

A Second Look at First Impressions

By Cheryl Ferguson

No matter how good you look on paper, everything you do – from how you treat each member of the interview team, to what you're wearing, to what you say or don't say during the interview – is noted, and taken into account in the hiring decision.

If you don't believe me, listen to what I've heard recently from hiring managers about why they won't be moving forward with otherwise qualified candidates.

A Human Resources Director had this to say about a senior level candidate who was being considered for a high visibility position at her company: "He kept me waiting for several minutes while he finished a cell phone conversation in the lobby, failed to recognize me from an earlier meeting, and didn't treat me as a peer during the interview process. A used car salesman came to mind." Arrogance, or the impression that "I'm more important than you, or my time is more valuable than your time," screams "difficult employee" to everyone who comes in contact with this type of individual. A seasoned hiring manager will gladly keep a position open until a candidate with a more professional demeanor comes along.

In the category of "there's no such thing as a sure thing": A senior level executive, familiar with the organization he was interviewing with, was referred in by the CEO to interview for a Business Development position. He had all the right stuff: industry experience, a golden rolodex, and a term sheet listing deals in the U.S. and abroad. He was so comfortable that he didn't ask any questions of the people on the interview team about their roles at the company, their view of the business, or how they might work together – and left them with the impression that he was really not interested in them or the company. Overconfidence can be misconstrued as indifference, and indifference suggests, well, it suggests you could take or leave a job offer. Nine times out of ten, you won't get the offer.

The turn-off for a Quality Control Director and the rest of the interview team at one company: "The candidate, with elbows on the table and toothpick in hand, picked her teeth at lunch." In another instance, a Vice President of Finance heard back from six different people on the interview team that a particular candidate "swore like a sailor" during each of her interviews." Did your mother ever tell you to sit up straight, get your elbows off the table, or watch your language? She did it for a reason. She knew that other people judge us by our behavior. Unsuspecting candidates step in this minefield all the time, blowing their chance for an invitation to join a company.

When asked why he wouldn't be moving forward with a candidate who had applied for an Account Executive position within his organization, the President of the company replied, "His shirt was so wrinkled that it looked like he'd worn it the day before, balled it up in a corner of his room, put it back on the next morning and wore it to the interview. He didn't even bother to try and cover it up by putting a jacket over it. My thought was that if he couldn't even take the time to impress me at our first meeting, what was he going to be like with our customers?" "Dress for Success" was the title of a popular business book in the 70's, and while the rules have relaxed somewhat, employees at high tech or west coast companies may dress more casually than employees in traditional industries or companies on the east coast, there is simply no excuse for wrinkled shirts, thigh-high skirts or coffee-stained ties at an interview.

Arrogance, overconfidence, bad manners, and sloppy attire are mistakes that *no* interviewee can afford to make. Professionals know that the sure way to get the offer is to back up their skill set and experience with a first impression that leaves no doubt in anyone's mind that they're the right candidate for the job.

So, if you've been wondering why you didn't get the offer for a job that you're otherwise qualified for, you may want to take a second look at the impression you left with the people at the company you interviewed with. Actions speak louder than words.

Cheryl Ferguson is the host of The Recruiter's Studio (www.therecruitersstudio.com), a career resources website featuring web cast interviews of people talking about what they do for a living. A recruiter with both staffing industry and corporate experience, she has placed candidates with unique backgrounds – a Rhodes Scholar, a U.N. Peacekeeper and an Anthropologist – as well as candidates with more mainstream experience – salespeople, scientists, marketing, legal and administrative staff – at start-ups, mid-sized and established companies.

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