

What We Have Here is Failure to Communicate

Trisha was a mid-level Java developer with a solid history of middleware and JSP work on her resume. Since she was local, we invited her in for an interview without a phone screen. When we started asking her questions, it quickly became obvious that Trisha was a woman of few words. Her answers were short and often composed of “yes/no” responses, even to questions that were meant to start a dialog. Once she did start opening up, I still wasn’t sure she was *actually* talking. I saw her lips moving, and heard mumbling sounds coming out, but it wasn’t anything that sounded like English.

I’m not sure if Trisha was nervous or just shy, but either way, I had to ask her numerous times to repeat herself. Now I was the one getting nervous! I didn’t want to be the guy who “ruined” the interview, so I pulled back on my questions. The other folks in the room and I exchanged uneasy glances. We felt like we were on a *Seinfeld* episode. It was almost impossible to understand Trisha, and when she did speak up, her halting, uncertain, confused speech patterns made us feel more like code breakers than interviewers. I am not exaggerating to say that I did not understand a single answer she gave during the interview.

Knowing, alone, isn’t good enough. You’re going to be talking with other technical people, and you’re going to be talking to customers, and sales reps, and Betty from Marketing. You will write something eventually, whether it’s documentation, or a project plan, or a requirements document. The word processor might correct your spelling, but it won’t correct your lousy writing. The ability to communicate thoughts and ideas, in a clear, concise manner, is an absolutely invaluable skill that employers seek.

The same goes for verbal communication. I used to work with a co-worker who doubled the length of every meeting he was in, because he could not answer a question in less than ten minutes. “Hey, Dennis, what time is it?” “Well, that’s kind of interesting, because I just happened to be reading an article on cesium clocks and leap seconds and the history of the Gregorian Calendar and ...”

I’ll spare you the rest.