

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

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How often have you heard the statement, “You only have one chance to make a good first impression”? In employment interviews, this is still true, but it may not be the “make-or-break” issue it was in the past.

From the perspective of the job seeker, it still makes sense to do some research about the company before the interview, practice telling brief stories (preferably less than a minute each) about your past experiences and accomplishments, and, of course, dress for the part. If you don’t know the company’s dress code, call your point of contact at the company and ask. It may save you from the embarrassment of showing up in a three-piece suit when everyone else is wearing jeans and sports shirts! Allow plenty of time to get to the interview location, particularly if you have never been there before. If you are late for something as important as an interview, it is highly likely that the interviewer will assume that tardiness is a character flaw—regardless of the circumstances. Your appearance, confidence, attitude, timeliness, and preparation will affect both the first and the lasting impression you leave upon your interviewers.

Now, I would like to speak to my fellow recruiters and interviewers. Yes, because we are human, we will be affected by first impressions—good, bad, or otherwise. But I hope we don’t let them overly influence our decisions about candidates. Snap decisions based upon initial impressions frequently prevent us from discovering the true talents many candidates may be able to offer. Perhaps the following story will help to illustrate my point.

Many years ago, when I was a rookie recruiter, I frequently visited a number of college campuses, often interviewing 12 to 15 engineering students each day for opportunities with my former employer, a large manufacturing and marketing firm. I remember one day I was looking forward to meeting a student with a high grade point average and an impressive resume. When he arrived for our scheduled interview, however, he was late, inappropriately dressed, and, heaven forbid, he mispronounced the name of my company. My reaction was to simply brush him off without even trying to determine why he was late or why he was dressed in shorts, a t-shirt, and sandals. Based upon this first impression alone, I was “convinced” he would not be a good employee for my company.

Today I realize that my rush to judgment was unfair to the candidate and, quite possibly, to my employer. Had I given him the chance to explain his tardiness and dress, he may have given some perfectly legitimate reason far different from my presumption that he was a “slacker.” He might have said something like, “I’m sorry I’m late, but I just got back at 4 am this morning from my grandmother’s funeral and, regrettably, I overslept. I am very interested in your company and I didn’t want to miss the chance to interview with you. Is there any chance we can reschedule?” Of course, my snap judgment didn’t give him that chance. If only I had asked him, “Why?” maybe he would be the VP of Technology for my (former) employer today!

If employment interviews are to be fair, objective, and professional, interviewers must challenge themselves to avoid making snap decisions about candidates based upon first impressions. Too often these first impressions are the result of “candidate stereotyping,” where the interviewer tends to categorize all candidates based upon personal biases or prejudices. More often than not, these biases are not relevant to job performance, but rather reflect the personal preferences of the individual interviewer. Now that I am an experienced interviewer, I realize that in order to give the candidate a fair opportunity to present him or herself, I must reserve any and all judgments about the candidate until the interview is over. And, during the interview, I need to challenge myself to give the candidate a variety of opportunities to reveal his or her knowledge, interests, accomplishments, and experiences—both positive and negative. Then, after 45 to 60 minutes, I should have a fairly comprehensive understanding of the whole person, not just a first impression.

Clearly, the more you know about a candidate, the more confident you will be that you are making the right selection decision. And, the candidate will respect you and your company for giving him or her a fair shot, regardless of the outcome.