

Managers' behaviour in job interviews impacts the firm's image

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If you have ever conducted a job interview, you likely understand that the process is not a one-way street but a multi-lane road with two-way traffic. As an interviewer, you want to assess the applicant's skills and abilities. Similarly, the candidate also assesses you and your company. What can you do to create impressions that enhance your company's recruiting and selection outcomes?

With my co-authors, I examined interviewers' impression management behaviours, i.e., signals they deliberately send to applicants during the meeting. We met with 15 individuals who regularly conduct job interviews and 15 who had recently been interviewed several times. We reviewed information materials provided to candidates and observed 10 real job interviews. Then, we integrated the insights that we gained into a conceptual model in order to understand what signals interviewers send and why they do it. We determined five common characteristics that they want to signal when interacting with candidates: attractiveness, authenticity, closeness, distance in terms of professionalism, and distance in terms of superiority.

Attractiveness – A fundamental intention of interviewers is to paint a positive picture or, as one interviewer put it, “to present your company as a strong employer, as a strong brand.” They would, for example, decorate the room and, during the interview, express enthusiasm. One commonly used strategy in panel interviews is to smile and nod at other company representatives to elicit an impression of harmony and signal a positive corporate climate. Our findings suggest that interviewers use these behaviours primarily to fill the vacancy as fast as possible. In addition, we found that signalling attractiveness might be especially important in certain industry sectors such as service providers. As an example, hospitals are concerned about applicants' consumer behaviour and want to be chosen in the future, if candidates need treatment, even if they receive a letter of refusal.

Authenticity – Another fundamental intention is to appear authentic and represent what the job and organization are like. This can be achieved by confessing negative aspects about the work. Our findings suggest that interviewers use such behaviours with the aim of achieving high job tenure in terms of sustainable recruitment. What is interesting is that in our study, they did not choose between signalling attractiveness and signalling authenticity,

but instead tried to achieve both at the same time.

Closeness – Statements like “It’s about appreciating the applicant” was something that we came across repeatedly during our study. Many interviewers consider the job interview to be the starting point for a positive, long-lasting relationship. Closeness can be signaled by laughing with the applicant and demonstrating similarity. For example, a strategy that one interviewer shared with us is “cheering the candidate up by stressing something positive from his or her CV”. In addition, our findings suggest a feeling of closeness might help applicants to open up and encourages them to divulge not only more but also more honest personal information.

Distance in terms of professionalism – Some of our participants stressed the importance of signalling professionalism. For example, application documents can be displayed on the interview table and notes can be taken not only to ensure a smooth procedure, but also to signal to the applicant how much effort is put into making a proper selection decision. For this purpose, some interviewers may decide not to provide certain services to applicants like serving coffee, as one interviewer was quoted saying, “I want to lay emphasis on professionalism because to me, a selection interview is not an afternoon coffee party”.

Distance in terms of superiority – Interviewers do not always try to be friendly and build rapport with applicants, instead they want to signal their power and superiority. “It has happened that I’ve told applicants ‘nobody under the sun will ever hire you with this employer’s reference’”, reported one of our study participants. Our findings suggest that they use such behaviours to build a strong reputation as interviewers and to gain respect from colleagues. Signalling superiority seems to be especially important in industry and military sectors that have a command structure. Importantly, we found that interviewers can have the intention to signal closeness and distance at the same time. For example, within the same interview, a hiring manager may try to create a close relation image when asking delicate questions and a superior image when asking challenging ones.

Taken together, our findings should encourage managers to look ahead and to not underestimate the power of small signals. The applicant will walk away from the interview with certain impressions in mind, and the interviewer has the opportunity to shape these impressions. If signals are handled well, the job interview may be the beginning of a good relationship between the organization and an individual – in the form of a new employee, an ambassador who promotes the organization as an attractive place to work, or as a customer.

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Notes:

- This post is based on the author’s paper [How and Why Do Interviewers Try to Make Impressions on Applicants? A Qualitative Study](#), co-authored with Martin Kleinmann, Cornelius J. König, Klaus G. Melchers and Donald M. Truxillo, in *Journal of Applied Psychology*, March 2016.
- The post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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