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Beyond Applications: Exploring the Impact of First Impressions during the Interview Process

Anna Thomas

Defining the Focus

First, what are first impressions? According to Albarracin, Wang, Li, & Noguchi (2008), first impressions are judgements based on concrete and abstract constructs that are formed during human interactions. These impressions are held in our memories and shape our beliefs and attitudes for individuals and events. In relation to the hiring process, first impressions are the encoded elements related to personality and appearance which can influence potential employers. Framing first impressions through a semiotic lens, elements from our clothing and applications become symbols. In turn, these symbols reflect basic truths embedded within our personalities.

HR Reality Check for Educators

As instructional and administrative positions become more competitive, first impressions can supplement applications and portfolios. Researchers have identified multiple areas of consideration for educational professionals initially entering the field or those veterans seeking out promotions.

Are you Ready for a Faculty Parking Pass?

Teacher preparation programs need more direction in promoting appropriate dress during field-based experiences (Colbert, 2008).

Some instructional positions (ex. PE) focus more on appearance than others despite their listed bona fide occupational qualifications (BFOQs) (Dillion, McCaughtry, & Hummel, 2010).

Digital footprints extend farther than you think. Personality information can be gleaned from your email address (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2008). Potential employers are taking note of our selected domains, use of characters, and selected.

Additional Considerations

1. Footwear Counts: Low-heeled shoes were found to give the impression of emotional stability, while colorful, pointy shoes indicated extraverted tendencies.
2. Give Me a Hand: Quality of handshakes are more important for women than men during the interview process. Shake with confidence.

3. Visibility Promotes Inclusion: Workforces that already employ individuals with disabilities are more apt to provide workplace accommodations and have better perceptions on the abilities of employees with exceptional needs. Welcoming environments are typically evident.
4. Unintended Considerations: When being interviewed, keep in mind the interviewer might be unconsciously factoring in attractiveness, especially if the position requires interacting with the public.
5. Grizzly Gets the Job: Facial hair was found to represent competency, attractiveness, and agreeableness.

Unless you are applying for a position the explicitly requires physical attractiveness as a BFOQ (ex. a certain chicken wing franchise), then your looks should not factor into the decision-making process. However, your degree of attractiveness is not protected under Title VII, as appearance or the lack of is not recognized as a protective class (unless you live in Michigan). Employers often subconsciously associate attractiveness with competency and good physical health (Gumin, 2012). As noted above, educators may encounter this form of bias if applying for positions in the health field or community and public relations.

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About the author

Anna Thomas is a PhD student in the Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership program, focusing on K-12 General Administration.