
The Interviewer's Perception or Who Gets Hired?

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By Jack Deal

I recently interviewed on radio a high tech human resources guru from Silicon Valley. During one segment of the show we had been talking about appropriate dress for a high tech job position. At one of the commercial breaks he mentioned he had done recruiting at a small high tech company that had adopted 'grunge' as its corporate identity. He had interviewees that had torn clothing, matted hair and no shoes.

It was a strange set of interviews, he confided, but for better or worse the company had set the standard. A suit and tie were definitely not appropriate. Later in the show we discussed in more detail what sorts of things were appropriate.

Having been involved in thousands of interviews I thought I had seen it all: alcohol, facial tattoos, free use of obscenities, etc. Still, the question of an interviewer's perception is an interesting one so I began to jot down a few notes.

The perceptual experts tell us we have 6 seconds to make a first impression. That is the visual side of perception. Personal hygiene, with the possible exception of some high tech grungers, strikes me first. If hair is dirty, clothes unkempt and shoes soiled then the perception, mine included, is that the individual does not take care of himself or herself. If they can't take care of themselves when going to an interview -- what will they do when hired? What does it say about an interviewee if they do not care about personal appearance?

Beyond the physical, I think we get a more personal picture in the first two minutes of an interview. These are often awkward moments 'hi, how are you, thanks for coming, good to see you', etc. These initial moments are a good indicator of an individual's behavior when dealing with the unknown and determining their level of people skills. This initial chit-chat also sets the stage for the rest of the interview.

In the United States, we shake hands, especially in a business context. If I get a weak touch, strongman grip, or vertical yanking then I will perceive the individual tends to the extreme. I may be wrong, but for the applicant the interviewer's perception is reality.

I usually begin by asking the applicant to give me a thumbnail sketch of their skills and abilities. Most qualified applicants can usually give a synopsis in a minute or two. This is not a difficult question but it does require a variety of skills to pull it off. If the applicant cannot state what they can do then the implication is they cannot do anything. Obviously this may be true with some applicants and not with others. But perception is perception.

Gradually I get around to what they are looking for. Amazingly, some answer they do not know. If they appear truthful, a 'don't know' response can be seen as being honest. Most of the time, it implies the applicant has no ambition or has not thought very much. Here reality creates the perception and it's a negative.

What I normally want to hear is they are looking for an opportunity and challenge. This means that at some point the applicant will have 'smoke coming out of their smokestack'. This is an indicator of ambition, drive, work ethic, etc. If they are looking for security and stability and no smoke I often perceive they are in it just for the paycheck.

I let the applicant do the talking and I just ask a series of questions. Near the end of the interview I usually ask them if they have any questions about the company. Amazingly again, many applicants say no, even when they know virtually nothing about their potential future employer! What I perceive is a good response is one or two insightful questions. Going into a long series of intricate questions is just as bad as not having any questions at all.

There are several areas that send flags up at different points in the interview. If they jump right on salary and benefits I know they are more interested in what the company can do for them than what they can do for the company. If they speak poorly about their past employers then I know they would probably do the same with my company. If they tell me secrets or confidential information about their past employers, I know they will do the same to me. The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior.

I am used to applicants being nervous but experienced interviewers can get applicants to relax. The sole purpose of the interview is to find out if the applicant will be appropriate for the company. This seems too obvious! Yet many applicants do not understand this simple concept. We have a very short period of time to determine if the applicant is appropriate to become 'one of our family'. And why would we ever hire an obvious problem?

Those of us that conduct interviews are people too. We have our perceptions: the good, bad and ugly.

The difference is we decide who gets hired.

Jack D. Deal is the owner of Deal Business Consulting. Related articles may be found at <http://www.jddeal.com> and <http://www.freeandinquiringmind.typepad.com>

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