.....5 Soft Skills to Showcase in an Interview

By Miriam Salpeter | U.S.News & World Report LP – Fri, Mar 22, 2013 3:21 PM EDT

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If you are extremely qualified, have terrific application materials, a targeted resume and you're interviewing for jobs, but always coming up with a silver medal, it's possible that you're bumping up against an elusive category: likability. Also known in the industry as "cultural fit," likability is a reason many candidates don't make the final cut--the interviewers either didn't like them or didn't believe they would mesh well with current employees.

One of the reasons that most employers don't provide specific feedback to a second-place candidate is because it's difficult to explain why someone doesn't fit in. An employer can get in legal hot water for explaining that someone didn't get hired because the team just didn't like the candidate and couldn't imagine spending a lot of time together.

Emotional intelligence, otherwise known as soft skills, is the category of skills most likely involved when evaluating likability or fit. Wikipedia defines them as "Personal attributes that enhance an individual's interactions, job performance and career prospects. Unlike hard skills, which are about a person's skill set and ability to perform a certain type of task or activity, soft skills relate to a person's ability to interact effectively with co-workers and customers and are broadly applicable both in and outside the workplace."

Soft skills include: attitude, communication skills, time management, critical thinking and a slew of other categories that do not relate to intelligence.

There's no question that soft skills play a role in most, if not all, hiring decisions. So how can you demonstrate these skills during an interview? Eddie Earnest from HigherNext (www.highernext.com), a company that offers the Certified Business Laureate (CBL) certification tests and credentialing system, suggests the following tips to help highlight these five soft skills during an interview.

1. Work ethic. Make sure to weave your thoughts about how important the company's mission and vision are to you and explain why you're willing to go the extra mile to help the organization succeed. One tenet of evaluating candidates is that past performance is a predictor of future results. Make sure you prove that you have a strong work ethic by giving examples from the past about how you went above and beyond the call of duty to get a job done. "Describe how you always complete projects efficiently and on-time, why you're punctual and persistent and how you balance your drive to succeed with the company's goals," Earnest says.

2. Positive attitude. Give examples of how you improved employee morale in a past position, or how your positive attitude helped motivate your colleagues or those you managed. Earnest suggests: "Some people are naturally bubbly and always upbeat. Others have a more tame and low-energy demeanor. Especially if you tend to be more low-key, smile when you shake the interviewer's hand and make an extra effort to add some intonation and expression to your responses."

Make sure you aren't boring or dry, or you could lose your chance to be hired.

3. Communication skills. Your interview is a great opportunity to demonstrate how well you communicate, so be sure you prepare and practice responses to showcase your best skills. Earnest says, "Be concrete with these examples, and bring proof to the interview. Provide examples of materials you created or written campaigns you developed in past positions."

4. Time management. This is a crucial skill many employers seek in their hires. Earnest notes, "It's especially important for candidates who want to work in a startup to know how to manage their time, tasks and responsibilities effectively." Be prepared to explain how you prioritize the most important items first, delegate the items that others can do and figure out a way to get things done in the confines of your resources on the job.

5. Self confidence. Earnest reminds job seekers, "You can demonstrate self confidence at the interview by the way you present yourself, including how you dress for the interview, the way you approach to shake hands and how you speak about your experiences during the interview."

If you're not particularly confident, practice acting like you are. Make direct eye contact when speaking with strangers. Listen to your own voice--is it shrill or timid? Rehearse speaking in a more confident-sounding voice. Don't forget about your body language, which is one of the first ways employers will gauge your confidence levels. If you tend to hunch over, make sure you think about sitting up during your interview.

Don't forget to think about soft skills when you prepare for interviews to be sure you demonstrate everything you have to offer the employer.

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Have you ever walked out of an interview thinking, "Wow! This job almost sounds too good to be true!"

If so, there's a reason for that.

Don't forget: The interview is a two-way street. Yes, you're selling yourself to them, but they're also selling you on the job. This is especially true if you're a high-quality candidate. Your interviewer may paint a beautiful picture of what the company has to offer, but sadly, it might not be a full or accurate picture.

It happens all the time: You start a new job only to find out that the position isn't what you thought it would be, the travel required is far greater than you expected, the hours don't match what was promised…

Interviewers aren't necessarily trying to intentionally mislead you. In some cases, they might be ill-informed themselves. Fooling a candidate into taking a position doesn't do the company any favors. Surveys show that employees who get the wrong information during the interview are much more likely to feel unsatisfied and start looking to work elsewhere quickly.

Still, a 2012 report from Development Dimensions International, Inc. reveals the most common complaint among new hires is getting an unrealistic, inaccurate picture of the job during the hiring process.

So, what's a job candidate to do? In short, you have to investigate. Ask questions and do your own research.

Questions to Ask

There are two different "types" of questions to ask your interviewer. One type probes for real, factual information. The second gathers perception-based information, which is subjective and shouldn't be taken as pure fact.

1. Factual

•What is the turnover rate for this position?

•Do you have any statistics regarding employee engagement? (Some companies do surveys.)

•Can I see the full, official job description?

•Who will I be working with most and can I meet them?

2. Perception-based

•Can you tell me about the company culture?

•Can you tell me about the dynamics of the team I'll be working with?

Research Areas

Of course, there's no guarantee that the above questions will elicit "truth" so it's worthwhile doing a little research on your own as well.

1. Observation: While you're there for the interview, look around. What does the environment feel like? Do people look happy and productive, or stressed and overworked?

2. Public Information: Look at the financials of the company (if it's public); read press releases, customer reviews, and other information available online. All of this gives you a sense of the company's overall standing and reputation.

3. Glassdoor.com: This website gives you an insider's look at what it's really like to work at a company. Current and former employees can post anonymously regarding anything—company culture, job duties, salaries, interviews, you name it.

Next time you head out for an interview, remember that it's not just about proving you're the right person for the job. It's also about making sure the job is right for you.

It's still pretty likely that, once you're in the job, you'll experience a few surprises—some good, some bad. Hopefully, following these tips will help ensure you start with realistic expectations and minimize the negative revelations.

Chrissy Scivicque, the founder of EatYourCareer.com, believes work can be a nourishing life experience. As a career coach, corporate trainer, and public speaker, she helps professionals of all levels unlock their true potential and discover long-lasting career fulfillment.

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 How to Meaningfully Mentor in a Matter of Minutes

By Marty Nemko

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Marty Nemko

Increasingly, managers are asked to mentor their supervisees and are expected to do it on top of everything else and without much training.

Here's a crash course on few-minute mentoring.

First, what is mentoring? It's not supervision or evaluation—those are mandated and judgmental. It's not training—that's purely instructional. Mentoring is voluntary, the intersection of coaching, listening, asking and tactfully suggesting, mainly on issues of the protege's choosing.

If you're like most managers, you'll mentor during the proverbial "managing by walking around." Yet even in those catch-as-catch-can moments, take a moment to prepare:

•Do you have a goal or simply want to hear what's on your supervisee's mind?

•If you have a goal, how can you tactfully ask about it? Put yourself in the supervisee's shoes: How would you want the question phrased?

•It's still not time to open your mouth. Look at the supervisee: Does he or she look too busy to talk? Or is he or she averting eyes? Both could be a sign that mentorship isn't welcomed.

If the person consistently hints that he or she is not interested in your mentorship, it may be wise to direct your efforts elsewhere. But let's assume otherwise. Of course, every situation is different, but here's a sample dialogue, with underlying principles noted.

Manager: Hi Mary. Hey, you had talked about doing more professional reading. Had a chance to do any?

Mary: Not really. I should though.

Manager: OK.

In this scenario, the manager realizes that pushing further would likely make the exchange feel more like evaluative supervision. He reminds Mary, the supervisee, and in doing so, implies she needs to do more reading. That's enough for now. Having subtly pushed her, the manager makes his next question one that won't make her feel pressured or defensive:

Manager: So is there anything you'd find helpful to chat about? Anything I can do to make your life easier?

To maximize the chance Mary will jump on something, the manager asks two open-ended questions: one very broad, the other probing for an area she's finding difficult.

Mary: Easier would be good.

Manager: Something specific or just a general feeling of being overwhelmed?

The manager words the above question as to not make Mary feel denigrated. For example he didn't say, "Are you feeling overwhelmed?" or, "What's the problem?"

Mary: There's a lot to do.

Manager: I can understand.

Even if the manager can't quite understand, it's worth being empathetic unless he decides to abandon the mentoring role in favor of bring-the-hammer-down supervision.

Manager: Want to see if there's at least a little fix possible?

The mentor wants the mentee's assent before launching in. And the use of "at least a little fix" reassures Mary, the supervisee, that the manager won't demand a personality transplant.

Mary: Sure.

Manager: So do you want to eat the salami a bite at a time, I mean take one task that's eating you up? Or look at the overall situation?

Giving choices is a way to give the person a say in the matter. It's also helpful when dealing with someone who doesn't easily generate ideas.

Mary: It isn't really any one thing.

Manager: Is there something new you want to try, or would you like a suggestion?

Mentors should try to get ideas to come from the mentee. They're more likely to be implemented and to preserve the person's self-esteem. But sometimes, people do need outside input.

Mary: I'm open.

Manager: Well, some people find it helpful to think continually, "Do I really need to do this? And if so, is there a less time-consuming way to do it?"

Mary: I'll think about trying that. But a lot of times, I just don't know whether there is a more efficient way?

Manager: In cases like that, might it be worth asking someone you know is efficient how he or she would do it? Or even have that person watch you do the task?

Advice may engender less defensiveness when dispensed as a question.

Mary: I don't know. I'll think about it. Thanks for the ideas.

It's possible she'll blow off every suggestion or possibly try them, but it's clear she's had enough for now.

Manager: By the way, I liked that comment you made at the meeting about the new product.

Where possible, end on a positive note.

Mary: Thank you.

The manager smiles and walks on.

That exchange took just a few minutes yet left the mentee with plenty to think about without making her feel unduly defensive. Mary may well be open to future mentoring sessions.

The San Francisco Bay Guardian called Dr. Nemko "The Bay Area's Best Career Coach" and he was Contributing Editor for Careers at U.S. News. His sixth and seventh books were published in 2012: How to Do Life: What They Didn't Teach You in School and What's the Big Idea? 39 Disruptive Proposals for a Better America. More than 1,000 of his published writings are free on www.martynemko.com. He posts here every Monday.

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