

# Interviewing: By Sylvia Henderson

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## **It's Still Person-to-Person**

The interview process in the millennium especially where technology companies are concerned is different in many ways from the process of the last decade. Telephone interviewing is much more prevalent for weeding-out prospective candidates before they even walk in the door for a person-to-person interview with a potential employer. Group interviews with future peers are conducted where formerly a potential candidate used to speak with company management or a human resources professional. Candidates are given problems and puzzles to solve in order to prove their competency in areas they note as being proficient on their resumes or to explore their creativity. The emphasis in job interviews tends more to lean towards creativity, programming and technical proficiency, ability to use computers, and other job-related competencies. Less and less do I see or hear about competency of interpersonal skills. Yet, certain interpersonal skills withstand the test of time and tell a lot about a person whether over the telephone or in person.

A job candidate must exhibit certain skills no matter how technically proficient she or he may be. Technology companies seek people not only able to design the next coolest web site or maintain a large client-server environment or develop the next wireless application but who also exhibit good interpersonal skills. Desirable skills include good grooming, the ability to speak clearly and succinctly, use of good grammar, the capacity to explain complex concepts to be understood by non technical people, and a "personable disposition". A potential job candidate may be in high demand for their technical skills and may be in a position to weigh multiple offers at any one time, but once hired for technical proficiency, that person will likely not go very far very fast if they exhibit poor "people skills".

To help with getting your foot in the door for an interview or to make a good impression at an in-person interview, keep these suggestions in mind.

## **Good Grooming**

Casual attire does not absolve you of good grooming. Aspects of good grooming apply whether you wear white shirts and dark suits or polo shirts and khakis. Shower or bathe before the interview. Snicker you might at such an obvious concept but you would be surprised how many professional people leave a body odor trail in their wake. Some cultures do not abide by European deodorant standards which is fine in and of itself. But for a job interview, a shower just before you leave for the meeting helps put others at ease in this multicultural world of ours.

Lighten the load when it comes to fragrances and makeup. Use little, if any, perfume or cologne. Some people are allergic to fragrances. You do not want your interviewer sneezing every few minutes or wiping watery eyes because you are in front of them with a wafting fragrance penetrating the cubicle. Your makeup should make you look "natural". I know this seems like an oxymoron, but the goal is to appear like you are not wearing makeup, for an interview. Save the personalizing aspects of your makeup routine for once you have the job.

Piercings. Well, I have mixed feelings about them but I recognize they are acceptable by today's

grooming standards, especially in the high-tech field. So my advice is to limit the number and locations of the piercings for the job interview. The ears are probably fine, even for guys. Save the eyebrows, noses, lips, and tongues for after the job offer is accepted.

Similar advice goes for the hair. Whatever your style, make sure it appears neat for the interview. Have the neatest mohawk you can have since there is not much you can do to change the hairstyle for an interview if it is the hairstyle you normally wear. Try limiting yourself to one or two colors for the interview. Braids should be re-braided to look crisp and clean. Crew cuts and fades should be just-cut and neat. Dreadlocks should be clean. Have I missed anything? Oh! You have a modest, "traditional" hair style? Clean and just-done are the guidelines to keep in mind for any hairstyle.

The breath is something few of us admit needs constant attention. At least for ourselves. We quickly conclude that the other person needs breath maintenance. Forget the chewing gum as breath enhancer. Gum activates acids in the stomach which exacerbate foul breath once the gum is no longer chewed. (You do know not to chew gum during the interview, don't you?) Carry some breath mints, the small kind that are specifically for breath control, not just peppermints. I am not endorsing a specific product when I say to use something like Altoids or Tic-Tacs. They happen to be what I carry at all times and are the brands that come to mind.

You are interviewing over the telephone, you say, so you do not have to worry about good grooming. Wrong! Believe it or not, good grooming comes across over the phone. True, you do not have to worry about the colors of your hair or how fresh your breath may be, but tongue and lip piercings affect your speech. You feel fresh after a shower and that freshness comes across in your attitude. It is how you feel about yourself that comes across in a phone interview.

## **What You Wear**

Whether you are female or male, neatness is important. For an interview, shirts should be ironed and pants or skirts, pressed. Yes, that goes for the polo shirt or the dress blouse. Ironing is a foreign activity to me on a regular basis, but when it is time to make a good impression, the iron comes out of storage and gets used. If you do not even own one of the contraptions, the dry cleaners is worth the \$1.95 all-the-time charge for a pressed shirt or blouse.

Tuck shirttails into pants or skirts. Wear a suit or sport jacket when you initially enter the establishment for the interview. The jacket might come off once the initial impression is made, but the first thing the interviewer sees should be you fully dressed. This applies to wearing a sweater instead of a jacket if the dress code is casual and if it is understood that casual attire is appropriate for the interview. You should get this understanding clearly from the person who sets up the interview prior to the meeting. If the pants or skirt have belt loops, wear a belt (or suspenders) whether or not you usually wear them.

Wear socks or hose. And shoes should have closed toes for both men and women. Make sure the shoes whether dress pumps or wing tips or sports shoes or boots are clean, free of scuffs, and polished if they can be polished. Save a pair of Timberlands as "interview shoes" if they make up the bulk of your footwear.

Skirts should be just above-to-just below the knees. Do not wear shorts. Slacks should rest at the top of the front of your shoes and should slope slightly back to rest about an inch above the heel of your shoes when you are standing.

Get dressed up for a telephone interview. You will put yourself in a “dress-up” frame of mind and you will sound like a professional across the wires (or over the satellite).

### **How You Sound**

Speak clearly and succinctly. Enunciate your words. Keep the gum and candy out of your mouth. Control your rate of speed. If you speak fast normally, slow it down a bit for the interview. If you speak slowly, speed it up a bit to sound energetic and enthusiastic.

Leave the jargon and peer-talk out of the interview. You may be interviewing with people who are your age or younger but you are in a professional situation, no matter how many scooters and ping pong tables are in the conference room. Business is conducted so that those stock options you are offered will be worth something and you are being evaluated on whether you will fit into a particular business environment.

Work at coming across confident but not cocky. If you have trouble with confidence, especially around other people, practice in a mirror before the interview. Talk about yourself, your technical abilities, your experiences to yourself in front of the mirror. Look at how you look and feel. Pull out the actor (gender-neutral) in you and make yourself sound confident when you speak. The act will carry through in the interview.

If you are conducting a telephone interview, stand up or sit up straight while talking. Your attentiveness comes across over the phone.

### **The Handshake**

This is my personal bugaboo. The first impression you give to others in a business environment is communicated through your handshake whether you are male or female. The handshake says more about you in a few seconds than any grooming or clothing or fresh breath can ever say. Learn how to give a firm, personable handshake if you learn nothing else. Practice on your friends, your partner, your dog, or yourself (yes, you can shake your other hand and feel whether your grip is firm and dry.)

Your grip should be firm but not crushing. Conquer the limp, fishy grip. Wipe your hand off just before the handshake (out of sight of the person you are about to greet) so that your hand is dry. If you are freezing from nervousness, warm your hand under your arm while you are waiting. I cannot emphasize enough the impression either good or bad that is made through a handshake.

Practice these interpersonal skills and the next impression that you make in an interview, whether by telephone or in person, should be a strong, positive impression. All that you will have left to do is convince the interviewer of your technical capabilities.