

## **Interview Advice: Fact or Fiction**

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*A survey consisting of thirty-one questions was administered in the Fall of 1992 over a three month period. Forty-six human resource specialists completed the survey. The survey requested information regarding preferences and impressions that employment interviewers have concerning various standard interview variables. The results supported the hypothesis that the advice career counselors, magazines, and journals offer to job applicants is accurate and true for most situations. The seven areas studied, in most instances, were supported by the majority of the human resource specialists. In some instances, results indicated differences in interviewee ratings were caused by the gender, age, and years of experience of the interviewer.*

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The most common employee selection procedure is the interview as over 85 percent of companies in the United States use the interview as their only procedure to select new employees (Bell, 1992). Companies use the interview to assess applicants' personality, knowledge, skills, and abilities, as well as determine if applicants "fit in" with current employees. Another factor in understanding why interviews are used so often is the notion of tradition. Companies and individuals have historically used interviews because they are fast and inexpensive.

The interview, however, is not a valid process. Extraneous variables that negatively affect the interview consist of: Body language, verbal (language) skills, appearance, and non-verbal behavior. Though the interview is not a valid process, the fact remains that most people will have to participate in this procedure in order to secure a employment.

There is much advice given to job applicants regarding interviews. The job applicants can find advice from many different sources such as magazines, newspapers, books, career centers, and research journals.

The professional interviewers are told to: Know what the job entails,

prepare questions, and take note of body language (Van Holm, 1990). In addition, interviewers are told to pay attention to non-verbal behavior as it offers insight into applicants' strengths, weaknesses, likes, and dislikes (Thibadoux & Jeffords, 1991).

The advice given to job applicants is practically the same as that given to interviewers. Job applicants are advised to: Practice questions, research the company, design questions to ask the interviewer, dress conservatively, be on time, not discuss salary, notice their own body language, make eye contact, have a firm handshake, and write a short thank-you note after the interview session (Moreau, 1989; Deep & Sussman, 1990; Anderson, 1991; Hanger, 1991; Rosen, 1992; Swardson, 1992).

The above advice seems reasonable, as much of the interview research has shown that non-verbal behavior such as eye contact, smiling, and posture have an impact on interviewers' decisions. In general, studies have found the amount of eye contact in an interview to be an important element when receiving positive or negative ratings. (Young & Beier, 1977; Forbes & Jackson, 1980; Rasmussen, 1984; Riggio & Throckmorton, 1988; Anderson & Shackleton, 1990; McShane, 1990). In support of this, most researchers found that applicants who engage in direct eye contact had higher interview ratings (Young & Beier, 1977; Forbes & Jackson, 1980; Rasmussen, 1984; Anderson & Shackleton, 1990).

Equally important, the studies concerning smiling have shown that facial expressions do have an effect on hiring decision (Young & Beier, 1977; Rasmussen, 1984; Forbes & Jackson, 1980; Anderson & Shackleton, 1990). Results of these studies have found that individuals who displayed positive facial expressions, (i.e., smiling), were more often found to have a higher rating than individuals who showed either neutral or frowning facial expressions.

Interestingly, another non-verbal cue, posture, has not been found to have a significant impact on interview evaluations. According to Forbes and Jackson (1980), Riggio and Throckmorton (1988), and Anderson and Shackleton (1990), posture by itself did not influence the interviewee ratings to a significant degree.

There is, however, evidence that two of the three non-verbal cues, eye contact and smiling, individually influenced ratings. Degrees of eye contact and use of facial expressions (i.e. smiling or frowning) can give the interviewer specific impressions about the job applicant's personality. When eye contact, smiling, and posture are all grouped together as non-

verbal behavior, their power to influence greatly increases. The researchers concluded that non-verbal behavior was an important factor used by interviewers when forming an impression of the job applicant.

Some research has stated that up to 80% of an applicant's score is influenced by non-verbal behavior (Young & Beier, 1977). Likewise, some researchers have found that verbal behavior and content were also important (Rasmussen, 1984; Riggio & Throckmorton, 1988). Rasmussen (1984) found that when the verbal information was entered into the decision making process the non-verbal behavior effects were small. Because most of the interview research focused on non-verbal behavior and not verbal content, these results are consistent with previous research. Riggio and Throckmorton (1988) confirmed this finding. In both studies, the levels of non-verbal behavior seemed only to enhance or amplify the applicant's good or bad verbal response.

Previous studies indicate that even though much of the advice has not been empirically studied, applicants need to listen to all of the interview advice offered to them. This study attempts to find the relationship between the advice given to job applicants by career counselors and "experts", and whether or not these factors are taken into account by interviewers. In carrying this out, we focused on seven general areas: Interview preparedness, applicant appearance, day/time of the interview, non-verbal and verbal behavior, resume content, and post-interview impressions.

## **METHOD**

### **Subjects**

Forty-six individuals participated in this study; 20 men and 26 women. All participants were members of the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) and their ages ranged from 24-68 with the median age being 41. The years of interviewing experience ranged between one and 30 years with an average of 11 years.

### **Procedure**

The survey was comprised of 31 multiple choice questions asking interviewers about their preferences and impressions of various interview variables. The questions requested information about: Interview prepar-

edness, applicant appearance, day/time of interview, non-verbal and verbal behavior of applicant, resume content, and post-interview impressions.

The participants attended the meetings of SHRM in Roanoke and the New River Valley in Southwest Virginia, where the surveys were distributed. Ninety-seven surveys were handed out and 46 were returned. Each survey took approximately five minutes to complete. The subjects had the option to complete the survey at the meeting or mail it to the researchers. No reliability or validity data exist on the survey used in this study.

## **RESULTS**

### **Interviewee Dress and Appearance**

As shown in Table 1, 76% of male interviewers prefer short hair on applicants while the majority of women interviewers believe hair length does not matter. If a male applicant wears an earring, 65% of male interviewers believe this to be unprofessional. Fifty-one percent of those who answered the survey stated they did not care what color hosiery was worn.

There was a direct relationship between polished shoes and the age of the interviewer in that older interviewers noticed whether or not an applicant's shoes were polished. There was also a significant difference ( $\chi^2 = 8.394, p = .039$ ) between age of the interviewer and color of hosiery; younger interviewers did not care about the color of the hosiery.

### **Researching the Company Prior to Interview**

As depicted in Table 1, 63% of the interviewers said it was preferable to do research on the company. There was no significant differences based on gender, age, or years of interviewer experience of the interviewer.

### **Day and Time of Interview**

According to Table 1, 88% of individuals interviewed said if the applicant was late, they would rate them lower. Also, 66% of human resource specialist prefer to interview between 8:00 a.m. and twelve noon. There were no differences in relation to gender, age or years of experience of the interviewers and questions.

**Table 1****Interviewer Responses**

Variable	Gender		Total %
	Male %	Female %	
<b>Dress and Appearance</b>			
<b>Men's Hair Length Preference</b>			
Short hair	78.9	75.0	76.0
Long hair	0.0	0.0	0.0
Does not matter	15.8	2.5	21.0
Do not notice	5.3	0.0	2.0
<b>Earrings on Males</b>			
Negatively affects rating	75.0	56.5	65.0
Does not affect rating	25.0	43.5	34.0
Positively affects rating	0.0	0.0	0.0
<b>Color of Women's Hosiery</b>			
Tan/nude	20.0	23.8	22.0
Colored	5.0	0.0	2.0
No hosiery	0.0	0.0	0.0
Does not matter	45.0	57.1	51.0
Do not notice	3.0	19.1	24.0
<b>Researching the Organization</b>			
Essential to have knowledge	30.0	15.4	21.0
Preferable to have knowledge	60.0	65.4	63.0
Does not matter	10.0	19.2	15.0

**If Applicant is Late**

Would never hire	0.0	8.0	4.0
Would give lower rating	85.0	92.0	88.0
Would not affect rating	15.0	0.0	6.0

**Preferred Time to Interview**

8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.	50.0	60.0	66.0
12:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.	0.0	0.0	0.0
Does not matter	50.0	40.0	34.0

**Nonverbal Behavior****Eye Contact**

All the time	35.0	46.2	41.0
Every so often	65.0	53.8	58.0
Not important	0.0	0.0	0.0

**Smiling**

All the time	0.0	0.0	0.0
Every so often	80.0	100	91.0
Do not care	20.0	0.0	9.0
Do not notice	0.0	0.0	0.0

**Good posture**

Positive impression	31.5	26.0	28.0
Negative impression	21.0	26.0	23.0
Does not matter	47.5	48.0	47.0
Do not notice	0.0	0.0	0.0

**Verbal Behavior****Tentative words**

OK, applicant is nervous	55.0	79.5	68.0
Don't hold against them	40.0	20.8	29.0
Rate them lower	5.0	0.0	0.0

**Fillers**

OK, applicant is nervous	10.0	20.0	15.0
Don't hold against them	45.0	28.0	34.0
Rate them lower	45.0	52.0	49.0

**Grade Point Average on Resume**

Higher grades, higher rating	5.3	16.0	11.0
Important, but not everything	84.2	56.0	68.0
Don't care about GPA	10.5	28.0	20.0

**Post Interview Impressions****Thank You Note**

Impressed by one	85.0	92.0	88.0
Not impressed	5.0	0.0	0.0
Do not care	10.0	8.0	9.0

**Availability for Work**

As soon as possible	44.0	61.5	38.0
2-4 weeks	56.0	38.5	61.0
4-6 weeks	0.0	0.0	0.0

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**Non-verbal Behavior**

Regarding how often a person should make eye contact, 58% believed an applicant should make eye contact every so often. Ninety-one percent indicated it was appropriate to smile every so often. Concerning the overall posture of an applicant, 47% of those interviewed reported they notice the applicant's posture, but that factor does not affect the applicant's rating.

There was a significant difference among years of human resource experience and the importance of an applicant's posture ( $2, \chi^2 = 6.161, p = .046$ ). More experienced human resource professionals preferred an applicant to be sitting straight and on the edge of their chair.

## **Verbal Behavior**

If tentative words (e.g., I guess, I think) were used by an applicant during an interview, 68% of the interviewers believed it was acceptable because they assumed the person was nervous. Also, 49% of those interviewed reported that they would rate the candidate lower if the candidate used fillers (e.g., like, um, ya know) when speaking during the interview.

There were significant positive differences between ambiguous terms (e.g., pretty good, fairly well) and the age of the interviewer ( $2, \chi^2 = 13.784, p = .001$ ), years of experience ( $2, \chi^2 = 9.598, p = .008$ ), and the gender of the interviewer ( $2, \chi^2 = 6.535, p = .038$ ). The younger female interviewers with less than ten years experience were more accepting of these ambiguous terms.

## **Resume Content**

When looking at an applicant's grade point average, 68% of the interviewers agree it influences them in their decision-making. Male interviewers tend to be influenced by the school the applicant attends ( $1, \chi^2 = 3.802, p = .051$ ); while the female interviewers are not.

## **Post-Interview Impressions**

If the applicant sent a thank-you note or follow-up letter, 88% believe this a very effective technique. Also, 61% believe that 2-4 weeks was an appropriate time span for availability to start work.

## **DISCUSSION**

The results of this study indicate that the advice given to job applicants by career advisors and "experts" is generally true. Results show the importance of different tactics that candidates should use in each of the seven categories (interviewee preparedness, applicant appearance, day/time of the interview, non-verbal and verbal behavior, resume content, and post-interview impressions).

Concerning interviewee preparedness, the consensus was that an interviewee should have some knowledge about the company with whom



he/she is interviewing. This agrees with advice usually given to applicants regarding preparation.

Job applicants often worry about how their appearance may affect their chances for employment. This study found that interviewees should: Dress appropriately for the job, men should have short hair (for women hair length does not matter, as long as it is neat), men should not wear an earring, the color of women's hose does not matter, engagement or wedding rings do not influence the interviewer, and shoes should be polished. Overall, results indicate an interviewee should be neatly dressed and groomed to make the best impression possible.

Results indicated that the day of the week on which an interview takes place does not have a significant effect on the interviewee's ability to be hired. Concerning the time of day when the interview takes place, sixty-six percent of subjects preferred giving interviews between 8:00 a.m. and twelve noon. The time of arrival for the interview is equally important. The responses indicated that interviewees should arrive for the interview up to ten minutes early. This supports the advice currently being given to applicants and is, therefore, important for those applicants who arrive late to know it will decrease their chances for obtaining employment. These findings are consistent with those found by Aamodt (1985).

In the past, non-verbal cues have been focused on by researchers. Research done by Riggio and Throckmorton (1988) found that non-verbal behavior did not have a significant impact on the hiring of the applicant. This study found that in the non-verbal category interviewees should: Make eye contact, have a firm handshake, smile, and have good posture. The results, however, of a study by Anderson and Shackleton (1990) support the findings of the present study concerning the role of non-verbal behaviors and their influence in the interview process.

In the present study, verbal cues given by an interviewee were separated into: Ambiguous terms (e.g., pretty good, fairly well, etc.), tentative terms (e.g., I feel, I think, etc.), and fillers (e.g., like, uhm, ya know, etc.). Interviewers noticed the ambiguous and tentative terms but did not rate the applicants lower. Female interviewers were more accepting of these terms than their male counterparts because the females' understood that the applicant was nervous. On the other hand, applicants using fillers were, in fact, rated lower by all interviewers. Accordingly, interviewees should avoid using fillers. This data supports the professional and popular advice given to job applicants. Job seekers should be sure to keep this important factor in mind when interviewing.

An applicant's resume reflects many qualities of a job candidate. The grade point average (GPA) of an applicant influences the interviewer depending if the GPA is below average ( $2.0 <$ ), average ( $2.0 > 2.5$ ), or above average ( $>2.5$ ). This can be accounted for by being the best indicator of an applicant's potential. Also, findings suggest that the interviewee's school influences the interviewer. Interestingly, males' ratings were affected more than females' in this category. This may be the result of males having more pride for their alma mater or that they place more importance on an applicant's school than do females.

Regarding the question of availability, subjects reported they preferred interviewees who could be available for the job in two to four weeks. Eighty-nine percent of subjects appreciated a thank you note from the interviewee. This supports advice already given to applicants reflecting the need for them to send a follow-up letter. Job candidates should keep these hints in mind to increase their chances for a position.

This study has presented some important results that applicants can use to their advantage when searching for a job. For more conclusive data, further research will have to be done.

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