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Get it right from the start

Sunday, February 28, 2010

More than half of recruiters make up their mind about candidates within the first few minutes of a job interview, according to research by Interview Techniques.

Fifty seven per cent of the 269 recruiters polled in the survey said the initial stages of job interviews strongly affected the outcome for the applicant.

"First impressions are still hugely important in the interview process," said Laura McGrath, partner of Interview Techniques. "Nearly 60 per cent of recruiters admit that the first couple of minutes of an interview strongly influence their decision.

"This includes personal presentation, how you walk into the room, your smile, handshake, how you engage with the interviewer.

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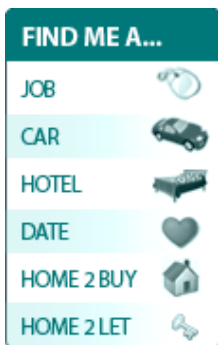
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An interview is like any other form of human interaction. We all make assumptions when we meet a person for the first time: do we trust them, do we like them, could we work with them?" According to Mared Roberts, HR consultant with Brightwater, a good first impression is down to three key elements: preparation, enthusiasm and presentation. "At interview stage, it is a given that your skills, qualifications and experience are relevant for the job," said Roberts.

Interviewers then make up their mind very quickly based on how prepared and enthusiastic the candidate is about the organisation and the role. Presentation also plays a very important part. It is essential to be groomed and formally dressed to show you are serious about securing the position."

Ann O'Mahony, regional director with La Creme, agreed that preparation was key to creating a favourable first impression.





"Interviewers will quickly detect a lack of preparation and view it as a sign of a lack of genuine interest. Interviewees should be able to talk knowledgeably about the company, their competitors and any recent news items either about the company or their industry sector.

"Understanding the job specification in advance and being able to demonstrate the transferability of your skills to the job is essential. This allows the interviewer to get a real flavour of how you would perform in the role," she said.

A bad early impression could seriously damage a candidate's chances of securing a role, according to Barry Rudden, associate director, IT, Sigmar.

"For example, if it is a client-facing role that requires very strong communication skills, and a candidate has little or no eye contact, is slouched in the chair and is unable to project their voice with any authority, the interviewers are not going to be convinced that person could represent the company in front of a client," he said.

While a good first impression will help to engage the interviewer, it cannot disguise a shortfall in skills or experience.

"It is a good start and may even give someone the benefit of the doubt over another aspect of the interview. Generally though, it is just enough to comfortably get through to the next phase of the interview, and a chance to prove yourself by answering competency based questions," said Rudden.

The labour market in Ireland has changed dramatically in recent years, with a greater number of available candidates now chasing fewer vacancies. The sudden move away from the candidate-driven market has impacted on the selection process for most positions.

"The whole interview process is taking much longer.

Two years ago, offers were made two to three weeks after the first round of interviews. It can now take up to two months to get to the job-offer stage," said McGrath.

"Employers are becoming much more conservative in their approach. Whereas five years ago, employers were happy to train somebody into the role, now they are much more likely to select those who 'tick all the boxes' of the job specification.

Because there is a large supply of good quality candidates, they want an exact match - a person who can hit the ground running."

More lengthy selection processes require more input and preparation from applicants.

"Additional stages are more likely to be introduced into the process. More preparation is therefore required by the candidate, who is often requested to put together a presentation for one of the interview stages and complete aptitude tests, personality profiling or assessments - depending on the position," said Rudden.

"Most importantly, organisations are spending more and more time on identifying the right fit for the business, which ultimately comes down to a personal and cultural match."

The report found that 70 per cent of all employers used prepared competency-based questions to ensure that candidates had the right skills for the position.

"In many cases, an employer will let you know what competencies they are looking for, and often highlight them on the job specification," said McGrath.

"A job applicant then knows the areas to focus on and has the opportunity to prepare good, strong answers. Unfortunately, three out of four applicants do not know how to answer this style of question.

By doing some research and getting some training on competency or behavioural interviews, a candidate can really stand out from the crowd."

Proof of experience relevant to the position on offer is now standard in most interviews.

"This is the quickest way of understanding whether a person has the core skills necessary to fulfil a specific position. By asking for examples of previous relevant experience, clients can effectively rule people in or out. The 'career goals' questions are also important, but not in isolation and only after the competencies have been first established for the position in the here and now," said O'Mahony.

There was, she said, a clear trend towards more structured interview techniques. "The competency-based behavioural format is a more rigid approach to interviewing, and

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ensures that every candidate is interviewed in the same way and assessed through a matrix system," O'Mahony said.

"The interview questions are behavioural and situational, and include lots of 'give me an example'-type questions. Behaviour-based interviewing uses the recognised principle that past and present behaviour is the best predictor of future performance."

This can include building a profile of an ideal candidate for a particular position, and then using psychometric testing to find the closest match. "Before you can recruit the right person, you need to understand the profile of the role itself. Job profiling helps you identify the key behavioural requirements of the job you are recruiting for in a natural and intuitive way. The process is structured to give you a template into which you can slot a candidate," said O'Mahony.

"Job profiling complements the psychometric profiling. Both enable you to fit job and candidate together seamlessly. By comparing a personality profile with a job profile, you are able to assess how well a person would fit the role."

Roberts said that, despite the different technical tools and matrices available, selecting successful candidates would never be an entirely objective process. "Thorough interview processes that include tests, assessments and presentations help towards ensuring an employer finds the right individual for the role and for the organisation. However, there is always a risk involved.

"No matter how far HR and employers go towards making the interview process as systematic, measurable and objective as possible, we are ultimately always looking for the right personal fit and that is, after all, purely subjective," she said.



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