

Marketing oneself: what do small business owners look for when interviewing job candidates?

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is aimed at helping job candidates market themselves in hopes of receiving the job offer. The researcher investigated what small business owners look for when interviewing candidates for positions within their companies. The research question is as follows: What are the top five attributes you look for when interviewing someone for a position within your company? (Participants were asked to rank their top five attributes, with #1 being most important.) Structured interview questions provided relevant data in relation to the top five attributes when assessing potential employees. Business owners in this study owned companies in the fields of retail, restaurant, manufacturing, healthcare, auto, real estate, and telecommunications. In analyzing data from this research question, a major theme emerged. All twenty participants stated that communication was an attribute they looked for when interviewing potential employees. Communication was not only a top five attribute with all respondents; it was one of the top three attributes in all twenty respondents' answers. Nine sub-themes emerged as well and will be discussed. They include: follow the communication style of the interviewer, avoid speaking negative about previous employer/colleagues/organizations, prepare for the interview through conducting mock interviews, research the company, nonverbal communication speaks volumes, ask relevant questions, Don't dominate the interview, listen, show confidence, show a positive attitude/personable. After findings are discussed, recommendations for future research will be addressed.

Keywords: interviewing, personal attributes, communication, job applicant, employment decisions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When a person applies for a specific job, it can be assumed that he or she possesses the hard skills required to fulfill the job requirements. These hard skills include the knowledge, skills, and other abilities needed to perform a job function. However, what may not be assumed, are the soft skills needed to perform in a job as well. Soft skills include the interpersonal skills required to be successful in fulfilling job responsibilities. Soft skills have more to do with who we are than with that we know (Robles, 2012) and companies are beginning to rate employees' interpersonal skills as more important than analytical abilities (Klaus, 2010.) Klaus (2010) continues that success is based on what one knows but also how one communicates it. Hard skills may get someone an interview, but it's the soft skills that will get, and keep, the job.

In a study conducted by Robles (2012) the top ten soft skills perceived most important by business executives were identified. Findings included integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic. Although all important, the remainder of this paper will focus upon communication. In Robles (2012) study, executives overwhelmingly indicated that integrity and communication were two soft skills needed by employees in today's workplace. In this study, 100% of respondents indicated that communication to be very important or extremely important.

Research currently shows that employers want to hire people with strong interpersonal skills, which include communication skills. James & James (2004) state that hiring people with strong interpersonal skills is crucial in maintaining a competitive advantage. However, it's also been stated that those graduating from high school may lack soft skills needed to succeed in today's workplace (Gewertz, 2007.) It is imperative that future employees understand the importance of interpersonal skills, in this case, specifically communication, in order to gain, and keep employment.

PURPOSE

The ultimate goal of this study was to help job interview candidates understand what affects employment decisions during job selection interviews

RESEARCH QUESTION

Research Question- What are the top five attributes you look for when interviewing someone for a position within your company? (Participants were asked to rank their top five attributes, with #1 being most important.)

Using a qualitative methodology, perceptions of twenty small business owners in northeast Pennsylvania were analyzed. All small business owners interviewed were the people that made the hiring decisions within their companies. All interviewed small business owners in this study employed between 1-50 employees. The businesses in this study included fields of retail, restaurant, manufacturing, health care, auto, real estate, and telecommunications.

FINDINGS

In analyzing data from this research question, a major theme emerged. All twenty participants stated that communication was an attribute they looked for when interviewing potential employees. Communication was not only a top five attribute with all respondents; it was one of the top three attributes in all twenty respondents' answers. In addition, it should be noted that all twenty participants were able to rank their top five attributes with no issues of "ties." All responses were clearly stated without hesitation. Finally, it should be noted that communication was the only attribute that all twenty participants stated within their lists, no other given attributes were stated by all respondents. Therefore, communication was the most significant finding in this study.

DISCUSSION

In regard to communication, respondents were most interested in assessing whether the potential employee could effectively interact with him or her. This included both verbal and non-verbal communication skills. Below is a summarization of respondent's feedback in regard to what they look for within the theme of communication.

Nine sub-themes within the area of communication are summarized below.

Follow the communication style of the interviewer. It is important to let the interviewer set the tone of the interview. By doing so, one will learn a great deal not just about the interviewer's personality, but also the company culture and environment.

One respondent stated, "I like to start all interviews with a joke. By doing this, I get a sense of the person's sense of humor. This is important to me because we joke quite a bit during the day and I want someone that will fit in and take a joke. If a person is too serious, he or she won't fit in our work environment."

Avoid speaking negative about previous employer/colleagues/organizations: It is important for the interviewee to refrain from speaking negatively about previous employers, colleagues, and/or organizations.

One respondent stated, "I realize not all employment situations end well, people leave places for a lot of reasons, and people are fired for a lot of reasons. However, I wouldn't hire someone that talked bad about a previous employer because I figure they will do the same thing when they leave my business. It shows a lack of respect and I don't want that in any employee. I realize people are fired unfairly and give them the benefit of the doubt, until they prove otherwise. If they talk bad during the interview, they have just proven themselves otherwise."

Prepare for the interview through conducting mock interviews: It is important to prepare for the interview by practicing through mock interviews. This will help the candidate prepare for potential questions and may ease the anxiety he or she will feel during the "real" interview. By conducting mock interviews beforehand, the interviewee will most likely be able to communicate more effectively during the job interview.

One respondent stated, "It is always apparent to me when someone is prepared for the interview. Sure, they may not know exactly what I am going to ask them, but I can tell the ones that come to the interview ready to answer. There are so many websites that give people direction and prepare them for popular interview questions. I am more likely to hire someone that obviously prepared themselves well, this tells me about them as a person, an employee."

Research the company: It is important to research the company prior to the interview. The interviewee should arrive at the interview with knowledge of the company's Mission (purpose), history, key personnel, and any other pertinent information specific to the

organization. This serves two purposes: 1. It gives the interviewee important background information so that he or she will be able to effectively discuss the company during the interview, and 2. It shows the interviewer that the interviewee took initiative to find out about his or her company.

One respondent stated, "I once interviewed someone and he didn't know the name of my business. I couldn't believe it at the time but I've seen similar things over the years. I've been in business for 20 years and have interviewed hundreds of people. I will only hire people that come to the interview with knowledge of my business and see how they fit into the picture. I can tell if someone is looking for a paycheck, that's not the person I want to hire. I want to hire the person that believes in what I believe, and wants to be part of the greater good."

Nonverbal communication speaks volumes: Communication includes sending and receiving messages. These messages don't necessarily have to be words, they can include eye contact, body posture, and gestures as well. These nonverbal attributes are important as well during the interview process.

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Ask relevant questions: It is important that potential employees have come to the interview prepared, by having done research on the prospective company, including key people that work within the company. This will help allow for thoughtful comment, and the ability to ask relevant questions. It's just as important that the company be the "right" fit for the employee as it is for prospective employee to be the "right" fit for the company. Being able to ask relevant questions will help the prospective employee assess the company and decide if it's an environment that he/she will fit into.

One respondent stated, "When I interview someone, I want to have a two-way dialogue with them. I don't want someone that doesn't say a word the entire interview and doesn't have any questions for me at the end of the interview. This doesn't help me to get to know the person."

Don't dominate the interview- listen: It is important to understand when to speak and when to listen. There is a fine line between talking too much and dominating the interview, and having an effective exchange between interviewee/interviewer.

One respondent stated, "I would never hire someone that talks entirely too much during the interview. Communication consists of two things: speaking and listening. If I am interviewing someone and he/she isn't able to sit and listen, this tells me something about them. I take time to listen to my employees and in turn want my employees to provide me the same respect. In fact, I spend more time listening to employees throughout any given day, and that is an attribute I look for in an employee."

Show confidence: Going into an interview with confidence is important. This shows that one is prepared and ready to handle a challenge.

One respondent stated, "When someone is confident, it shows. I've interviewed a lot of people, and the confident ones stand out. I want an employee to be able to speak his/her mind, and to be able to add their thoughts to the creative and innovative process, that's important to me."

Positive attitude/personable: Being personable can show the potential employer that one is a “people” person, this is extremely important in many of today’s small businesses.

One respondent stated, “Customer service is everything to a small business. We must provide exceptional customer service or we won’t survive. I need someone who fits that bill.”

RECOMMENDATION

Based upon the findings, it would be recommended to replicate this study within medium and large size firms in order to compare data with what was found within sampled small businesses.

SUMMARY

The research question was aimed at assessing the attributes small business owners look for during the selection interview. Communication was found to be the most crucial attribute the business owners looked for when interviewing potential employees. One respondent stated, “It’s not enough that my employees can do their job, they must be able to handle conflict, work with others in the office, negotiate; basically, communicate. If someone cannot effectively communicate, I don’t care how well they perform their job, they won’t be successful in my company.”

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