

Make the right first impression

The job selection process starts long before you reach the interview, says

Christopher Middleton

Once upon a time, a job interview didn't begin until you entered the room. These days, the process starts a lot earlier.

"Both sides have upped their game," says experienced trainer Charlie Ryan, who runs a company called The Recruitment Queen. "The interviewers are doing their research on the candidates, using resources such as Facebook, while interviewees use Google to find out everything they can about the company."

From the candidate's point of view, this amassing of corporate information is no longer an optional extra, says Dan Hawes, co-founder of Brighton-based Graduate Recruitment Bureau. "It's a vital basic requirement. As an interviewee you should find out everything you can about the company: its corporate structure, its recent financial performance and that of its rivals, too. You can also go one stage further and apply for the latest accounts from Companies House.

"Another trick that gives you an edge on your competitors is finding out who'll be interviewing you and researching them on the internet. Discovering that you share, say, an interest in waterskiing could be invaluable."

Next question – what to wear? Well, some companies insist that they don't judge on external appearance. "We have strict rules governing what we do and don't assess," says Beth Jenkins, campus marketing manager for oil company Shell, which takes on 150 graduates each year. "And not one of them relates to the interviewee's clothes or behaviour," she says.

However, some companies aren't so clear on the subject, which means it's only the most cavalier candidates who risk anything other than standard business attire. "When it comes to clothes, it's best to try to reflect the culture of your potential employer," advises Hawes.

That said, all your good sartorial work can be undone by basic errors. "You simply must remember to switch off your mobile phone, and take your headphones out of your ears," warns Denise Taylor, of recruitment training firm Amazing People, who has witnessed both these sins committed during interviews.

"I also strongly recommend wearing a watch. Quite often, young people use the clock on their mobile, and it doesn't look good if you've been asked to do a timed, 10-minute presentation, and you're constantly breaking off to check your phone."

Remember, too, to be polite to everyone you meet. Recruitment trainers are at pains to point out that you will be assessed by all the people you come across, including those who take your coat and offer you a cup of coffee.

Speaking of which, if you're nervous, it's best not to accept a drink, say the trainers. Accidental spills will only put you more on edge, plus it's a visible and audible giveaway if your hands shake when lifting the cup, or placing it back on the saucer.

Not that nerves are necessarily seen as a bad thing. "They can show that an interviewee really wants the job, and it's far better that someone is nervous rather than casual and arrogant," says Sara Reading, head of graduate recruitment for audit and accounting firm KPMG, which takes on 1,000 graduates a year in the UK.

For those who aren't confident that all interviewers will be so kind, a good way to keep the butterflies at bay, says Hawes, is to do a practice journey to the interview venue a week in advance. You'll feel less stressed

ALL TIED UP

A crisp shirt and tie will smarten up a casual outfit. But keep both plain and simple – think discreet stripes rather than cartoon characters or distracting patterns in psychedelic shades

THE HANDSHAKE

Use a firm – but not overpowering – grip and maintain eye contact with your interviewer as you shake hands

CASE IN POINT

Get a smart portfolio case that's big enough to carry samples of your work in a neat binder to keep them in order and stop them getting dog-eared

START ON THE RIGHT FOOT

Make sure your shoes are clean and polished. Scruffy boots are for working on building sites only



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