

*Do you know the path to failure?
There are many paths to success, but one clear path to failure
Steven E. Stemler and Varun Aggarwal*

The comedy sketch show *Saturday Night Live*, once did a segment in the 1990s where they dubbed the presidential debates, “The battle to avoid saying something stupid.” In both politics and business there are times when the core skill is not so much about giving the best answers but rather knowing how to avoid saying the wrong thing.

For example, what is it about job interviews that make them such a highly valued part of the hiring process? There are many possible answers including an opportunity to measure personality, job skills or to see how candidates connect with other individuals in the company. Often what it boils down to however, is seeing whether the candidate makes an error that takes them out of the running. Interviews tend to be most valuable as predictors of future performance when they are structured and specific.

What if this process could be automated, made more systematic, and yield better information? We have found a way to do this with some surprising results. Our empirical results show, for the first time, that it is indeed true that the people who avoided saying the wrong things were more successful in their jobs than people who gave the best answer.

In our work, we provided candidates with a series of specific situations and asked them to choose from among a number of possible ways to respond to each situation - a technique known as situational judgment testing or SJT (see Figure 1 for an example). We asked them to choose which of the options presented for each situation would be the best way to respond and which would be the worst. We then analyzed the data to see if their choices predicted actual job performance (such as sales targets achieved) for a few different roles based on data from Aspiring Minds, one of the world’s largest employability assessment company.

Most psychological tests have as their goal identifying people with maximum ability, such as the highest IQ scores, highest achievement test scores, etc. If we follow this logic, we would expect that the people who are most successful in the workplace would be those who were able to identify what experts in the field say are the best ways to respond to each scenario. It turns out that was not the case. Instead, what we found was that the people who were most successful on the job were those who were correctly able to identify the worst answer to a larger number of situation (i.e., the same answer that the experts had agreed was the worst response). They knew what to avoid for more scenarios.

Specifically, the correlation between the ability to correctly identify the worst responses and job performance ranged $r = 0.28-0.33$ and was statistically significant findings. By contrast, the correlation between the ability to correctly identify the best responses to the scenarios and performance ranged $r = 0.14-0.16$ and was not statistically significant.

In other words, the critical ability that these successful employees seem to share is the ability to know how to avoid stepping on landmines across a wide variety of situations. And actually, this makes sense. Because that is really the same skill they are using during job interviews.

One of the reasons that knowing the best approach may not be as predictive of job success is because there may be multiple paths to success. Companies have different organizational climates, norms, and structures so there could be multiple ways to handle the situation, which on average, will work equally well. There is probably no best answer! However, the wrong way to do things in a field is likely to lead to a negative outcome all the time and be relatively invariant across organizations, jobs and culture.

One of the major challenges in using SJTs for research has been the fact that each new field of study (e.g., management, sales, education) requires the development of a new SJT that is specifically tailored to the unique features of the field. If the major contributions that the technique of situational judgment testing makes in terms of predicting job success is determining if the person knows what not to do, then this has important implications. It suggests that the development of SJTs can be relatively standardized across fields of study in a way that has not previously been possible.

The finding that the ability to identify bad responses is a systematically better predictor of performance outcomes than the ability to identify a good response may contribute to the theoretical advancement of the field as well. Recently, there has been an explosion of research suggesting that “dark traits” – those characteristics that are particularly undesirable for an individual to have in an employment context - are useful for predicting job performance. Specifically, traits such as Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy tend to be characteristic of individuals who do not perform well on the job. But to date, those traits have been assessed using typical self-report survey questions.

If one were to integrate the concept of dark traits into SJT construction, it is likely that worst response could be made to represent a behavioral manifestation of a “dark trait”. Thus, one direction for future research would be to integrate the theoretical concept of dark traits into the generation of response options for SJTs. Our prediction is that this “dark trait” would form the agreed upon “worst” option, which would, in turn, be a significant predictor of job performance.

In sum, the key findings from our research show that there is usually more than one way to succeed, but there is typically a very clear and agreed-upon way to fail. Furthermore, it is possible to capture a job applicant’s knowledge of bad responses in a way that is quantitative, fast and easy to gather, reliable, and valid as a predictor of future job performance. As a practical matter, our results suggest that it may be best for companies not to look for candidates who answer all “best” responses on most scenarios and screw up a few, but rather to look for candidates who don’t screw up on any (or very few) regardless of what they believe the best response to be.

So, next time you evaluate a candidate, try to find if s/he knows the path to failure, rather than the path to success!

Figure 1.

You are a salesperson with a company that deals in industrial cleaning equipment. You recently met a prospective client who is interested in your product as it meets his requirements. However, he tells you that his wife's uncle is in the same business; hence he would prefer buying the product from him. What would you do?

- 1) You feel this deal is tough sell since the client would prefer buying the product from a relative who is in the same business. Hence, you would not pursue further.
- 2) Try to convince the client to buy your product by highlighting how your product is unique in its features and better than the competitor's product.
- 3) Ask the client to go for a trial use of your product without paying for it and then decide whether to buy your product or the competitor's product.
- 4) Suggest to the client that you can have a stand-by arrangement and if he needs a second vendor or a backup, you will be there to help him meet his commitment.

Note: Option 1 was identified as the “worst” response whereas option 3 was identified as the “best” response.