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The Anatomy of a Structured Interview

What a complete interview plan for one role looks like, why each part exists, and what it changes about the hire. Worked through on a real senior accountant search.

The role

Senior Accountant, manufacturing. The Inrock hire from Ratio's case study: hired in two weeks.

What's inside

8 skills, 16 questions, 64 anchors and follow-ups, one answer scored.

Written by

Michael Day, Co-Founder and CEO. 17 years in agency recruiting at Robert Half, Adecco, and Frank Recruitment Group.

PART 1

Why most interviews predict so little

The largest meta-analysis of selection methods to date puts the validity of an unstructured interview at .19 and a structured one at .42.¹ In plain terms: the conversation most companies run before a hire is about as predictive as a coin flip with a slight lean. Adding structure more than doubles it, and puts the interview at the top of every method the study examined, ahead of work samples, cognitive tests, and personality inventories.

The reason is not mysterious. In an unstructured interview, every interviewer decides for themselves what to ask, what a good answer sounds like, and how much weight to give it. Two interviewers can meet the same candidate and leave with opposite conclusions, both sincerely held. The hiring manager then has to reconcile impressions, not evidence, and the strongest personality in the debrief usually wins.

Structure, as the research defines it, is two things.² First, how the questions are built: the same questions for every candidate, derived from the job, at a difficulty that matches the level. Second, how the answers are scored: fixed criteria, a fixed scale, and each interviewer rating independently before anyone talks. Most teams that say they run structured interviews have the first half. Very few have the second, and the second is where the validity comes from.

The practical problem is that building both halves for one role is a day of skilled work, and it has to be redone for every role. So it does not get done. This paper shows what the finished product looks like when it is.

PART 2

The five parts of a complete plan

A complete plan is short enough to fit in a hiring manager's head and specific enough that two interviewers using it will rate the same answer the same way. It has five parts.

1. A skills model with must-haves and levels

Not the twelve requirements in the posting. The six to ten things the job actually turns on, each classed as domain knowledge, a hard skill, or a core competency, each with the proficiency the role needs, and two or three flagged as must-haves. A must-have counts more than the rest, and a weak answer on one caps the overall score. The other skills count toward the score but never cap it, so a strong candidate is not screened out for a gap that onboarding would close.

2. A list of what was left out, and why

Every job description carries credentials, tenure, and background preferences. They belong on a résumé screen, not in interview time. Writing down what was excluded keeps the interview honest and gives the recruiter a defensible answer when someone asks why the degree was not discussed.

3. Rounds that each do a different job

A screening round asks the plain version of each question in thirty minutes and establishes that the candidate has done the work. A hiring-manager round puts the candidate inside a specific situation from the job, with a constraint that disables the textbook answer, and finds out how they think when it is hard.

4. Questions with anchors and follow-ups

Under every question, four things the interviewer listens for, and a follow-up to ask when the answer misses one. Ratio uses four fixed lenses, called RATE: did the candidate give a **Relevant** specific, explain their **Approach**, discuss the **Trade-offs**, and offer **Evidence** of the outcome. The lenses never change. Only the question does. That is what lets an interviewer who has done three of these run the fourth without training.

5. A fixed scale and a visible roll-up

Each answer gets one rating on a four-point scale, relative to the proficiency the role needs, with a one-line note on the evidence. The interviewer sets the rating; the four lenses guide what to listen for, and ticking one records a note, not a score. Ratings then

combine by a fixed rule that is the same for every candidate: higher-ranked skills count more, must-haves count more still, and a weak answer on a must-have caps the overall score. Every interviewer's individual ratings stay visible. The debrief is about where the ratings disagree, not who liked whom.

PART 3

The example: a senior accountant at a manufacturing company

What follows is the plan Ratio generated for Inrock's senior accountant search, from the job description and the finance director's intake notes. It is shown as produced. The finance team used it to run the search; the role was filled in two weeks.

The skills model

Eight skills. The three must-haves are domain knowledge, which is right for a senior finance role: the hire has to run a close, own controls, and explain a variance on day one. The two core competencies are not must-haves, so they count toward the score but cannot cap it, yet they are the ones the finance director said separated the last good hire from the last bad one.

#	SKILL	CATEGORY	GATE	LEVEL
1	Month-End Close	Domain Knowledge	★ Must-have	Advanced
2	Internal Controls	Domain Knowledge	★ Must-have	Intermediate
3	Financial Reporting	Domain Knowledge	★ Must-have	Intermediate
4	Cost Accounting	Domain Knowledge	☆ Preferred	Intermediate
5	MS Dynamics NAV	Hard Skill	☆ Preferred	Intermediate
6	MS Excel	Hard Skill	☆ Preferred	Intermediate
7	Problem-Solving	Core Competency	☆ Preferred	Intermediate
8	Cross-Functional Alignment	Core Competency	☆ Preferred	Intermediate

Left out on purpose

The posting also asked for the items below. Ratio kept them out of the interview and gave a reason for each.

~~Bachelor's degree in Accounting~~

A credential. Verify it from the résumé, not in interview time.

~~3+ years with a manufacturing company~~

Experience duration. Verify it from work history.

~~Public accounting experience preferred~~

A background preference. Evaluated from work history.

~~State tax filings~~

A compliance task that sits inside the broader accounting-cycle judgment already assessed.

~~Accounts receivable and collections~~

A transactional task below the senior bar. Not worth an interview question.

PART 4

Two rounds, one skill at a time

Three skills in full: the two core competencies, because those are the skills most teams find hardest to interview for, and the top must-have. The remaining five are in the appendix. For each, the screening question, the hiring-manager question, and the anchors and follow-ups the interviewer sees under each.

Notice how the second-round question differs from the first. It is not a harder version of the same question. It is a specific scene from this job, with a constraint (two hours to close, a plant manager who will not move) that a prepared answer cannot route around. And notice the Relevance anchor in the second round: it names what an empty answer sounds like, so the interviewer knows the floor before the candidate starts talking.

Cross-Functional Alignment

Coordinates with intercompany units and non-finance departments to clear out balances and gather data. Look for persuasive follow-up that resolves bottlenecks, not just sending repeated email reminders.

★ Preferred

Core Competency

Intermediate

Assessed on behavior

SCREENING ROUND · 30 min

Behavioral

Can you describe a time you had to push non-finance colleagues for missing month-end data?

LENS	DID THE CANDIDATE...	IF NOT, ASK
R	Provide a real example	Which team was delaying the numbers?
A	Explain what they did	How did you get them to send what you needed?
T	Discuss the tradeoff	What tradeoff did you make to meet the deadline?
E	Share the outcome	How did the situation resolve?

HIRING-MANAGER ROUND · 45 min

Behavioral

Describe a time when the operations team delayed sending month-end inventory data, threatening your close deadline. What did you give up to get them aligned?

LENS	DID THE CANDIDATE...	IF NOT, ASK
R	Provide a real example, not just mention automated email reminders	Where did this intercompany delay happen in your past work?

LENS	DID THE CANDIDATE...	IF NOT, ASK
A	Explain what they did	What steps did you take to get the plant manager to respond?
T	Discuss the tradeoff	What did that push cost your relationship with the plant team?
E	Share the outcome	What was the final result for that month-end close?

Problem-Solving

Investigates and resolves complex ledger discrepancies and accounting edge cases independently. Look for structured root-cause investigation and lasting fixes, not just quick adjustments or immediate escalation.

★ Preferred

Core Competency

Intermediate

Assessed on behavior

SCREENING ROUND · 30 min

Behavioral

Tell me about a recent time you found a complex ledger error that others missed.

LENS	DID THE CANDIDATE...	IF NOT, ASK
R	Provide a real example	What was the discrepancy about?
A	Explain what they did	What did you do to track down the root cause?
T	Discuss the tradeoff	What was hardest about getting it corrected?
E	Share the outcome	How did it turn out in the end?

HIRING-MANAGER ROUND · 45 min

Behavioral

Tell me about a time you found a recurring ledger error that other accountants kept fixing with quick manual adjustments. What did that teach you about finding root causes?

LENS	DID THE CANDIDATE...	IF NOT, ASK
R	Provide a real example, not just making a quick patch or escalating without finding the root cause	In your last role, what specific ledger discrepancy was it?

LENS	DID THE CANDIDATE...	IF NOT, ASK
A	Explain what they did	What did you do to uncover why the error kept happening?
T	Discuss the tradeoff	What did you put on hold to fix the root cause properly?
E	Share the outcome	What was the final outcome after you made the fix?

Month-End Close

Executes multi-ledger closing routines and journal entries under tight deadlines. Look for proactive variance reconciliation and ownership of numbers, not just posting transactions into templates.

★ Must-have

Domain Knowledge

Advanced

Assessed on judgment

SCREENING ROUND · 30 min

Situational

If a subledger doesn't match the general ledger hours before month-end close, how would you handle it?

LENS	DID THE CANDIDATE...	IF NOT, ASK
R	Give specific detail	Can you give me a real case where that happened?
A	Explain their approach	What would you check first yourself?
T	Discuss the tradeoff	What gets cut if time runs out?
E	Describe what good looks like	How do you verify the ledgers are balanced?

HIRING-MANAGER ROUND · 45 min

Situational

Day three close is in two hours, but an unmapped variance is off by fifty thousand dollars, and the plant manager won't adjust their ledger. Do you post the package with the discrepancy or delay reporting?

LENS	DID THE CANDIDATE...	IF NOT, ASK
R	Give specific detail, not just claiming they managed the close while only compiling	What specific intercompany entry would you check first?

LENS	DID THE CANDIDATE...	IF NOT, ASK
	provided spreadsheets	
A	Explain their approach	How do you trace the missing balance before making your choice?
T	Discuss the tradeoff	What breaks if you delay the package until morning?
E	Describe what good looks like	How do you show the variance is fully reconciled?

PART 5

Scoring one answer

A plan is only as good as the rating it produces. Here is one answer to the Cross-Functional Alignment hiring-manager question, rated the way an interviewer would rate it in the room. The candidate answer is illustrative; everything the interviewer works from is the generated plan above.

SCORING ONE ANSWER

From an answer to a number the hiring manager can defend

Skill 8, Cross-Functional Alignment, hiring-manager round. The question, anchors, and follow-ups are Ratio's. The candidate answer is illustrative.

THE INTERVIEWER ASKS

Describe a time when the operations team delayed sending month-end inventory data, threatening your close deadline. What did you give up to get them aligned?

THE CANDIDATE ANSWERS

"At my last company the Tulsa plant was always the last one in with inventory counts. In March they were two days late, and I had a day-three close. I'd sent the usual reminders and nothing moved, so I called the plant controller directly and asked what was actually blocking them. Turned out the count sheets were done but their warehouse lead was on leave and nobody else knew our upload template. I offered to take their raw sheets and do the upload myself that month, which meant I was doing their data entry at 9 p.m. instead of reviewing my own accruals. We closed on day four instead of day three, and the next month I wrote a one-page upload guide and got the plant to name a backup."

Follow-up on Trade-offs: "What did that push cost your relationship with the plant team?"

"Not much with the plant, honestly; they were glad of the help. The cost was mine: my own accrual review got rushed, and I found a small miss the next week. I'd do it again, but I'd flag it to my manager earlier instead of absorbing it."

THE INTERVIEWER CHECKS

R

Relevance: Provide a real example. **Yes.** Named the plant, the month, and the specific block: template knowledge and an absent lead. Not a generic "I follow up persistently."

A

Approach: Explain what they did. **Yes.** Moved from reminders to a direct call, diagnosed the real cause, offered a concrete unblock, then fixed the recurrence with a guide and a named backup.

T

Trade-offs: Discuss the tradeoff. **Partly.** Nothing volunteered. The follow-up pulled out a real cost, their own review slipped, but it took the prompt and it stayed thin: one sentence, no sign they weighed alternatives at the time.

E

Evidence: Share the outcome. **Yes.** Day-four close, on time the next month, recurrence fixed. Specific and partly negative, which reads as true.



3 of 4 · Meets, for Intermediate

The interviewer set this rating. The four lenses guided what they listened for; ticking one records a note and does not change the score.

Why not 4?

The trade-off had to be prompted and came back thin. For an Exceeds, the interviewer wanted to hear the cost weighed before it was absorbed, or the pattern fixed across plants rather than once.

Why not 2?

The example is specific, the approach is clear, and the outcome is concrete. Needing a follow-up on Trade-offs is normal for this level, not a gap.

HOW IT BECOMES A SCORE

- Every rating is a human rating. Ratio never scores an answer itself; it combines the ratings interviewers give.
- The combination rule is fixed and the same for every candidate. No interviewer re-weights the evidence in the debrief.
- Higher-ranked skills count more, and must-have skills count more still.

- A weak answer on a must-have caps the overall score. A candidate cannot outrun a critical day-one gap by doing well on supporting skills.
- The screening round produces a star rating. Once a hiring-manager round is rated, the scorecard shows a percentage, with every interviewer's individual ratings preserved.

Two things to take from it. The follow-up did real work: without the Trade-offs prompt, this answer would have read as a clean success story, and the interviewer would have had no idea the candidate's own review slipped. And the rating is defensible in a sentence: three of four, Relevance and Approach solid, Evidence specific, Trade-offs present but only when prompted. A second interviewer can disagree with that, but they have to disagree about the evidence, not the impression.

PART 6

What this changes for your team

For the recruiter

The screening round becomes a fixed thirty minutes with eight questions and a rubric, not a conversation that drifts. Ratings from the screen carry into the hiring-manager round, so the second interviewer starts from evidence instead of a summary email. The excluded-signals list is the answer to “why didn't you ask about the CPA.”

For the hiring manager

The hard questions are written, calibrated to the level, and come with the follow-ups. The manager spends the interview listening rather than inventing, and the debrief is a comparison of ratings on named skills. When a candidate is passed over, the reason is a skill and a rating, which is what a defensible decision looks like.

For HR

Every candidate for the role was asked the same questions and rated on the same criteria by people who scored independently. That is the standard the research, and an adverse-impact review, both look for. It is also a record: the plan, the ratings, and the evidence notes exist for every hire, not just the ones that go well.

HOW THIS PLAN WAS MADE

Ratio produced everything in this document from the job description and the finance director's intake notes: the skills model, the exclusions, both rounds of questions, the anchors, and the follow-ups. The finance team reviewed it, ran the interviews, and rated the answers. Ratio added up the ratings. No candidate was scored by software.

If you have an open accounting or finance role, we will build the plan for it in front of you in a 30-minute working session, and you keep it whether or not you buy anything.

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References

1. Sackett, P. R., Zhang, C., Berry, C. M., & Lievens, F. (2022). Revisiting meta-analytic estimates of validity in personnel selection. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 107*(11), 2040–2068.
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2. Campion, M. A., Palmer, D. K., & Campion, J. E. (1997). A review of structure in the selection interview. *Personnel Psychology, 50*, 655–702.

APPENDIX

The remaining 5 skills

The rest of the plan, in the same form: Internal Controls, Financial Reporting, Cost Accounting, MS Dynamics NAV, MS Excel. The three must-haves are marked; Month-End Close, Internal Controls, Financial Reporting.

Internal Controls

Designs, reviews, and maintains accounting control environments to safeguard assets and satisfy audits. Look for active gap identification and risk reduction, not just passive adherence to existing checklists.

★ Must-have

Domain Knowledge

Intermediate

Assessed on judgment

SCREENING ROUND · 30 min

Situational

How would you handle a team repeatedly skipping required approval documentation for journal entries?

LENS	DID THE CANDIDATE...	IF NOT, ASK
R	Give specific detail	Have you dealt with a control gap like that recently?
A	Explain their approach	What steps would you take to fix the compliance issue?
T	Discuss the tradeoff	What's the hardest part of enforcing controls on busy teams?
E	Describe what good looks like	How do you know the control is working?

HIRING-MANAGER ROUND · 45 min

Situational

A plant supervisor keeps approving manual inventory write-offs without supporting receipts, bypassing the secondary review rule to hit shift deadlines. What do you check first?

LENS	DID THE CANDIDATE...	IF NOT, ASK
R	Give specific detail, not just talking about general compliance policies without a	Which specific inventory write-off would you pull to

LENS	DID THE CANDIDATE...	IF NOT, ASK
	single specific control owned	review?
A	Explain their approach	What steps do you take to stop the policy bypass?
T	Discuss the tradeoff	What risk do you take on if you freeze write-offs immediately?
E	Describe what good looks like	How do you prove the compliance gap is closed?

Financial Reporting

Prepares balance sheet and P&L analysis packages for senior management. Look for business context behind budget variances, not just dumping ledger output into report templates.

★ Must-have

Domain Knowledge

Intermediate

Assessed on judgment

SCREENING ROUND · 30 min

Situational

If senior management asks for an explanation of an unexpected P&L variance, how would you respond?

LENS	DID THE CANDIDATE...	IF NOT, ASK
R	Give specific detail	What's a specific variance you investigated recently?
A	Explain their approach	How do you trace the root cause behind the variance?
T	Discuss the tradeoff	What tradeoff do you make between detail and delivery speed?
E	Describe what good looks like	How do you confirm your variance explanation is accurate?

HIRING-MANAGER ROUND · 45 min

Situational

Gross margins dropped three percent this month, but sales volume matched forecasts and raw material costs look flat on paper. How do you isolate what drove the swing?

LENS	DID THE CANDIDATE...	IF NOT, ASK
R	Give specific detail, not just listing financial statements prepared without explaining the	What line item in the cost schedule would you check

LENS	DID THE CANDIDATE...	IF NOT, ASK
	business drivers behind numbers	first?
A	Explain their approach	How do you analyze the variance across product lines?
T	Discuss the tradeoff	What detail do you drop if leadership needs an answer today?
E	Describe what good looks like	How do you show senior management your explanation is accurate?

Cost Accounting

Tracks inventory, fixed assets, and manufacturing costs across production ledgers. Look for clear resolution of inventory discrepancies and valuation adjustments, not just routine ledger entries.

★ Preferred

Domain Knowledge

Intermediate

Assessed on judgment

SCREENING ROUND · 30 min

Situational

How would you handle an inventory count that shows a large discrepancy with plant records?

LENS	DID THE CANDIDATE...	IF NOT, ASK
R	Give specific detail	Can you share a real case where you cleared a count discrepancy?
A	Explain their approach	What would you check to find where the discrepancy started?
T	Discuss the tradeoff	What makes inventory adjustments tricky to clear?
E	Describe what good looks like	How do you verify the subledger matches physical stock?

HIRING-MANAGER ROUND · 45 min

Situational

Physical inventory at the main plant is twenty machines lower than the fixed asset subledger, and quarter-end close starts tomorrow. Walk me through how you reconcile the difference.

LENS	DID THE CANDIDATE...	IF NOT, ASK
R	Give specific detail, not just posting routine inventory entries without	Where in the subledger do you look for the missing count?

LENS	DID THE CANDIDATE...	IF NOT, ASK
	resolving discrepancies	
A	Explain their approach	What steps do you take to verify if an asset was scrapped?
T	Discuss the tradeoff	What do you give up if you write off the discrepancy now?
E	Describe what good looks like	How do you verify the adjustment matches actual warehouse counts?

MS Dynamics NAV

Operates MS Dynamics NAV to record transactions, manage subledgers, and run financial reports. Look for deep workflow efficiency and system troubleshooting, not just basic data entry.

★ Preferred

Hard Skill

Intermediate

Assessed on operation

SCREENING ROUND · 30 min

Applied Skills & Knowledge

Walk me through how you set up subledger reconciliations in MS Dynamics NAV.

LENS	DID THE CANDIDATE...	IF NOT, ASK
R	Give specific detail	Which ledgers do you manage most often in the system?
A	Explain their approach	What is your standard procedure for posting entries?
T	Discuss the tradeoff	Where does the system process usually slow down?
E	Describe what good looks like	How do you know the posting went through clean?

HIRING-MANAGER ROUND · 45 min

Applied Skills & Knowledge

A posted journal entry in Dynamics NAV created a phantom balance in an intercompany account because the posting group was configured wrong. What's your first move?

LENS	DID THE CANDIDATE...	IF NOT, ASK
R	Give specific detail, not just doing basic data entry in NAV without troubleshooting	Which table in Dynamics NAV do you inspect first?

LENS	DID THE CANDIDATE...	IF NOT, ASK
	workflows	
A	Explain their approach	How do you reverse the entry without breaking subledger links?
T	Discuss the tradeoff	What constraint stops you from editing the posting group directly?
E	Describe what good looks like	How do you confirm the account balance is clean?

MS Excel

Builds structured spreadsheets with advanced formulas to audit ledgers and analyze financial data. Look for scalable modeling and error-checking methods, not just basic lookup functions.

☆ Preferred

Hard Skill

Intermediate

Assessed on operation

SCREENING ROUND · 30 min

Applied Skills & Knowledge

How do you usually structure an Excel sheet to check multi-ledger balances for errors?

LENS	DID THE CANDIDATE...	IF NOT, ASK
R	Give specific detail	What's a workbook you built recently for this?
A	Explain their approach	What formulas or controls do you build in to catch mistakes?
T	Discuss the tradeoff	What do you sacrifice when keeping the model simple?
E	Describe what good looks like	How do you prove the spreadsheet is error-free?

HIRING-MANAGER ROUND · 45 min

Applied Skills & Knowledge

A financial consolidation sheet linked to ten subledger files returns circular reference errors after a team updates their tabs. How do you trace where the formula broke?

LENS	DID THE CANDIDATE...	IF NOT, ASK
R	Give specific detail, not just using standard lookup formulas without building error checks	What Excel tool or function do you use to trace it?
A	Explain their approach	How do you structure your formula audit step by step?
T	Discuss the tradeoff	What complexity do you sacrifice to make the sheet stable?
E	Describe what good looks like	How do you test that all linked calculations line up?