

Three-minute warning



LAST IMPRESSIONS, IT SEEMS, ARE JUST AS IMPORTANT AS FIRST IMPRESSIONS IN AN INTERVIEW. **HANNAH COWLEY** MAINTAINS EYE CONTACT WITH THE LATEST RESEARCH IN HOW TO LAND A JOB.

Julia Goodman, founder of communications coaching company Personal Presentation, believes that the first and last three minutes of an interview are crucial. She studied over a thousand taped interviews to research the effect that the first and last few minutes of an interview have on an employer. "Simple things, like maintaining good eye contact, and having a firm handshake, really help," she says. However, she warns candidates not to put on an act, but to be themselves. "Often an interviewer will spot fakery."

Her firm has devised a programme called You Brand to help coach private and corporate clients. It is designed to show people how to communicate more effectively and get ahead in the workplace. You Brand also takes account of the research of psychologist Albert Mehrabian, who concluded that only 7% of the impression we give to others is down to what we actually say, and that non-verbal cues have a far bigger impact. You Brand accordingly stresses the importance of factors such as facial expressions and body language in an interview.

"The first few minutes of an interview are key," agrees treasury recruiter Matt Mattheou. "Most interviewers will make up their minds during this time and it is very hard to change first impressions." He says that most treasurers are used to meeting clients and are therefore sensitive to the importance of dress and body language.

You Brand focuses on how people make an employer feel. Goodman advises interviewees to stay focused and energised, and be conscious of their body language throughout the entire interview.

"People are often self-aware at the beginning of interviews, but start to forget themselves as the meeting goes on," she warns.

A You Brand programme lasts four days, spread over several weeks. Video and psychological intervention is used to demonstrate to clients their body language during mock interviews. Goodman says: "Half of my clients fluffed the mock interview in the final moments: they were so relieved it was over that they dropped their focus."

A spokesperson from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, a professional body for those involved in the management and development of people, says: "The first three minutes of an interview are more important than the last three. Maintaining eye contact is very important for a client-facing job role, but if people are shy they will often still get jobs based on ability. A firm handshake is important, but over-valued. Factors such as being smiley and showing positive body language are more important."

Not everybody agrees with Goodman's stress on the start and end of an interview. Deborah Thomas, senior treasury recruiter at Michael Page International, and James Crichton, senior business manager at Hays Treasury, both argue that the first and last three minutes of an interview are not necessarily the most important at all. They say it is how the candidate communicates and answers questions throughout the interview that is important.

"Competency-based interview questions will enable the employer to ascertain how you have dealt with difficult situations in the past, how good you are at working within a team, and whether you are the sort of person they are looking for," says Crichton. "These assumptions cannot be made accurately in six minutes."

Crichton believes it is important for treasurers to follow the usual advice about a confident handshake and maintaining eye contact, but suggests that can only take you so far. "In an increasingly competitive job market in treasury, more is expected from candidates in the job application process and at interview," he says. "Gone are the days of gut-feeling being a credible selection tool. To succeed at interview, a solid, confident technique must go alongside strong preparation and a thorough understanding of your potential employer, the role and what differentiates you from the rest."

Thomas adds that one of the most important things in a job interview is to plan what you are going to say and to be prepared for questions. If you are well prepared and confident, then your body language will reflect that.

But whatever the recruitment consultants think, one thing is certain – interviewees need to stay sharp throughout. As Goodman recalls: "First and last impressions, made in three-minute windows, really do count. People need to close the deal."

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