

I Your Career

THE PRESS, Christchurch Saturday & Sunday, May 28-29, 2005

Swinging the bias your way

Job interviewers are only human and therefore fundamentally biased. That can be used to the advantage of the job seeker, writes SIMON PANCKHURST.

Bias is such a fundamentally inherent human trait that the typical interviewee's destiny is often determined seconds after their bum hits the seat.

So if faced with little relevant experience and a brief shot at a job that doesn't come along everyday how does one truly shine and distinguish themselves from the rest of the pack? What actually makes a difference?

While unlikely to admit it, because most do not consciously appreciate it, the reality is if the interviewing panel like you, you've got a foot in the door.

By nature the interview is a very interpersonal affair and it's your interpersonal skills and manner that are on show and will always attract a disproportional amount of attention. Rightly or wrongly they will heavily influence the outcome of the interview.

Psychologist and journalist Daniel Goleman labels interpersonal ability, emotional intelligence. He claims it is more predicative of work success than IQ but unlike IQ something we can all readily improve.

But can we really change? Like most things in life, some more so than others. Temperamental blind spots are the best targets. These are ways we impact on others that we aren't actually aware of. If you are thick skinned enough and can stomach some honest feedback, ask your friends and family. They'll eventually hit you between the eyes with something you may or may not have expected. Accept it and do everything you can to address it.

Successful job hunters are wonderful listeners. Calvin Coolidge knew this with his "no man ever listened himself out of a job." Give the speaker your full attention and answer the question asked, not the one you wanted to be asked. Think carefully and deliberately about what is being asked and why. Don't immediately assume you know what is behind the question, consider all possibilities and politely ask for clarification if need be. Look for cues from the interviewer that blatantly indicate their interest, e.g. eye contact, nodding and raised eyebrows or lack of it e.g. looking away or frowning and adjust your response accordingly.

Actions speak louder than words and the interview is the perfect opportunity to demonstrate how you successfully interact and communicate with others, an attribute that is critical in just about every job. What you say is important, but how you communicate is paramount.

Smile often. Show some passion for the position and the opportunity. Be humble. If you've got a good sense of humor don't leave it at reception. Smile some more. Be genuinely appreciative of the panel's time. Be genuine. Be refreshingly honest. You are more likely to start a "me too" club and earn respect than loose face. Minimal weight will be given to actual examples talking about good interpersonal strategies if you don't put into practice with the interview panel 'likeable' behaviours, there and then.



Twisting fate: by listening and looking for cues, job hunters can swing an interviewers bias their way. Photo: Fairfax

Empathetic applicants are more likely to succeed as they can put themselves in the shoes of others and see things from their perspective. If you can demonstrate an understanding and acceptance that we all have very different views and beliefs resulting in unique interpretations of the same situations, you'll score well.

Managers are looking for employees that can fit into the existing culture and add to the harmony not detract from it. Answers that demonstrate acceptance of emotionally charged situations and actions that pacify rather than inflame, will be well received. "Ella didn't need me to point out it wasn't a good decision, that was obvious. Instead I tried to support her through that difficult time and assist her in devising a better strategy for similar situations."

Similarly those assessed as easy going and open minded will be valued highly. Given stress is increasingly becoming a more pressing workplace issue, provide examples that demonstrate your flexibility and ability to accept and embrace major change. An inability to go with the flow will be quickly picked up especially when you get to ask questions. Try and avoid petty questions that if answered to the contrary, wouldn't actually affect your interest in the position.

Passion and enthusiasm is critical but it is humility over arrogance that will make a real difference. Too often the successful applicant is the only one who doesn't eliminate themselves from contention.

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