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Managing the Initial Job Interview: Smile, Schmooze, and Get Hired?

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People seeking new employment look for ways to distinguish themselves from scores of similarly credentialed competitors. As a result, job seekers are deluged with advice designed to demystify and manage the search process. This includes how to write resumes and cover letters, prepare for psychometric tests, network, and scour the Internet for jobs. If you're offered an interview, there's more advice about techniques to master and pitfalls to avoid. These include dressing appropriately, arriving at a certain time, making small talk, using humor effectively, and so on. And while a single misstep may take you out of the running, a flawless performance doesn't guarantee you'll land the job.

One truism is that the initial job interview is the critical stage where applicants must separate themselves from the rest of the pack. At this stage, you've ostensibly met the "paper" requirements for the position, and must now "sell" your superior experiences and interpersonal qualities to interviewers. So in addition to appropriately highlighting academic and work experience, you must display the requisite physical image, eloquence, and bearing. The challenge is to convince the employer that you're credible, reliable, agreeable, and, generally speaking, fit the organization's culture. In essence, you need to "connect" with the interviewer interpersonally. This process can be unpredictable and is highly subjective.

Initial job interviews are typically short (30-45 minutes). They give the applicant and interviewer an opportunity to assess the potential for a long-term employment relationship. Given the stakes and short time frame, the encounter is usually ambiguous, if not awkward, for applicants since they have to quickly assess the interviewer's demeanor and size up the behaviors appropriate for the interaction. After this quick assessment, astute applicants will adjust their influence tactics to nudge the interviewer toward a favorable outcome.

But which influence tactics offer the most promise in this interview scenario? And what constitutes an "astute" applicant? Fortunately, the successful use of influence tactics in initial job interviews was the subject of recent study conducted by Chad Higgins of the University of Washington and Timothy Judge of the University of Florida. In a nutshell, they found that applicants who focused more on being pleasant, agreeable, and offering compliments to interviewers were deemed better fits to their prospective jobs (and were hired at a higher rate) than applicants who focused more on their credentials for the job. Indeed, the study confirms several of the principles stressed more than 80 years ago by Dale Carnegie—begin with praise, then smile, empathize, and be agreeable.

Specifically, Higgins and Judge wanted to know how applicants go about managing the "shared meaning" between themselves and interviewers. In their research, they wanted to understand whether influence tactics had a direct effect on the outcome of initial job interviews and what determined the tactics that applicants selected in the first place. To address these issues, Higgins and Judge enlisted the assistance of college students applying for jobs through their university placement office. The students completed surveys about their use of influence tactics before and immediately after their interviews. Students were again surveyed three months later when they would have had enough time to learn about the outcome of their interviews. The recruiters who interviewed these students were also surveyed about their perceptions and evaluation of each candidate.

Higgins and Judge focused on two types of influence tactics: ingratiation and self-promotion. Ingratiation involves displaying behaviors that conform to the desires of others. For example, an ingratiating applicant might agree with the opinions of a recruiter during an initial interview. This, in turn, may cause the recruiter to assume that they shared similar beliefs and attitudes. And an assumption about shared beliefs would make the applicant more attractive to the recruiter—who would then express a more favorable assessment of the applicant. On the other hand, self-promotion is defined as asserting one's competencies and other qualities to the interviewer. Self-promotion should also have a positive effect on interviewers. After all, presumably the interviewer's organization wants to hire people who are capable of performing the job. Furthermore, when applicants offer similar academic training and work credentials, self-promotion may help applicants distinguish themselves from competitors.

Another factor that Higgins and Judge examined is self-monitoring. They proposed that some applicants are more adept than others at scanning the interview environment, assessing the interviewer's style, and then adjusting their behaviors to portray the image most appropriate to the situation. Having such self-monitoring ability, they note, is critical to the successful use of influence tactics. Individuals scoring high on self-monitoring tend to be better influencers. For example, a previous study examined the behavior of female applicants who were told that the interviewer held stereotypical views of women. Those female applicants who scored high on self-monitoring tended to act more feminine during the interview than those who scored low. In other words, individuals who are high self-monitors may be especially effective in using influence tactics to manage and shape the impressions that people form of them.

So what did Higgins and Judge find? First, their study revealed that ingratiation plays a bigger role in interview outcomes than just about anything else, including objective credentials. In particular, ingratiation tactics were especially significant in terms of their positive impact on interviewers' assessments of candidates. Interestingly, self-promotion as well as work experience and credentials such as grade point average, did not considerably influence the interviewers' evaluation of the candidates' fit with potential employers. And, as expected, applicants who were high self-monitors received more favorable evaluations from interviewers. In other words, Higgins and Judge confirmed that an applicant's "performance" during the initial interview had more influence on recruiters than did their academic qualifications or work experience—credentials taking years of effort and hard work to acquire!

There are several implications from these findings. For starters, the adage "It's not what you know, but how you act," may seem appropriate for job seekers. Applicants who understand the importance of creating positive impressions at their initial interviews and who have the skills to effectively gauge and shape their behavior on the fly (i.e., people high in self-monitoring), may be the odds-on favorites to land the job.

This pattern of results should provide plenty of useful ammunition for career counselors and strategists wishing to better prepare their clients in a tough job market. That is, while a well-polished resume is important for getting in the door, it's the performance in the interview stage that has the greater impact on their prospects with employers. Consequently, more training on interview techniques (e.g., interview simulations) may prove quite helpful to job seekers.

That said, the findings of the study also offer some red flags for interviewers and employers regarding the recruitment and selection process. In short, this study should raise recruiters' awareness of their potential their bias (or gullibility) toward applicants who actively manage their image during interviews. While impression management during interviews is not harmful per se, recruiters may unintentionally overweight its effects when evaluating candidates. In essence, interviewers should never forget that they must also assess substance as well as style. In fact, Higgins and Judge suggested that interviewers use carefully crafted questions to help them discern whether applicants are merely being agreeable or are able to provide independent, critical assessments of problems they may face on the job.

Indeed, some business strategists have written about the rising "culture of personality" in the workplace, where companies seek to recreate themselves as customer friendly, relationship-oriented environments. To accomplish this, recruiters may tend to hire people who appear similar to themselves (and consequently more likely to build positive social relationships with). But while the social benefits that such actions may produce could be positive in the short term, any competitive advantage is likely to prove fleeting over the long haul. Studies show that employees with diverse backgrounds, views, and energies may do more to help their companies' creative output and strategic performance over time than a workforce populated by like-minded individuals.

Moreover, an emphasis on agreeability and similarity may imperil efforts to create a more inclusive, equitable work environment. It's no secret that the most obvious way that we judge similarity and attractiveness is through physical appearance. Applicants who do not physically resemble their interviewers may have to work harder to demonstrate psychological fit—something that can prove challenging indeed in a brief interview. It's also likely that such candidates may feel pressured to showcase their credentials, in effect choosing self-promotion over ingratiation. But Higgins and Judge's findings suggest that doing so would put candidates at a disadvantage.

All in all, Higgins and Judge have improved our understanding of the interview process in some important ways. Thanks to Higgins and Judge, we know that interviewers' perceptions of job applicants (and the job offers that result) are often shaped by subjective factors during initial interviews—a process that usually takes less than an hour. As a result, candidates who are skilled in the art of impression management, particularly ingratiation, are likely to have a leg up on the rest of us—at least when it comes to landing the job.

Source: Higgins, C.A., & Judge, T.A. 2004. The effect of applicant influence tactics on recruiter perceptions of fit and hiring recommendations: A field study. *Journal of Applied Psychology,* 89(4): 622–632.

Quality Research and Practical Relevance: Can We Find the "Sweet Spot?"

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You're probably familiar with the debate. Does academic research matter to the practice of management? And if not, should it? Conversely, do academics care about the applicability of their research to management practice? And if academics don't take applicability into account when designing studies, should they? To some, these questions have an "either-or" patina to them. In other words, the debate is viewed through a purist lens. Put simply, some view academic research quality and practical relevance as mutually exclusive territory. . .embracing one loses the other in the process. Moreover, some academic critics argue that managers are poorly equipped to assess academic research quality. In short, the argument goes, if managers really can't distinguish between high quality and low quality academic research, then they can't make good judgments about its practical relevance.

Others, however, contend that these purist views sell managers, as well as academics, short. Indeed, a more nuanced perspective is that academic research quality and practical relevance can be mutually reinforcing. Of course, this begs the question of what constitutes "quality" research—research that managers as well as academics would consider "relevant" and of potential practical benefit. In their recent study, David Baldridge of Oregon State University, Steven Floyd of the University of Connecticut, and Livia Markoczy of the University of California-Riverside grappled with these important issues. Generally speaking, Baldridge, Floyd, and Markoczy explored the idea that assessments of academic research quality are positively associated with judgments about managerial relevance.

In doing so, they made some interesting arguments. In particular, Baldridge, Floyd, and Markoczy felt that managers and academic scholars both prefer research that is: 1) interesting (because it challenges common assumptions, practices, and beliefs); and 2) well-justified (because it presents solid evidence to support conclusions). In essence, they proposed that studies with the most relevance to practice are viewed that way because both academics and managers judge them to be interesting *and* well-justified. Granted, this "sweet spot"—the proportion of studies that meet both criteria in both camps—is not likely to be large. Consequently, Baldridge, Floyd, and Markoczy predicted that the relationship between perceived academic research quality and practical management relevance would be positive, but relatively modest.

That said, Baldridge, Floyd, and Markoczy argued that the potential for overlap between the academic and managerial communities has been underestimated. For instance, managers often underestimate the extent to which many academics value research that impacts management practice. Likewise, many academics underestimate the extent to which managers want solid evidence for research conclusions (especially conclusions that could impact management practices). Granted, academics and managers are likely to use different criteria to assess research-based "evidence." For managers, business practice may combine formal education, lasting impressions from mentors, ex-