Interviewing pitfalls
How novices can avoid obstacles

What's the most important part of a fraud examiner's toolkit? Interviewing. Higher-education fraud examination students can learn about interviewing from textbooks. But before they begin to practice this craft, they need to know some common pitfalls so they can increase their chances of successfully achieving their interviewing objectives.

I’ll discuss some of the more common snares I’ve observed in practice (along with antidotes):

• Failure to plan.
• Confirmation bias.
• Settling into the interviewing comfort zone.
• Rapidly diminishing capability to pay attention.
• Personalizing the interview.

Finally, I provide some extra advice for budding fraud fighters in the Millennial Generation (and the upcoming Generation Z).

Failure to plan
Without a doubt, this is the primary error interviewers make. It seems that the more experience an interviewer has, the less he or she prepares. Whether because of busyness or overconfidence, this pitfall spells disaster. Not only does efficiency suffer because the interviewer might have to schedule another interview, but effectiveness suffers because the interviewer might never discover needed information. Fraudsters often take time before interviews to prepare answers to anticipated questions. When I debriefed career criminals on their tactics, thoughts and behaviors about interviews, they would typically respond, "I had my routines that I was going to run down on them" and "I had my story made up."

The antidote
The interviewer must consider the interviewee's role in the fraud and relationship to the fraudster (if that person isn’t the fraudster), available information, desired outcomes from the interview and primary interview strategy plus alternate, viable strategies. The success or failure of the interview is determined prior to the time the interviewer walks into the room. As I’ve often said, "Either you have your own plan or you are part of someone else's plan." You — not the interviewee — has to control the interview.

Confirmation bias
An interviewer whose mind is made up before an interview spells danger. Confirmation bias (also known as confirmatory bias or myside bias) greatly decreases the likelihood that an interviewer dismisses, ignores or filters any contradictory information during an interview, whether the interviewee expresses it verbally or non-verbally. Thus, interviewers might not even be aware that they’re missing important information that can increase the examination’s effectiveness.

The antidote
It’s imperative that the interviewer wants to maintain an open mind, which isn’t so much a skill set as an attitude. The effective interviewer gives the interviewee a chance by looking at all the data, listening to others and theorizing a hypothesis without precluding anything. Also, if the interviewer maintains an open mind, the interviewee will perceive it and be more cooperative.

Before many of my past interviews, colleagues would tell me that they believed the interviewees were guilty as sin. However, we later discovered they actually were innocent. If I hadn't been aware that my colleagues could have caused me to have confirmation bias, I might have dismissed contradictory interviewee behaviors during interviews as minor aberrations.
Settling into the interviewing comfort zone
If we repeat familiar patterns of behavior, we create routines. Our routines become desirable because they define our comfort zones. Interviewers might have only one or two interviewing approaches. Unfortunately, these one-size-fits-all routines don’t always work. Interviewers’ comfort zones might serve them well until they face challenging interviews, which require different approaches that fall outside their comfort zones.

The limited interviewer may then experience diminishing results, and a supervisor motivates the interviewer to improve. Or, ideally, the interviewer recognizes that he or she can learn so much more about human behavior and will acquire new skills that will enhance the interview process.

The antidote
Be proactive. Don’t wait until something (or someone) forces you to change. Your only limit is yourself. If you’re willing to keep learning, practicing and improving, your interviews will yield effective and efficient evidence. On the other hand, if you rest in your comfort zone and think you’re good enough, victims won’t find justice and innocent people will be wrongly accused.

Rapidly diminishing capability to pay attention
The attention span of the average adult is believed to have fallen from 12 minutes in 1998 to five minutes in 2008, according to “Stress of modern life cuts attention spans to five minutes,” by Matthew Moore in the Nov. 26, 2008, issue of The Telegraph (http://tinyurl.com/8a43cw3). (Undoubtedly, attention spans have shortened even more in the ensuing six years.)

If interviewees’ attentive capacities are just five minutes, or less, then after that point interviews provide diminishing returns.

Also, many distractions — such as cellphones and other technologies — can divert interviewees so they can’t provide valuable information. A 2010 global study, “the world UNPLUGGED: Going 24 Hours Without Media,” reported that students’ "addiction" to media is similar to drug cravings. The study indicated that technology, including cellphones, has a dark side. (See this study, conducted by the International Center for Media & the Public Agenda in partnership with the Salzburg Academy on Media & Global Change, at http://tinyurl.com/3hnw25k.)

Our attention deficits probably result from a lack of self-discipline and the delusional belief that we can cognitively multi-task. We can’t do anything about our natural limitations, but we can discipline ourselves to pay attention.

The antidote
Plan and conduct an interview with few distractions. Require that all participants turn off their cellphones. When possible, ask questions in an unpredictable order.

Personalizing the interview
A guiding principle should be, “The interview is not about me; I am conducting the interview.” The interview is a professional encounter. If you don’t conduct the interview, someone else can conduct it, but the interviewee remains the same. Interviewers are replaceable; interviewees aren’t. Never lose sight of this foundational truth.

If I personalize the interview process I will focus on my inward emotions rather than on the interviewee’s verbal and non-verbal behavior. An interviewer’s unfettered emotions will have a debilitating impact on a number of levels. As Friedrich Nietzsche said, “He who fights too long against dragons becomes a dragon himself; and if you gaze too long into the abyss, the abyss will gaze into you.”

If the interviewer becomes personally involved in an interview, the interviewer becomes the interviewee and the interviewee becomes the interviewer. Most of us want to search for connections to others. But if we connect too strongly, we will become so similar (at least in our own minds) to interviewees that we might have difficulty believing the interviewee is guilty or is providing inaccurate information. Once that occurs, the interviewer probably won’t obtain necessary evidence or could discount incriminating evidence.

Does this mean that the interviewer must be an unfeeling, uncaring person who simply goes through the mechanical motions of conducting an interview? Not in the least! But it does mean that the interviewer has enough control so that he or she won’t be emotionally influenced by circumstances, the heat of the moment or the interviewee’s behavior.

The antidote
Before each interview, remind yourself that your objective is to collect evidence in a dispassionate manner; you won’t become emotionally involved. Focus on the overall objective of the interview so that you won’t be caught up in details that could connect you too closely with the interviewee. If, for example, you discover that the interviewee is from the same part of the country you’re from, remind yourself of the many persons you know who also are from that area so you’ll dilute the influence that this information could have on your interview.
Some extra advice for budding fraud fighters
The current generation is going to have to overcome three obstacles when interviewing, which neophytes from previous generations didn’t have to deal with.

The first obstacle is that many of us spend an inordinate amount of time looking at plastic screens as a significant mode for learning, communicating, being entertained and experiencing the world instead of interacting directly with others in the same space and time.

This places young interviewers at a disadvantage because much of the communication between an interviewer and an interviewee takes place non-verbally, according to Albert Mehrabian in his 1981 book, “Silent Messages,” http://tinyurl.com/3cze3f.

Concurrently, the verbal aspects of communication are replete with meta-messages. For example, what kind of impression does an individual make whose voice inflection rises or falls at the end of a sentence? Can this inflection be as adequately and consistently communicated via a text message compared to in-person communication?

This example (and there are many more) contains the essence of the interviewing process. Unfortunately, nuances, interpersonal communication subtleties and appropriate responses that were previously integral parts of the social modeling process aren’t as readily available to the current generation as they were to previous generations.

Also, as I mentioned above, electronic devices, such as tablets, cellphones and laptops shorten attention spans. Web surfers usually spend no more than 10 to 20 seconds on a page before ads or links distract them and they burrow down into successive rabbit holes, according to the Sept. 12, 2001, article, “How Long Do Users Stay on Web Pages?” by Jakob Nielson, the Nielsen Norman Group, http://tinyurl.com/c6cb9jz.

A great deal of communication now takes place via 144-character communication snippets on Twitter. The average person checks his phone once every six minutes. (See the Feb. 11, 2013 Nokia study quoted in the Elite Daily article by Stephen Willard, http://tinyurl.com/m4gf46y.) Psychologists have recently coined “nomophobia” — the fear of being out of cellphone contact — shortened from “no-mobile-phone-phobia.” (See techopedia, http://tinyurl.com/m8duerz, 2013.) Young people, of course, are most affected because electronic devices always have been in their lives.

The second obstacle for new fraud examiners is that they’ll be interviewing contemporaries for long periods of time who also have a dearth of direct, face-to-face interpersonal communication. At the extreme, I envision two or more uncomfortable people in an interview room. All of them can only remain in the moment for five minutes or less and are fidgety because they need plastic-screen fixes.

The third and most challenging obstacle, which I’ve touched on here, is that new fraud fighters will be spending hours interviewing older interviewees who are more familiar — explicitly and implicitly — with the subtleties of interpersonal communication. These are people who have spent significantly more time in direct, face-to-face communication.

The interpersonal communication-challenged interviewer will be at a significant disadvantage when interviewing guilty, guilty-knowledge, deceptive and/or antagonistic interviewees. Many experienced fraudsters are master manipulators of inexperienced interviewers.

Solutions anyone?
So what do we do? Urge your students to put down their plastic screens and engage with others in direct communication — friends, family and those who cross their paths in the normal flow of life. Encourage them to write down their communication goals for each day. For example: Speak to three strangers (try to choose friendly strangers only!) and ask each a minimum of three open questions and one closed question.

Ask your students to listen intently to what they’re communicating. If they’re struggling, so much the better! The learning is in the struggle.

Suggest they read all they can on interviewing and questioning plus verbal and non-verbal behaviors. They can take interviewing and public-speaking classes or join a toastmasters group. Anything to get them to converse and observe body language and expressions.

Interviewing techniques are the vehicles that ride upon the road of interpersonal communication. If that road isn’t adequate, then drivers can’t maneuver their vehicles. Your students are the only persons who can bring themselves “up to code.” They can do
it. I have every confidence in them. It isn't easy, but it's necessary.  ■ FM

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