institution they are applying for, but should also be able to authenticate this knowledge (KD) and utilize it to inform their presentations (KC). Therefore, knowledge acquisition (KA) on the institution encompasses all activities that focus on acquiring knowledge from external and internal sources. Candidates need to search the institution and get to know its history, strengths and areas for improvement. Searching institutions' websites may not yield all information. Consequently, candidates may have to visit staff bios, the institutions' annual reports and any information they can gather about the institutions' projects or newspapers. This will help candidates in the knowledge transfer (KT) and knowledge application stages during the presentation. The actual presentation unfolds in the following moves:

- **Introducing the candidate & giving him/her the floor**

One or two weeks before the date set for the actual interview presentation, a soft copy of the candidate's CV is normally emailed to all the institutions' employees. On the presentation day, the candidate is introduced by a high ranking official from the institution to the audience and is then given the floor. Three out of the 10 candidates used PowerPoint slides. This could be termed the knowledge transfer (KT) activity that enables the exchange of knowledge between the presenter and representatives of the institution's units at the different organizational levels.

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The slides contained bullet point items covering the following:

- Candidate welcomes audience and introduces him/herself
- Survey of vacancy related administrative positions taken to-date
  - ➢ These cover:
    - o Research & other academic issues
    - o Leadership, personal skills and practical examples

These are guided by and aligned to the information gathered on the institution. This phase focuses on institutions' strengths and indicates areas for improvement (i.e., filling a gap).

- **Filling the gap**

This move focuses on relating candidate's experiences to requirements of vacancy and elaborating on future vision for the institution. This move is similar to Swales' (1990, p. 140) move of "establishing a niche", found in academic research papers. In this move, the speaker demonstrates to the audience his/her full knowledge of institution's strengths and particular area for improvements. In addition, s/he also underscores steps for undertaking the proposed improvements and their significance and benefits of these changes to the institution. This second move, the significance of the changes, is similar to Swales' (1990) move labeled "*occupying the niche*". In this move, the speaker delineates exactly what s/he wants to accomplish for the

institution and how. Such detailed delineations help create a better impression on audience and assure them that the candidate is worthy of their time, attention and discussions.

- **Qs & As Session**

The questions and answers phase addresses how the candidate will utilize the available knowledge in order to improve the institution's performance (i.e., Knowledge application (KP))**.** The Q. and A. session is enriched with various questions about different issues. It is steered and directed by the type of questions and comments the audiences make. In this phase of the presentation, the audiences ask questions pertinent to the institution administration and future planning. Some of these are focused on ways for increasing students' intake, outreach policies, offering new academic programmes, research and employees' benefits. The big majority of these questions require extensive and comprehensive knowledge of the institution's history. Giving broad general answers to such questions will not satisfy an audience who is aware of the institution's details. A portion of the audience also focus their questions on issues and areas related to their specific discipline(s). For example, in the case of a university chancellor, they ask how the candidate views their discipline; especially if they know from the candidate's CV that s/he is from outside their field. Therefore, candidates need to demonstrate awareness, knowledge and sensitivity towards the different academic disciplines in the institution. It is relevant here to cite the example of a candidate whose academic discipline was mathematics. He was asked about his views on the Performing Arts Department in the institution. He was very skilful in responding to this far reaching question when he said:

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"I have a strong interest in performing arts. I go to the theatre, I love music, etc. Furthermore, he masterfully utilized this question to give a hint on his family by giving the following relevant digression:

"I am married to a music department graduate and all my family members have a strong interest in performing arts. My children perform in their schools."

He also digressed to add that music introduced him to his wife because he happened to know her through a music course that they were registered in. This created a light atmosphere during the session and gave the members of the audience a reason to have a good laugh.

Future planning skills are also the focus of many questions. Therefore, candidates for vacancies should know where the institution they are applying for stands and what needs to be done to take it forward. Such skills could be covered by questions such as the following:

- What academic disciplines do you think the university need to offer to attract more students?

Also, various questions cover issues relevant to academic accreditation, a big issue for all academic institutions. The candidates' careful and well-thought responses will of course sway members of the audience in his/her side or turn them against his/her appointment.

Conclusion

Following the above steps will, hopefully, enable prospective job seekers to take control over the presentation (see Daniel, 2014, for more tips) and secure the position. This preliminary analysis is based on a small size sample of presentations for academic administrative positions at a private university in the United Arab Emirates. Future research may examine a larger sample to verify the findings of this research.

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