

# Body language can speak volumes during interview

**T**he most important communication during a job interview is often the unspoken kind. Body language, or nonverbal communication, can let interviewers know more about you than what you tell them.

"We have all experienced instances in which someone is saying one thing and their nonverbal communication says another. We usually believe the nonverbal," says Susan Bixler, author of five books on professional image and president of The Professional Image in Atlanta. "It's an absolutely critical element in the job interview process. The best resume, the absolute best spoken words don't get an individual a job."

There are many opportunities during a job interview to display bad - and good - nonverbal communication. Here's how to make the most of what your body is saying.

## Shake on it

Your interviewer's initial nonverbal impression of you comes through your first point of contact - the handshake. Don't be afraid to display a strong, firm handshake. Doing otherwise can make you seem insecure and lacking in confidence.

"You think that's simple - everyone knows how to shake hands - but that's not true," says Sherry Maysonave, communication image consultant and author of "Casual Power" (Bright Books, \$29.95). "People tend not to slide their palm in far enough, they tend to think it may be bone-crushing."

Don't be timid - slide your palm all the way in and deliver a firm, confident handshake.

## Musical chairs

If you have several seating options to choose from, ask your interviewer for instructions - don't just assume and take a seat.

How you sit, too, is as important as where you sit.

"If you are sitting on the edge of the seat it can make you look eager but also scared, like you are ready to bolt out of the room," Maysonave says. "Go ahead and slide to the back of the chair and sit tall and straight. That will make you look confident and comfortable."

Women should not cross their legs and instead sit with their knees together. Men should avoid sitting with their legs too wide apart or crossed with the ankle on top of the knee. Both of these positions convey a comfort level that's inappropriate to the job interview situation.

"Anything that creates an intimacy before there's a rapport established will signal to the interviewer that you don't use good judgement and that you resort to inappropriate behavior," Maysonave says. Also, make sure you consistently maintain a comfortable space - about 3 feet - from your interviewer. Shortening that space can feel invasive and, again, inappropriately intimate.

## Hands down

Nervous hand habits, like nail biting, hair twirling and hand twitching, can distract the interviewer and convey nervousness and insecurity. You can sit with your hands clasped together or hold on to a small briefcase or organizer through the interview, Maysonave says. Avoid steepling your fingers, particularly in an upright position, when answering a question.

"This can be perceived as arrogant, saying 'I know more about this subject than you do,'" Maysonave says.

## The eyes have it

We have all heard that eye contact is important - it conveys confidence and respect - but too much eye contact can be bad, too.

"You don't want to make eye contact for more than three or five seconds. It's too intense to sustain it the whole time - the key is make it, break it, make it, break it," Bixler says. Avoiding eye contact, especially while answering a question, can convey dishonesty.

## Practice makes perfect

Because most forms of nonverbal communication are practiced subconsciously, the best way to get rid of bad habits is to become aware of them. Get a friend or family member to practice interview situations with you. Using a video camera to tape the mock sessions can be even more helpful.

"Play the video and view it with a critical and detached eye," Bixler says. "Ask yourself, 'What would I like and not like about this person nonverbally? What's making me feel comfortable, making me feel like I can build a rapport with this person?'" Get your mock interview partner to ask the tough questions that would make you nervous and susceptible to bad body language. "Notice what you do under pressure and be conscious of it," Maysonave says. "The awareness is half the battle."

## Nonverbal cues offer insight into interview

Don't just listen to what your interviewer is saying - watch his or her body language. It can reveal how the interview is going.

"If the interviewer touches her nose, she is disapproving somewhat of what you're saying. If she looks at her watch or shuffles papers, you're not on track," says Sherry Maysonave, a communication-image consultant. "If she leans toward you, she is engaged and is really listening and taking you seriously. If she's leaning back far into the chair, she is evaluating you with a critical eye."

If your interviewer suddenly switches gears - from relaxing in a chair to sitting upright, for example - you may have said something that the interviewer needs to evaluate from a different perspective.

You can tell a difficult question is coming if the interviewer places his fingertips together in an upright, steeple-like fashion.

"This signals that he has disconnected from the interviewee, and is thinking about what he will say next, possibly considering how to say something unpleasant or uncomfortable or how to ask a

delicate or emotionally-charged question," Maysonave says.

And don't ignore the obvious signs. "If the interviewer stands up, the interview is over," Maysonave says.

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