

# The language of interviews:

It isn't what you say, it's what they hear

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By Robert Holton

After you leave an interview, the difference between what you think you said and what the interviewer actually heard could be the difference between a job offer and a rejection letter. In an interview you describe yourself, talk about the opportunity you are seeking and engage in simple courtesy talk, but everything you say and how you say it can directly affect your ability to get the job you want.

When asked to describe yourself, be careful to avoid overused phrases such as "fast learner," "team player," "proactive," and "self-motivated." An interviewer hears these so often, you run the danger of putting him or her to sleep. While you may think you are talking about your abilities, keep in mind that the person across the desk from you may have talked to five other people that have used the same description. Instead, describe yourself using specific examples, creating more interest and making your skills more memorable.

## Interests and hobbies

You should also be aware that what you are saying about things seemingly unrelated to employment, such as hobbies or community activities, is being analyzed directly in relation to your possible future employment. While hiking or mountain biking may seem innocent hobbies, an interviewer may be hearing that you prefer to work independently, rather than in a team environment. You shouldn't shy away from

discussing a particular interest because of what an interviewer might think-you never know when you will meet a sincere enthusiast-but give some thought before the interview as to how your hobby or community involvement relates to the important qualifications for the job.

## Past employment

Most interviewers believe strongly that actions speak louder than words, so the most important element of self-description is the explanation of your past and current employment. Again, before the interview, give thought to what actions may give a poor impression and which may give a good impression.

Any example in which some other person has to be wrong and you have to be right is probably a bad example, no matter how good you think it makes you look. Pointing out that a former supervisor failed by not following your advice, meaning to give an interviewer the impression you are intelligent, may suggest instead that you have a problem with authority, were not trusted, and are now vindictive. Choose examples that highlight work you did from which all people involved benefited and leave a positive impression of your past work relationships.

**Many people fail to recognize that the interviewer will**

**naturally identify with the employer in any example you give and not with you.**

You may be entering into an employer/employee relationship with the interviewer. Be careful how you phrase past experiences.

When discussing the opportunity you are seeking, the same issue of overused phrases can occur. Phrases like "growth opportunity," "challenging position" "utilizing my skills," and "proper recognition" are not only overused, they also focus only on you. Instead, focus on past examples of when you helped an employer, a group or even a friend improve in some way, emphasize how you found that valuable and express your interest to create similar situations.

Another problem is assuming that the words you and the interviewer use mean the same thing. A phrase like "growth potential" can mean that you are seeking increased responsibilities while staying in the same position until you retire, or that you would not be satisfied unless you were promoted every year and eventually became the vice president. Explain yourself in concrete terms, asking for feedback from your interviewer. For an interview to conclude with both parties having a clear understanding of the job you are seeking and the position that is being offered, give-and-take

discussion is always recommended.

## Small talk

Surrounding the heart of the interview are the courtesy elements: greetings, small talk and farewells. Even these help form the final decision by an interviewer. Remember that the receptionist works with the interviewer and probably will share a first impression. The interview starts the first time you call or the moment you step into the front lobby. A firm handshake and smile are essential, followed by a thank-you for the opportunity. If possible, weave a compliment into the initial small talk regarding something you may have read about the company or the interviewer. Take notice of and make positive comments

about the surroundings. What you fail to say can be just as important as what you do say. If you notice the picture of the interviewer's children playing soccer and make a comment, you have already made yourself more personable and friendlier than many other applicants.

Either before beginning the interview or at the end, the interviewer may make small talk. An interviewer can often determine how easily you interact with others through this process. They may also be further evaluating what you are saying. Remember, the interview begins the moment you make first contact and only ends the moment you leave the parking lot. This does not mean that you should second-guess or modify every word that you say. Be

relaxed, natural and simply aware that what you say or how you say it is part of the interview, no matter how casual or seemingly unrelated the topic.

At the end of the interview, don't ever forget to say "Thank you" and tell the interviewer why you are thankful, whether it is for the opportunity to talk or for any advice that may have been given. A sincere thanks can be the most rewarding words an interviewer can hear. Being concerned with what an interviewer hears, rather than with what you are saying, could very well reward you with a job offer.

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