

Our Take: Be Humble

by Jon Jacobs - August 8, 2008

Humility helps. Haughtiness hurts. That's a message I'm hearing with increasing frequency when career experts discuss interviewing skills.

"Too many people in interviews come off as a little too confident, a little bit arrogant," says one portfolio manager at an institutional asset management firm. Instead of telling an interviewer that "you should hire me because....," he reminds candidates, "in the end, the person is going to hire you because they like you, they want to work with you or they want to do business with you."

Likeability has always topped the list of factors separating candidates who get offers from those who don't. And no one likes a know-it-all.

At the same time, more and more employers are holding out for the "ideal" candidate. Besides requiring recent experience that precisely mirrors their current opening, employers often look for rare accomplishments and abilities that lift one candidate above the sea of well-qualified contenders.

Delicate Dance

So while our headline's advice might sound trivially obvious, it's not so simple to put into practice. That's because the candidate selection process creates myriad pressures to act anything but humble. In fact, phrases like "walk on water" - out of favor since the 1980s among law school admissions officers - are used in the hedge fund business to this day.

Rather than a bright red line, then, successful interviewing calls for a delicate dance between self-promotion and self-effacement.

Here are three situations where it seems especially wise to err on the side of humility:

1. When your interviewer is younger than you.

"You treat that 32-year old like a guru," urges New York executive coach Bill Belknap. "If you come across as their dad, you won't get in the door."

2. When notifying a company you're interviewing with that you've received an offer elsewhere.

Hiring managers are herd animals - just like Web site columnists, and human beings in general. Therefore, a candidate's standing tends to skyrocket once an employer knows another firm is interested. Career coaches readily reel off instances when a prospective employer had dragged its feet, then made an offer just hours after learning a candidate had been offered a job elsewhere. Even before an offer arrives, it's to your advantage to notify prospects if you are in a fast-moving interview process with someone else.

However, never convey such information in a way that could be perceived as an ultimatum. Even though you hope to play on the hiring manager's fear of losing you, saying so explicitly creates a high risk the firm will walk away. Instead, New York career coach Roy Cohen recommends a neutral, low-key approach. Don't indicate you plan on taking the other offer, Cohen says. Just say, "I just want to let you know." Similarly, when informing a prospective employer you have other possibilities, don't say, "I talked with X and they really like me." You'll come off as arrogant.

3. When posing your own questions to an interviewer.

I once heard a career expert advise candidates to ask "penetrating" questions about prospective employers, to prove they'd done their homework. In my next interview, I tried that - and it blew up in my face. My tough questions branded me as a potential troublemaker. The moral: penetration is risky. Instead, signal your interest by exploring how the role fits in with the work group and larger corporate goals. Five O'Clock Club coach Suzanne Harwood suggests asking your interviewer about key issues and challenges the person hired would need to address.

A hiring manager's comment from a 2005 Wall Street Journal/Harris Interactive survey is also instructive. Sue Klose, an executive at Tribune Publishing, said some male MBA candidates "take themselves out of the running in job interviews by coming on a little too strong. They want to know right away what their projects will be and where they'll go next in the company. But women often are more humble and ask more thoughtful questions about the workplace environment, what will make them successful, who they'll be working with."