

G Your Career

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Freeze the first impressions

When it comes to hiring an employee, first impressions should be put on hold, writes SIMON PANCKHURST.

We live in an age where time is increasingly scarce. Marketers know products produced quickly (fast food) and services providing instant gratification (cell phones and broadband) will always be a winner.

Similarly someone that can achieve a desired outcome in a fraction of the time it might take others is known as an 'expert' and highly admired. They make quality decisions from snap shots of information. From All Black first five to foreign exchange traders, a quick assessment and the right call is an essential part of being successful.

So far so good, but what about horses for courses? With limited information we need to fill in the gaps. When making a prediction in the absence of the complete picture, if you are human it can be easy to default to stereotyping and common forms of bias.

To stereotype is to generalize about a group based on hearsay, opinions, and distorted ideas. Bias is a preconceived notion that prevents objective consideration of a situation. This 'quick assessment' approach comes with pitfalls.

Bias is dangerous as it is fundamentally inherent. It's not deliberate but so difficult to escape. None of us are immune. If you think you are impartial and open-minded, think again.

Recent research from Dr. Jonathan Bargh explores how we form impressions about those we first meet - we do this much faster than we realize. "There's nothing that's neutral," says Bargh, a New York University psychologist.

Bargh has found evidence that everything we encounter, no matter how trivial, reaches the conscious mind with a value judgment firmly attached. E.g. fashionable suit-good worker. Further this value judgment has nothing to do with reason and sets the tone, either positive or negative, for the interactions that follow.

The confusion caused by the "I can't operate on this man he is my son" brain teaser, when we are told the man's father died in the accident that inflicted the man's injuries, is a good example. The reason some struggle is the word 'surgeon' historically has had a strong male connotation.

Interestingly however, prior knowledge of the actual breakdown on the gender of surgeons has little impact on our ability to solve the problem. The surgeon/male association dominates.

So often we have little choice but to rely on first impressions. When deciding whether or not to offer a hitchhiker a ride, we can only use the few visual cues we are presented with. We are often forced to make decisions based on first impressions.

So it is lucky that recruitment is not such a situation. As interviewers we have ample time. We can be slow, deliberate and comprehensive even though it's essentially a yes/no decision. There is abundant time to reflect openly and rationally on the information collected.

Unfortunately, against all logic, most shun this opportunity. Our instinctive tendencies continue to dominate and propel us towards or away from an applicant in those first few moments.

Confirmatory bias then kicks in. Having made a quick largely emotive decision, we spend the rest of the interview gathering only supporting evidence. We consistently disregard (albeit subconsciously) any points or claims that do not support our perspective. (Sound familiar? -many of us have friends that we consider so stubborn, we know entering a friendly debate is a complete waste of time. They know best.)



First impression: what you see is not always what you get when it comes to recruiting

Unfortunately this tendency to reach a quick decision is further exacerbated by the nature of information conveyed in those first few moments. While assessing applicants does contain an 'interpersonal suitability' component, the interview is generally an opportunity for applicants to substantiate their application by providing verbal responses to interview questions.

Yet the interviewer's rapid 'first impression decision' is heavily influenced by visual cues - physical attractiveness, presentation, choice of clothing, and non-verbal cues- smiling, nodding, eye contact, and posture, not from the verbal responses. Few would argue with the academics that confirm that these practices have little to do with performance.

What to do then? Blame evolution?

While a critical ingredient is being more open Bargh tells us being totally neutral is not possible. Still try, but don't beat yourself up. Effort will be better rewarded by taking a lead from those learned folk that run our courts. Reserve judgment.

Try and resist coming to any sort of conclusion whatsoever until well after the event. Look upon the job interview as opportunity to gather objective information that is relevant to the job criteria. Freeze your first impressions and try to consistently gather information that is both positive and negative.

Be thorough. If a question results in dearth of information ask if they have more to add or a similar question that focuses on the same criteria. Don't make that conscious decision that they are weak or strong in a particular area, challenge it by seeking further evidence.

Finally keep it simple. You're best to target your three main criteria and gather extensive information on each. If it's way down the list it's not a priority. Focus on what's important.

If you are human you are fallible, take it on the chin, in this field a little hesitation ain't so bad.

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