

Do your research before interview. Study company, industry; prepare talking points

*Mike Rasor, Anne-Margaret Sobota -
Akron Beacon Journal*

You've taken the cap and gown to storage. You've sold back your books for the last time. You've kissed research projects goodbye. Now, after earning that college degree, it's time to put your feet up for a well-earned rest.

Not so fast.

With the ultracompetitive job market, it is becoming more necessary for recent college graduates to do one more homework assignment: Study the company to which they are applying.

Hiring managers say they are impressed by applicants who have a good grasp of the company and its industry --- information that can often be retrieved by visiting the company's Web site.

They also notice when that knowledge is painfully absent.

"If you go on a first date and all you talk about is yourself, you're probably not going to get another date," said Marky Stein, an author and career coach in San Jose, Calif. "Companies are the same way."

When job candidates are ignorant about the company and industry, interviewers "tend to think that the person is just out for themselves," she said. "In other words, they're just out for what they can get from the company, not what they can give to the company."

Stein is not alone. Most interviewers agree that research is essential to have a productive conversation with the candidate.

From her experience hiring bank tellers, branch managers and sales managers at Key Bank, Alexandria Fontecchio finds that recent college graduates lack this preparation more often than their older competitors.

She asks, "What do you know about Key Bank?" That question leads to many young, blank stares.

They reply, "I just want to get started with my career."

Not good enough.

"It's so competitive," Fontecchio said. "The people who have done their homework will get ahead every time."

Mike Kartson, a middle-level education major at the University of Akron in Ohio, had never heard of this requirement until he took several interviewing workshops offered through the university's Center for Career Management.

He said researching a company gets the attention of interviewers.

"It impresses them when you know stuff about them," Kartson said. "They aren't just going to ask you the basic questions. They are going to make you think."

Preparation isn't limited to research, however. Applicants should examine how participation in a student group or college job will help a recent graduate perform in the desired position, said Kent Kirch, director of global marketing for Deloitte & Touche.

"If they can correspond those activities to the position they are after, that can be helpful," he said.

These experiences can come in unexpected places, said Frank Scanlan, manager of the Society of Human Resources Management, a trade association in Alexandria, Va., that represents more than 190,000 human-resources professionals.

For example, if the recent graduate organized a trip to Europe with her friends, that can be mentioned as a leadership experience.

"I think you can do a lot in your college career that shows you're responsible, shows that you're dedicated and shows that you're focused," Scanlan said.

Meghan Phillips, an international-business major at the University of Akron, was able to use that example in a recent job interview. She had helped a former high school teacher plan a class trip to Europe.

Phillips had traveled extensively and knew a lot about things such as travel insurance, flights and group rates. Her experience saved travelers almost \$1,000 each.

And of course, everyone knows that making a good first impression is important.

Shake hands firmly. Use eye contact. Sit up straight. Strengthen your voice. Those are key to a solid first impression, said Alan Nierenberg, author of "Winning the Interview Game." It's also what he sees recent college graduates fail with the most.

Recent grads often "don't come across strong in their first impression," Nierenberg said. "First impressions are lasting. They either carry the interview in a positive or negative way."

Fontecchio from Key Bank said she's also seen candidates blow it as soon as they walked in the door.

One man was rude to the receptionist and security guard as soon as he walked in the door. He even asked the guard to hold his cologne for him during the interview. He treated everybody at Key Bank like nobodies, the recruiter said.

Not surprisingly, the applicant was not hired.

Fontecchio's biggest pet peeve is when a candidate, like the cologne lender, is overconfident and feels he deserves the job.

"You have to be a little humble because you're competing with other people like yourself," she said.

Deloitte's Kirch said interpersonal skills are also a must.

He spoke of a candidate who had the perfect resume --- straight As and a great background. However, not being a "people person" cost the applicant a job.

"This person had no interpersonal skills and people skills," Kirch said. "You need a balanced person."

Career coach Stein agreed. If she could tell her child one piece of advice before the first big interview, it would be to smile. Stein said interviewers make up their minds on a candidate in the first 15 seconds of meeting him or her.

Without smiling, interviewers will view the candidate as hostile, threatening and possibly dangerous, she said.

It's crucial to find a way to relax in the interview, said Kelly Hanna, an e-marketing and advertising student at the University of Akron. Otherwise, she said, the interviewer will sense your tension and may assume you're not good with people.

"Nobody wants to hire somebody that is uptight," she said.

In Nierenberg's book, people skills are one of the keys to landing a job. The theme is treating an interview like a game: You have to strategize to win.

Other essentials for victory include knowing about the company and demonstrating the skills needed to fill the position.

"If you understand the human resources people and what their hot buttons are, you can satisfy those hot buttons," Nierenberg said.

Set yourself apart from the competition by following these guidelines.

- Research your company. Google and www.hoovers.com should be your best friends in preparing for an interview. It will set you apart if you are able to confidently talk to the interviewer about the company's profits, competitors or industry trends.
- Prepare for questions. Start with the basics: "What can you tell me about yourself?" Then move to the noggin-scratchers such as, "What are some of your weaknesses?"
- Prepare anecdotes. You have accomplishments to be proud of. Why keep them secret? Try to work some self-promotion into each of the interviewer's questions.
- Be polite to the secretary. More often, interviewers are asking secretaries about their impression of a candidate. Interviewers have eliminated candidates who did not receive the secretary or receptionist's blessing.
- Send a thank-you note. Human-resources employees interview many people each day. If you didn't distinguish yourself, or even if you did, send a short note to thank the interviewer for the opportunity. In the note, include a reminder of what you may have chatted about.