

Companies should use caution when using unpopular puzzle interviews

October 15 2012

In today's tough job market, more job-seekers could be facing interview questions like this: Why are manholes round? Or how many barbershops are there in San Francisco?

[New job](#)-hunters need to be prepared for these "puzzle interview" questions, says SF State researcher Chris Wright, even though they may consider them to be unfair or irrelevant.

"I always give graduating students two primary suggestions. Expect the unexpected and be aware that you might get an off-the-wall question like this," said Wright, associate professor of psychology at San Francisco State University. "And realize that no one's really looking for a right answer, because so many of these questions are really more geared toward gauging your [thought process](#)."

Puzzle questions are especially popular in the tech and financial industries, where hiring managers see them as a good way to measure creativity, flexibility, [critical thinking](#) and the ability to work in novel and sometimes uncomfortable situations.

But Wright and colleagues have discovered that people generally see the questions as unfair and unrelated to job skills and performance, compared to traditional interview questions about past [work performance](#) and goals.

They videotaped mock interviews with both types of questions, and

asked undergraduate students to watch the interviews and rate both the interview's content and the job seeker's performance. The puzzle interviews got mostly negative reactions from the undergraduates, even when they were told that the job applicant was interviewing for a position like [software engineer](#) or [financial analyst](#).

But in an intriguing twist, the students said the applicant performed better in the puzzle interview than in the traditional interview. Wright thinks that the puzzle interview "may have seemed so off-the-wall" to the students that they were impressed by the poise and "relatively decent answers" given by the applicant.

Real-life job applicants also tend to dislike these puzzle questions, the researchers note, which poses a problem for industries that rely on them in their recruitment and hiring. Qualified applicants who don't like or trust the interview style might avoid companies that use puzzle questions, they suggest. It's also possible that questions seen as unfair or not relevant to a job could be the subject of a hiring lawsuit.

"And then there's still the question hanging out there, which is do these puzzles actually measure anything?" Wright said. "I think there's a feeling that these types of questions measure broad constructs like intelligence, but that there might be a lot better tools out there to measure this."

Some employers moved to puzzle interviews because they felt that applicants were too well-prepared for the traditional questions, having found the "right" answers through career Web sites and other sources. But Wright said [job seekers](#) can now prep for the puzzles as well, using sites like My Tech Interviews and others.

Puzzles may be unpopular, but companies such as Google, Microsoft and others still include them in their interviews, and graduates need to know

how to handle them, Wright said.

"What I find, when I see graduating seniors entering the workforce, is that they very rarely have knowledge of these types of [questions](#)," he said.

More information: The study by Wright and colleagues was published online on Oct. 15 in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*.

Provided by San Francisco State University

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