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What is This?

Perceptions of Interviewers' Evaluative Criteria for the Initial Job Interview: Implications for Marketing Our Students

Marilyn L. Lammers, James C. Bennett, Robert J. Olney, and H. Bruce Lammers

Two hundred and sixty job interviewers and 110 marketing students rated the importance of 25 positive and 25 negative attributes of the interviewee in the initial job interview. Factor analysis of the interviewers' ratings indicated that they tended to focus on seven factors (evaluative criteria). Students accurately perceived the importance of four of these factors, but significantly misperceived the importance of the other three. No support for a negativity bias was found. Implications for grooming the students were discussed.

First impressions, especially negative ones, can be painfully long-term and resistant to change. Nowhere is the sensitivity to this unsettling observation more acute than in the initial job interview, where an applicant typically has somewhere in the neighborhood of a mere 30 to 60 minutes to favorably impress the interviewer. Although a 30- to 60-minute exposure may seem of sufficient length for an applicant to overcome early-revealed weaknesses, Schmitt's (1976) review of the literature suggests that interviewers typically make their decisions within the first four minutes of an interview. Given that the opportunity to impress another is brief and fleeting, the applicant cannot afford to create erroneous impressions. The salesperson's classic forewarning of "no second chance" resounds loud and clear to the applicant facing the initial interview.

Clearly, an understanding of what interviewers are seeking is essential in preparing the applicant for an impending initial interview. More formally, to get an edge on the competition, an applicant must understand the cognitive structure and evaluative criteria (Engel and Blackwell 1983) of the interviewers.

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Along these same lines, Hafer and Hoth (1981) convincingly argued in a recent issue of the *Journal of Marketing Education* that educators can help groom their students for employment by emphasizing in their teaching those attributes which job interviewers seek in the ideal job candidate. In essence, Hafer and Hoth contended that educators who want to help their students market themselves for employment can best do so by practicing the marketing concept: first find out what characteristics or attributes interviewers want in an interviewee and then develop those characteristics in the students.

One purpose of the present study was simply to identify the cognitive structure and evaluative criteria imposed by interviewers. A second and perhaps more interesting purpose was to identify discrepancies and consistencies between the interviewers' *actual* evaluative criteria and the interviewers' evaluative criteria as *perceived* by potential applicants (in this instance, upper level marketing students).

To accomplish the purposes of the present study, we took an empirical step toward identifying what interviewers seek in the initial job interview by factor analyzing interviewers' ratings and interviewee attributes. The advantage of using factor analysis is that it takes the categorization of the attributes out of the researcher's hands. The researcher then has less opportunity to inject bias. Some previous research (e.g., Hafer and Hoth 1981, Spalding and Grimm 1982) categorized interviewee

attributes without performing a factor analysis or some other equivalent multivariate test. Although the resultant categories and dimensions usually appeared to have face validity, the empirical validity necessarily remains suspect.

The stated purposes of the present study show that our interest was primarily of an applied and practical nature. However, the study also has implications for attribution theory research in social psychology and consumer behavior. (For a good review of attribution theories, see Mizerski, Golden, and Kernan 1979.) In its simplest form, attribution theory is concerned with the processes people use to infer the causes of events. There is some empirical support, for example, for the phenomenon that people may give more weight to negative information than to positive information when developing judgments and perceptions of others. This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as the "negativity bias" (cf. Arvey and Campion 1982). From this negativity bias perspective, we hypothesized that interviewers and potential applicants would give more weight to negative interviewee attributes than to positive interviewee attributes.

METHODOLOGY

Interviewers' Perceptions

Two hundred and sixty job interviewers from firms in Los Angeles were individually contacted and surveyed one-on-one by undergraduate students from five sections (section sizes ranged from 15 to 30) of the business communications course at California State University, Northridge. To lessen the inconvenience of the survey to the job interviewers, the students met with the job interviewers at a time and place of the job interviewers' own choosing.

The job interviewers were asked to complete a questionnaire which contained the dependent measures of the study, which were the job interviewers' ratings (on five-point scales) of the importance of 50 interviewee attributes and characteristics "critical to the initial job interview." The interviewee attributes had been gleaned from a variety of sources (e.g., Arvey and Campion 1982, Schmitt 1976). Of the attributes, 25 were positive in nature and 25 were negative. All 50 attributes are shown in the factor analysis table (Table 1).

Potential Applicants' (Students') Perceptions

One hundred and ten third- and fourth-year marketing majors at California State University, Northridge were also asked to rate the importance of the same 50 interviewee attributes *from an interviewer's perspective*. These students had not participated in the interviewer survey just described. The marketing students expressed a great deal of interest in finding out how well they could guess the job interviewers' ratings. Without question, the students' ratings were done with a good deal of sincerity and involvement.

RESULTS

Reliability of the Questionnaire

The internal consistency of the 50 items on the survey instrument proved to be very high and statistically significant (Cronbach's alpha = .93, $p < .01$).

Evaluative Criteria: Factor Analysis of the Attribute Ratings

To determine the set of evaluative criteria used by the job interviewers, a principal components factor analysis (VARIMAX rotation after Kaiser normalization) was performed on the interviewers' importance ratings. The factor matrix is presented in Table 1.

Seven significant factors with eigen values greater than 1.00 were found. These seven factors accounted for 50.2 percent, 8.4 percent, 7.5 percent, 6.7 percent, 4.9 percent, and 3.9 percent of the common variance, respectively. Five additional factors with eigen values of less than 1.00 each accounted for the remaining common variance. Given their low eigen values, however, these final five factors were not subjected to further analysis (Stewart 1981).

The factor analysis results strongly suggested that there were seven key aspects (evaluative criteria) of the interview situation to which the interviewers attached varying degrees of importance. The first factor we called the *social interaction factor*. Some attributes which loaded heavily on the social interaction factor were: displays a sense of humor, has a positive

TABLE 1

FACTOR MATRIX OF THE CRITICAL ATTRIBUTES OF THE INITIAL JOB INTERVIEW

	Item	Factor							Communality
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
18	Displays sense of humor	61	06	21	04	25	-05	-03	559
22	Displays positive outlook	59	16	03	20	05	21	06	610
19	Poised during interview	49	16	07	05	14	21	20	433
15	Demonstrates enthusiasm	44	01	-06	05	-01	21	17	518
21	Good eye contact	40	12	14	21	23	21	08	451
17	Confidence in interaction	39	03	16	-10	08	31	01	411
35	Poor social skills	36	27	29	11	11	-01	14	523
07	Hand gestures appropriate	27	12	-05	08	20	17	02	492
50	Too arrogant or aggressive	06	68	11	10	02	01	10	542
49	Too loud during interview	19	65	09	20	23	01	10	631
44	Demonstrates radical ideas	06	52	22	07	04	10	03	400
43	Reveals narrow interests	11	35	28	07	07	11	06	627
31	Responds w/only yes or no	11	12	67	10	10	20	06	565
47	Gives indefinite responses	02	37	46	08	09	21	21	494
39	Appears indecisive	18	26	44	17	10	24	18	514
38	Unrealistic job expectations	-05	35	40	17	-01	17	02	463
33	No spontaneity	40	07	40	11	20	08	05	449
41	Negative outlook	19	24	34	18	14	12	04	448
36	Lacks self-confidence	15	11	30	09	22	10	16	658
42	Appears defensive	15	26	28	28	14	01	04	644
14	Punctual for interview	04	14	06	82	05	13	13	785
37	Was late for interview	03	09	16	78	15	-02	03	709
46	Personal appearance inapprop.	23	30	22	49	10	02	12	534
12	Neat-professional appearance	34	24	-03	43	02	20	20	506
25	Positive and courteous	25	27	15	31	24	30	09	602
02	Demonstrates good vocabulary	12	09	09	17	09	12	01	430
26	Nervous habits displayed	05	17	07	01	70	07	12	641
27	Speaks too softly	18	-04	14	16	61	10	01	514
48	Smokes during interview	21	37	-15	25	42	01	17	542
32	Seems tense	20	14	39	-03	42	19	15	552
45	Appears restless	22	37	29	14	41	04	24	552
40	Appears awkward	21	32	35	05	37	14	28	618
34	Awkward in greeting	35	27	28	19	35	00	12	638
04	Body posture appropriate	21	13	-02	14	22	09	07	415
23	Responses convincing	12	01	14	00	09	62	07	488
24	Appropriately assertive	24	-03	06	05	22	51	12	447
08	Responses clear	-02	06	15	10	-08	47	12	313
09	Appears calm	30	06	-03	00	30	38	09	465
15	Maintains self-control	09	21	22	-11	11	34	15	471
03	Listens well	04	22	11	23	09	34	-03	330
16	Oral language clear	12	10	19	05	03	32	16	271
20	Confidence in own abilities	21	-05	05	18	09	31	07	528
11	Evidences long range goals	17	04	-01	24	-12	23	21	428
01	Appears self-confident	12	05	-07	-02	17	19	01	542
28	Unprepared for interview	-02	03	24	12	22	14	74	731
13	Prepared for interview	14	17	01	23	-02	21	71	681
29	Unfamiliar with company	13	11	10	-08	14	06	51	466
10	Can state how w/benefit company	12	01	-15	15	10	25	-31	416
06	Discusses shortcomings	18	09	10	07	03	16	21	454
30	Narrow career objectives	13	19	20	14	-01	11	20	596
Eigen value		13.1	2.2	2.0	1.8	1.3	1.1	1.0	
Percentage of common variance		50.2	8.4	7.5	6.7	4.9	4.3	3.9	86.0

Note: Decimals have been omitted from the factor matrix. N = 260 job interviewers. Five other factors with eigen values less than 1.00 were also discovered in the factor analysis. Because of their low eigen values, they were not included in the table; therefore, the percentage of common variance does not total 100. For descriptive purposes, Factor 1 = social interaction factor, Factor 2 = arrogance factor, Factor 3 = low self-confidence factor, Factor 4 = etiquette factor, Factor 5 = anxiety factor, Factor 6 = professional poise factor, and Factor 7 = preparedness factor.

outlook, is poised during interview, demonstrates enthusiasm, maintains good eye contact, and shows confidence in interaction. Factor 2 was labeled the *arrogance factor* and was accounted for by such items as: too arrogant or aggressive, too loud, and demonstrates radical ideas. Factor 3 we called the *low self-confidence factor*. Examples of items which loaded heavily on this factor are: responds with only a yes or no, gives indefinite responses, appears indecisive, has unrealistic job expectations, and demonstrates no spontaneity. Factor 4 was branded the *etiquette factor* and included the items dealing with punctuality, appearance, and manners. Factor 5 was the *anxiety factor* and was tapped by such items as: displayed nervous habits, speaks too softly, smokes, seems tense, and appears restless. The sixth factor was labeled the *professional poise factor* and was loaded on by the items: convincing presentations and responses, appropriately assertive, clear responses, calm, and self-controlled. In a sense, this factor appears similar to Factor 1. Note, however, that humor, enthusiasm, and positive outlook are virtually absent from Factor 6. The final factor, the *preparedness factor*, was represented by the items dealing with preparedness for the interview and familiarity with the company.

Interviewers versus Students

Seven factor-based scores were computed for each job interviewer and student by averaging each person's responses to those items which had factor loadings greater than or equal to .40 on a given factor (Kim and Mueller 1978). One-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were then performed on the factor scores with job interviewer versus student as the between-subjects factor.

The ANOVAs indicated that the students significantly misperceived the interviewers' importance ratings on three of the seven factors. Specifically, students significantly underestimated the importance weights assigned by the interviewers to two factors: the low self-confidence factor, $F(1,368) = 13.34$, $p < .001$; and the professional poise factor, $F(1,368) = 11.04$, $p < .001$. Interestingly, the students overestimated the importance weights ascribed to the preparedness factor, $F(1,368) = 5.05$, $p < .03$. On the remaining four factors, there were no

statistically significant differences between the students' and the interviewers' importance ratings, (all $Fs < 1.50$). The means for these ANOVAs are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2

MEANS AND ANOVA SUMMARIES ON STUDENTS' VS. INTERVIEWERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SEVEN INITIAL JOB INTERVIEW FACTORS

Factor	Means		F(1,368)	p
	Inter-viewers	Students		
Social interaction (5 items)	2.3	2.2	1.14	.29
Arrogance (3 items)	2.2	2.3	0.81	.37
Low self-confidence (5 items)	1.9	2.2	13.34	.01
Etiquette (4 items)	1.9	1.9	0.64	.43
Anxiety (5 items)	2.8	2.7	0.46	.50
Professional poise (3 items)	1.9	2.1	11.04	.01
Preparedness (3 items)	2.1	1.9	5.05	.03

Note: 260 interviewers and 110 students. Ratings are based on responses to 5-point scales with 5 = not at all important and 1 = very important.

Negativity Bias

It had been hypothesized from attribution theory that interviewers and students would give more weight to negative attributes than to positive attributes. An ANOVA on the average response to the 25 negative items versus the average response to the 25 positive items failed to produce evidence for the negativity bias, $F(1,368) < 1.00$.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One purpose of the present study was to quantitatively determine the factors or evaluative criteria used by interviewers in the initial job interview. We found through factor analysis that the interviewers broke the interviewees' attributes into seven significant dimensions or factors involving social interaction, arrogance, low self-confidence, etiquette, anxiety, professional poise, and preparedness. The overlap between this set of factors and the factors found in other studies is considerable (see Goodall and Goodall 1982), which attests to the convergent validity of the present study.

A second purpose of this study was to determine consistencies and discrepancies between the interviewers' and the potential applicants' (students') ratings of how important these factors are in the initial job interview. Here, we found that the marketing students accurately perceived the interviewers' importance ratings on four of the seven factors. However, the students significantly underestimated the importance of the low self-confidence factor and the professional poise factor and significantly overestimated the preparedness factor. These misperceptions provide compelling clues to the marketing educator (and to the student) on the areas in which students should be better prepared. Our data suggest that the students need to take more seriously their public display of self-confidence and their professional poise. Although these factors themselves are not easy to teach, their perceived importance can be. Classroom activities incorporating and stressing the use and practice of such skills can help students become less intimidated across many social and professional situations (e.g., class presentations, case presentations, group panels, etc.). We are not advocating a marketing course called "Self-Confidence and Professional Poise," but if the relevant skills can be worked on in the everyday routine of class the payoffs will go well beyond the initial interview.

The overestimation of the importance of the preparedness factor seems puzzling at first glance. However, upon reflection the pieces of the puzzle begin to fall into place. If there is a single factor that is drilled into students by their professors and the college milieu it is "preparedness." Students must be prepared for quizzes, assignments, and class presentations. Moreover, educators who are advising students preparing for the job market may say repeatedly, "Do your homework on the firms before you go on your interview." Preparedness, then, is a salient factor to the students.

Finally, we did not find support for the hypothesis that interviewers and students put more weight on negative information than on positive information. This is an encouraging result, for it promotes positive action rather than a negative (avoidance) action on the part of the interviewee. That is, instead of worrying and concentrating exclusively on negative behavioral traits, the interviewee can work on displaying his or her positive features as well.

Overall, the results of the present study provide some data that should be helpful to the educator in grooming students for the job market (Hafer and Hoth 1981). But we conclude with an important point that is often implied but seldom stated, perhaps because it seems so self-serving. *Students are a reflection of their educators.* As educators, we owe it not only to our students to see that they are well groomed for the job market, but also to ourselves.

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