

## WHAT APPLICANTS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE INTERVIEWING PROCESS: Separating Fact from Fiction

by James A. Tan and Kenneth E. Graham

### Abstract

The interview is a popular and frequently used selection device in U.S. companies (Harris, 1989; Posthuma, Morgeson, & Campion, 2002). In fact, a survey of 852 organizations indicated that 99 per cent of these interviewed applicants before hiring (Ulrich & Trumbo, 1965). Because of this, a cottage industry built around giving advice on what to do during interviews has arisen. For example, numerous books for the interviewer (e.g., Thompson, 2003) and interviewee (e.g., DeLuca & DeLuca, 2001) have been published. Unfortunately, much of these *how to* texts offer interesting anecdotes but only minimal research citations. In this paper, we review and discuss empirical research on what an applicant should (or should not) do during interviews. We present this information in a question-and-answer format.

### What is an Interview?

An interview is a procedure used to obtain information from an applicant through oral responses to oral inquiries (Dessler, 2004; McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt, & Maurer, 1994). Also, interviewers tend to believe that the interview is valid for predicting future performance (McDaniel et al., 1994). Many meta-analyses have been conducted that showed the validity of employment interviews (Huffcutt & Arthur, 1994; Latham & Sue-Chan, 1999; McDaniel et al., 1994; Schmidt & Zimmerman, 2004).

There are two basic types of interviews: structured and unstructured. The main difference between these two is that in structured interviews, questions (and sometimes acceptable answers) are specified in advance and a scoring key is provided (McDaniel et al., 1994). Furthermore, in structured interviews, the interviewer is not permitted to ask follow-up questions. In unstructured interviews, on the other hand, the interviewer does not have set questions to ask so the interviewer can pursue points of interest as these come up as well as ask follow-up questions. Furthermore, there is no formal guide to score the interviewee's responses.

There is also a trend toward using more structure in interviews, primarily to improve objectivity and job relatedness (Williamson, Campion, Malos, Roehling, & Campion, 1996). In particular, two types of structured interviews are being used more often: (a) situational (Latham, Saari, & Pursell, 1980) and (b) behavioral (or behavioral-description; Janz, 1982).

An abundance of empirical research has been conducted on the effects of various interview tactics on hiring decisions. However, most of these have been published in scientific journals that most lay persons cannot access. Furthermore, readers need some background in both research methods and statistics in order to understand these studies. In this manuscript, we summarize and discuss the empirical research as well as translate the existing empirical research into layman's terms.

### So what impacts interviewer decisions?

In this manuscript we will focus our review on characteristics and behavior that the interviewee can control. Research has shown that applicants can influence interviewers in the following categories: (a) first impressions, (b) nonverbal behaviors, (c) verbal cues, (d) impression management tactics, (e) clothing, (f) scent, and (g) handshake.

Why do I have to make a good first impression?

What kinds of nonverbal behavior work?

Empirical research has shown that nonverbal behaviors impact interview ratings. In this section we will go over some nonverbal behaviors and their impact on interview ratings.

### Why is a good handshake important?

There is a large amount of opinion written about handshakes, both in etiquette books and in the business literature. In fact, handshaking advice has been around for quite some time (c.f., Post, 1925). In one of a few empirical studies investigating handshaking, Chaplin, Phillips, Brown, Clanton, & Stein (2000) found that individuals with firm handshakes were perceived as more extroverted, open, having higher emotional expression, and positive affect and also made a better first impression. Those with firm handshakes were also perceived to be less shy and neurotic. This is doubly important for women as those with a firm handshake tended to be evaluated as positively as men. Moreover, women with firm handshakes were seen as more open compared to women with less firm handshakes (Chaplin et al., 2000).

### What should I wear?

Research has been conducted on how an interviewee should appear. Pearson, Murphy, and Ryan (1993) surveyed human resource specialists and found that 65 per cent of those surveyed said that men should not wear earrings. In fact, 75 per cent of male and 57 per cent of female human resource specialists said that earrings on men negatively affects their ratings. For women, 51 per cent of respondents said that the color of their hosiery does not matter. However, if women were forced to pick a color, then they are better off picking tan or nude since 22 per cent of respondents said that these were the preferred color.

Forsythe and her colleagues conducted a series of research investigating the effect of clothing on interview ratings. They concluded from their research that women should generally wear clothes that are masculine in nature (i.e., vertical lines, straight silhouettes, strong angular lines, large-scale details, heavy textures, strong color contrasts, and dark or dull colors; Morton, 1964). For example, women who wore more masculine clothes were perceived to be more forceful, self-reliant, dynamic, aggressive, and decisive (Forsythe, 1988; 1990). In fact in this study, women who wore more masculine clothes were more likely to be recommended for hire. However, Forsythe (1988) also found that this effect only works up to a point women who wore the most masculine attire actually received lower ratings than women who wore a moderately masculine suit (i.e., beige tailored suit with a blazer jacket and a rust blouse with a small self bow at the neck; see also Forsythe, Drake, & Cox, 1985). Jenkins and Atkins's 1990 survey of corporate and non-corporate recruiters support these findings. According to Jenkins and Atkins' survey, recruiters find conservative clothes to be the most acceptable for both men and women. For women, dress styles recruiters find most acceptable include a tailored suit, shoulder length hair, classic pump, and a clutch bag. For men, recruiters prefer them to wear a two-piece suit, have a short hair style, oxford shoes, and a briefcase.

Scherbaum and Shepherd (1987) found that those wearing a blue jacket were perceived as more competent and properly dressed compared to those who were wearing a red or no jacket at all and this finding had a stronger impact for men. Scherbaum and Shepherd's study seem to bolster the belief that for men, their attire should be composed of darker colors and layering (i.e., the traditional dark suit). Damhorst and Reed (1986) found similar results for women. In Damhorst and Reed's study, women who wore the dark jacket were rated as more potent (i.e., competent and bold). These studies indicate that for men a particular style of dress is suitable (i.e., dark suit). This is less apparent for women, who do not seem to have one particular style of business attire. For women, a suitable business attire is one that adopts to some extent the traditional male attire (Forsythe et al., 1985; Scherbaum & Shepherd, 1987)

### How much does grooming count? Should I shave?

For men, the question might be to shave or not to shave. Shannon and Stark, (2003) investigated whether or not level of beardedness affected evaluations and found that while level of beardedness did not affect the evaluation of applicants, there was a trend in their data suggesting that bearded applicants were selected at lower rates for management positions. Also, Atkins and Kent (1988) found that recruiters did not like un-trimmed beards on men.

### Should I cut my hair?

There is some research that recruiters do not think that the length and type of hair on a man matters as long as he looks clean and neat (Cohen, 1971). However, Cohen also pointed out the same recruiters indicated that they are more tolerant and liberal in their views regarding hair compared to the managers who would actually do the hiring. This is supported by Atkins and Kent's (1988) research which found that their sample of recruiters rated long hair on men low in their survey.

### Should I wear glasses or contact lenses?

Harris, Harris, and Bochner (1982) found that men or women wearing glasses were perceived as more intelligent, hard-working, and successful. However, they were also rated as less active, outgoing, and athletic. On the other hand, Atkins and Kent (1988) found that wearing eyeglasses had little effect on recruiters. The bottom line may be to wear glasses if fits the job stereotype (i.e., teacher).

### Should I research the organization?

Various job hunting books and web sites counsel that the applicant should research the organization before they interview. This has some basis in fact. Research has shown that 84 per cent of human resource specialists agree with the fact that applicants should have some knowledge of the organization (Pearson et al., 1993).

### What time should I arrive?

As much as possible, do not arrive late as research has shown that it could lower your ratings (Pearson et al., 1993).

### Should I interview in the morning or afternoon?

According to research, 66 per cent of human resource specialists prefer to interview between 8:00 am and 12:00 pm. (Pearson et al., 1993).

### Do I have to write a thank-you note?

Eighty-eight percent of human resource specialists indicated that a thank-you note or follow-up letter sent after the interview is an effective technique (Pearson et al., 1993).

### What about my accent?

With the United States becoming more diverse, more and more individuals entering the workplace speak with an accent. There is some research which show that foreign-accented individuals are rated lower (Kalin & Rayko, 1978). Furthermore, this effect seems to be inversely related to job status in that foreign-accented individuals received higher ratings for lower social status jobs (e.g., plant cleaner) than for higher status jobs (e.g., foreperson; Kalin & Rayko, 1978). However, Singer & Eder (1989) investigated the effects of accent on selection decisions and found that having an accent was not a detriment to an applicant. More recently, Cargile (2000) supported Singer and Eder's findings in that accented speakers were not judged to be less suitable for high-status positions nor were they rated as more suitable for low-status positions.

### Do vocal cues matter?

DeGroot and Motowidlo (1999) found that vocal cues such as pitch, pitch variability, speech rate, pauses, and amplitude variability was weakly correlated with ratings of performance ratings. While these cues were weakly related to interviewer judgments, personal reactions such as liking, trust, and attributed credibility explained the relations. In other words, interviewees who varied vocal cues elicited higher personal reactions from the interviewers which explained the finding.

### Should I use impression management techniques?

There has been some research on the effectiveness of impression management tactics. For example Stevens and Kristoff (1995) investigated whether interviewee impression management tactics affected their interview outcomes. Stevens and Kristoff coded the tactics used as (a) assertive impression management tactics (e.g., self-promotion, personal stories, entitlements, enhancements, overcoming obstacles, opinion conformity, and other-enhancement) or (b) defensive impression management tactics (e.g., excuses and justifications) (Crane & Crane, 2002). This is supported by Ellis, West, Ryan, and DeShon (2002) who found that applicants typically use some form of impression management tactic. In addition, Ellis et al. (2002) found that more assertive impression management tactics were used compared to defensive impression management tactics. Interestingly, the type of question used in the interview somewhat determined the type of impression management tactic used by applicants. For situational interviews, applicants were more likely to use ingratiation tactics; for experience-based or behavioral interviews, applicants were more likely to use self-promotion tactics.

Stevens and Kristoff found that self-promotion, fit-with-organization, and other-enhancement tactics were used by applicants. Furthermore, Stevens and Kristoff found that interviewers rated applicants who used the self-promotion and fit-with-organization tactics as more suitable and more likely to be pursued by the organization. Higgins and Judge (2004) extended this research and found that applicant impression management tactics had a more indirect effect on the receipt of a job offer. According to Higgins and Judge, applicants who used the ingratiation tactic were perceived as a better fit for the organization and were more likely to be recommended for hire and therefore receive an actual job offer.

### How do verbal characteristics and nonverbal behavior impact my interview ratings?

A plethora of studies has been conducted investigating the positive and negative effects of nonverbal behaviors on interview ratings. However, the findings are not as straightforward as it seems. Typically, what has been found is an indirect relation between nonverbal behaviors and interview ratings. In other words, other factors need to be in effect before nonverbal behaviors impact interview ratings. For example, Hollandsworth, Kazelskis, Stevens, and Dressel (1979) investigated whether eye contact, loudness of voice, body posture, fluency of speech, appropriateness of content, personal appearance, and composure were related to interview ratings and found that what contributed most to interview ratings was appropriateness of content followed by fluency of speech and composure. Rasmussen (1984) found that ratings of participants increased when they exhibited high levels of nonverbal behaviors (e.g., eye contact, smiling, hand gesturing, and head nodding) but only when the verbal content of the interview was good (i.e., whether or not the interviewee presents relevant and informative responses to questions; Hollandsworth et al., 1979). In other words, applicants were rated higher but only when they were actually answering the questions posed by the interviewer.

Similar to these, Parsons and Liden (1984) found that articulation (clear speech, good grammar, no use of slangs or profanities) contributed most to interview ratings, followed by eye contact. Washburn and Hakei (1973) found that applicants obtained more favorable ratings when they used high levels of gestures, eye contact, and smiling. Riggio and Throckmorton (1988) found that positive verbal statements, fewer verbal errors, and the subject's dress had the strongest influence on judges' ratings of interview performance.

These findings are supported by Curtin (2003) who found a high correlation ( $r = .76$ ) between answer content and final interviewer ratings. Curtin (2003) also found that the positive relation between the applicant's answer and the interviewer's decision was partially mediated by the applicant's nonverbal behavior. Simply put, interviewees whose answers were good and who exhibited positive nonverbal behaviors got higher interview ratings. As a caveat, Levine and Feldman (2002) found a moderator for some of these findings. In Levine and Feldman's study, they found that applicants who smiled more were found to be more likeable. Furthermore, applicant gender affected likability ratings in that men were perceived as more likable when they exhibited low eye contact while women were perceived as more likable when they exhibited high eye contact. Also, women were perceived as more likable when these had a relaxed posture as opposed to displaying a straight posture.

### Will going to interview training help my performance?

Riggio and Throckmorton (1988) found that applicants who were assigned to the training condition did not receive more favorable evaluations. However, the training type used in their study was a lecture/discussion type which may not be as effective as role-playing in training these types of skills (Venardos & Harris, 1973). Furthermore, Riggio and Throckmorton (1987) has shown that the lecture format for interview training is not an effective method in training job interviewing skills.

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