The importance of first impressions in a job interview

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The Importance of First Impressions in a Job Interview

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Abstract

In the present study, naive observers evaluated the initial greeting that took place within 59 employment interviews. Two trained interviewers conducted each employment interview, which was videotaped. After each twenty-minute interview, the two interviewers completed a post-interview questionnaire evaluating the candidates on their interview performance, behavior, rapport, and professional skills. These evaluations constituted the interview outcome criteria that we attempted to predict. Brief video clips were extracted from the recordings such that each began when the interviewee knocked on the door and ended five seconds after the interviewee sat down. Only the interviewee could be seen on the video. The video clips were shown to naïve observers who rated the interviewees on 12 interpersonal attributes, among these were hirable, competence, and warmth. These judgements were used to predict the outcome of the interview, operationalized as the mean of the two interviewers' assessments. Naïve observer judgments based on the initial 20-seconds significantly predicted interviewers' assessments who questioned the applicants for over 20 minutes. The present study showed that a personnel director's assessment of an applicant's skill, knowledge and ability might be fixed as early as the initial greeting of the formal interview.

The Importance of First Impressions in a Job Interview

The employment interview remains the most widely accepted method for employee selection. Although the validity of the interview has been questioned (Ulrich & Trumbo, 1965; Schmitt, 1976; Wright, 1969), the employment interview today is considered to be valid and reliable (Harris, 1989; Huffcutt & Arthur, 1994; Wright, Lichtenfels, & Pursell, 1989). Recent studies suggest that interviews can be valid if they are structured and follow certain guidelines that can improve the standardization and diagnosticity of the interview (McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt, & Maurer, 1994; Williamson, Campion, Malos, Roehling, Campion, 1997; Campion, Plamer, & Campion, 1998).

Although structured interviews are the most reliable and valid form of interviewing, there are errors that need to be avoided (Berman, 1997). A common problem in interview evaluations involves the potential over reliance of first impressions (Berman, 1997; Lee, & Gura 1997). Current theories of interpersonal perception and social judgment describe our day-to-day impression formation process as one that is normally characterized by fast, automatic, heuristic-based perception processes that persevere because of a lack of effortful cognitive analysis and biased information processing (Gilbert, 1995).

We know, for example that the more an applicant is similar to the interviewer, the more highly the applicant will be rated higher on likable (Dabbs, 1969), competence (Gifford, & Wilkinson 1985), and confidence (Liden, Martin, & Parsons, 1993). Other biases can result from unconsciously applied stereotypes and prejudices (Blair & Banaji, 1996), not least of which is the ubiquitous "what is beautiful is good" halo effect where evaluations of others are determined by mere physical attractiveness (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972).

Furthermore, once an impression of another is formed it necessarily will influence our behavior toward that individual (Jones, 1990). In fact, our behavior may be affected in such a way that we may unwittingly cause that individual to behave, act, or appear in a manner that is consistent with out expectations (**e.g., Rosenthal, 1991; Snyder, 1984**). In other words, our first impressions can often lead to self-fulfilling prophecies (e.g., Jussim, 1986).

It has been argued that the pre-interview impressions of job candidates can influence an interviewer's post-interview evaluation by influencing how the interviewer conducts the interview (Dougherty, Turban & Callender, 1994) or by causing the interviewer to interpret the information collected during the interview in a manner that is consistent with their initial impression (Phillips & Dipboye, 1989; Merton, 1948; Dipboye, 1982).

Taken together, these biases in person perception and their subsequent effects on interaction behavior lead to the conclusion that the most obvious threat to the validity of an evaluation based on a structured interview is the immediate snap judgment that is often made very early on in the interview process, or perhaps even prior to it's onset (Berman, 1997). It is not only possible, it is <u>likely</u> that the final evaluations made by interviewers will be determined in large part, or at least anchored, by the first impression, which may have been formed at the initial handshake and introduction.

Although prevailing social psychological theory and data strongly predict that professional interviewers are likely to be guilty of "judging a book by its cover," there exists no direct empirical documentation of how important the first impression is in determining an interview outcome. The purpose of this study was to quantify the impact of the first impression on final applicant evaluations based on their interview performance. A sample of naïve

observers watched a video recording of 59 different interviewees as they were greeted by two interviewers and were escorted to a seat. The video clip ended before the first prepared interview question was asked. We hypothesized that the impressions formed by these naïve observers who viewed only this "thin slice" of behavior (for a review and discussion of the "thin slice" literature, see Ambady, Bernieri, & Richeson, 2000) would significantly predict the final assessments made by trained interviewers following their 15 – 25 minute structured interview.

Method

Overview

Naïve observers watched the first few seconds of 59 job interviews and rated each applicant on various attributes including hirability, competence, and warmth. These impressions were compared to final assessments made by two trained interviewers following a 20 minute structured interview and by one trained evaluator who observed the entire interview on videotape.

The Interview

Interviewees. Undergraduates (11 males and 95 females) received extra credit for their participation. Roughly 20% of the sample were students enrolled in the business school, 20% were psychology majors, and the remaining 60% were students enrolled in an introductory psychology class.

Interviewers and evaluators. Each interview was conducted by a team of three assessors, two of whom actually conducted the interviewer while a third (whom we refer to as the *evaluator*) observed it later on videotape. Assessors rotated in and out of the roles of interviewer and evaluator across the set of interviews conducted. Advanced undergraduate psychology students ranging in age from 20 to 28 years served as assessors. Six female interviewers were chosen from fifteen applicants. The selection of each was based on their: (a) prior work experience, (b) plans to further their studies in Industrial or Organizational Psychology, (c) ability to pose questions confidently, and (d) successful completion of an interview training procedure. Four were Caucasian, one was Hispanic and one was Asian.

Interviewers completed four to five training sessions, each lasting about an hour. Interviewers memorized and rehearsed an interview protocol (Appendix A). The interviewers role-played with one another during the first session. The second session consisted of mock interviews with a confederate portraying three types of interviewee: an overly confident, an arrogant, and an uninterested applicant. Interviewers then conducted a literature review on "Interviewing Techniques – The screening Interview" and participated in at least three pilot interviews.

Procedure. Participants were informed over the phone that the purpose of the experiment was to find the best method of conducting a screening interview. It was explained that the interviews would simulate interviews conducted by firms screening candidates for larger client companies where the purpose is to decide whether an applicant will be selected for a second interview and what category of job an applicant seems most to suitable for. Participants were advised to dress appropriately.

The interviewee knocked on the door when reaching the interview room. The two interviewers greeted the applicant and seated them. The interviewers began by asking a neutral question such as "How are you doing today?" The interview protocol consisted of approximately 18 questions that assessed the interviewee's skills, knowledge and attitudes. The two interviewers alternated asking the questions, but either could ask a follow up question

appropriate to an interviewee's response. The interview concluded after all the prepared questions were addressed. Interviews ranged in length from 15 – 25 minutes.[1]

Two cameras recorded the interview. One focused on the entire group of three and was not used in the present study. The other camera was focused exclusively on the interviewee. It was from this camera that the videotapes of the interviewee were made and shown to both the evaluators and naïve observers.

Interviewer Evaluation of Applicants

The assessors (i.e., the two interviewers and the evaluator) independently completed an extensive evaluation of the applicant following each interview. First, each wrote a detailed open-ended report on the candidate. This was followed by a post interview questionnaire that consisted of 56 items. These ratings generally were made on 9-point scales. Items covered such things as: (a) the likelihood of choosing the interviewee for the final selection interview, (b) the job interview category in which the candidate would be placed, (c) the level of rapport experienced between interviewer and applicant, (d) how likable the interviewee was, and (e) the candidate's level of involvement, attentiveness and responsiveness during the interview. The interviewers also remarked on the candidate's physical appearance by assessing how well dressed the applicant appeared. Finally, interviewers assessed the level of motivation expressed by all interview participants as well as their interpersonal skills, professional competence, ability to learn job-related skills and ability to convey knowledge. The interviewers also rated how successful the candidates would be if hired. A more detailed description of this 56-item assessment is found in Gada-Jain (1999).

From this extensive assessment 13 variables were examined in the present study. Specifically, these were evaluations of the applicant's: interpersonal warmth, politeness, likeability, nervousness, expressivity, introversion, confidence, trustworthiness, competence, ambitiousness, hirability, and how well-dressed they believed the applicant to have been.

Thin Slice Judgments

Thin slices. Only the initial greeting was shown to naïve observers. The beginning of each clip was defined as the onset of interviewee's knock on the door. The termination point was defined as 10 seconds following the point at which the interviewee sat down. The 59 clips sampled ranged in length from 20 to 32 seconds. The clips were assembled and counterbalanced such that the order of clips on the stimulus tape was not identical to the order in which the interviews were performed. The thin slice video clips were numbered sequentially and were spaced on the stimulus tape to allow sufficient time for observers to make their judgments.

Naïve Observers. Most observers were students from psychology classes participating for class credit. A few individuals came from a convenience sample who volunteered their time. Of the forty-seven observers, 15 indicated they were male and 22 indicated that they were females. Forty-one participants indicated that English was their primary spoken language. The 13 variables selected from the interview assessments were assessed on an 8-point unipolar scale.

Procedure. Observers were informed that the purpose of the experiment was to study first impressions in a job interview. The observers were assured that there were no right or wrong responses and that they could follow their gut feelings. Observers were instructed to refrain from making any comments and to work independently. The video, played with sound, was stopped after the first clip so that any confusion about the observer's role could be cleared. The tape lasted approximately 35 minutes. Three groups of observers were needed to collect judgments for the 12 attributes plus physical attractiveness. The judgment of well-dressed was made only by the interviewers.

Results

Data Reduction and Reliability

A principal component analysis was performed on the observer data and the interviewer data separately as a guide to help reduce the number of variables for analysis. On the basis of this analysis, an inspection of the raw zero-order intercorrelations, and the constructs suggested by the variable names themselves, the 12 assessment variables (but not dress or attractiveness) were collapsed to create 3 composite variables we named: (a) likable, (b) self-assuredness, and (c) competence. Variances were standardized before composite variables were formed. Table 1 presents the intra cluster correlations of the 12 variables assessed by the interviewers and indicates the composite variable to which they contributed. The results in Table 1 are based on interviewer data only. Results from observer data and evaluator data were comparable.

The ratings of the two interviewers were significantly correlated and appear in Table 2. The degree of consensus between the two interviewers was highest on the composite variable *self-assured* (r=.56, p<.0001) and lowest on *likable* (r=.50, p<.0001). The evaluations of the two interviewers were combined.

Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients were computed to assess the consensus among our sample of naïve observers. The Cronbach Alphas were all above .77 (see Table 2). The evaluations of naïve observers were collapsed to form a single naïve observer judgment. To compare the consensus among observers with that of among the interviewers, mean inter-rater reliability (r) was estimated using the Spearman-Brown formula, relates overall effective reliability and mean inter-rater reliability given the number of raters used (Rosnow, & Rosenthal, 1991). The estimated correlation between any two observers chosen at random thus ranged from .18 - .38. Median level of consensus was slightly higher for interviewers (Median r = .35) than among naïve observers (Median r = .27). However, this difference is not nearly as large as one might expect given the extreme discrepancy in the amount of information each set of evaluators had to work with.

Predicting Interview Outcomes from Naïve Observer Judgments

We sought to determine whether naïve observers who watched just the first few seconds of a job interview could predict an interviewer's assessments following the 20-minute interview. Table 3 displays the correlations between the mean observer judgment and the mean interviewer evaluation for each of the three composite variables. The naïve observer and interviewers assessments correlated significantly on all three composite attributes. As might be expected, the three composite variables were highly correlated with each other suggesting the presence of a general evaluative factor within this evaluation paradigm. Therefore, we further collapsed the data to form a global super composite variable that represents the evaluative halo that exists throughout the entire assessment protocol. This global judgment variable appears at the bottom of Table 3.

Table 3 also displays the correlations between the mean observer judgments and the evaluations of the evaluator who like observers watched the applicant on videotape but like interviewers experienced the complete interview. Assessments made by the trained interviewer also were predicted from naïve observer judgments based on a 20 s thin slice of behavior.

Finally, the agreement between interviewers and the evaluator also appears in Table 3. The assessments made by those who witnessed the entire structured interview showed more agreement between each other than with the assessments made by naïve observers who viewed only the initial greeting.

The Mediating Effects of Appearance

Re do.

The present study wanted to determine if an applicant's appearance effected an interviewer's hiring decision. The dress and attractiveness of the candidate was correlated with the global decisions of the interviewers, evaluator, and naïve observers. As shown in Table 4, the physical appearance of dress did influence the hiring decisions of the observers (r=.44, p<.0005), interviewers **(r=.24, p<.01),** and evaluator (r=.36 p<.005); however, the physical attractiveness of the applicant did not influence the interviewer (r=.14) or evaluator's (r=.14) assessments.

Discussion

The assessments trained interviewers made after a 20-minute structured interview designed to assess specific job skills and past experiences were predicted from the naïve assessments of observers who based their judgments on only the first 20 seconds; the initial greeting. The data suggest that the final impressions of the interviewers may not have changed significantly from first impressions.

Schemas, "cognitive structures that represent knowledge about a concept or type of stimulus, including its attributes and the relations among those attributes" (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, p.98) may explain why the naïve observers were able to predict the final impressions of the interviewers. By influencing behavior, schemas can (a) direct attention and guide information by influencing what people notice and how they will interpret what they notice (Devine, 1989; Linville, 1982b; Darley & Gross, 1983). Schemas can also (b) steer memory when people have developed memories, they remember those things that are both consistent with their schema (Owens, Bower, & Black, 1979; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Higgins & Bargh, 1987) and inconsistent with their schema (Hastie & Kumar, 1979; Stull, 1981; Srull & Wyer, 1989). Finally, schemas can influence unanticipated judgments (Hastie & Parke, 1986).

The remaining question is what factors caused the first impressions in the interviews. Past research would think that attractiveness and physical appearance would have an effect on the first impressions being made. "The first message we send to anyone with whom we come in contact is generated by our physical appearance" (Richmond, McCroskey & Payne, 1991). Physical appearance is a factor of body size, body shape, facial features and clothing and accessories (Richmond et al, 1991). After seeing a strong correlation between the naïve observers and the trained interviewers, the present study sought out to answer the question of why the strong correlation had occurred. The trained interviewers had originally rated the applicants on how well they were dressed. A scale for attractiveness was added to the naïve observations to determine whether the attractiveness of an applicant predicted the interview outcome.

The attractiveness ratings of the naïve observers were correlated to the global assessment of the observers, interviewers, and evaluator. The physical attractiveness of the applicant significantly correlated with the observers' global ratings (r=.41, p<.001). However, attractiveness did not predict either the interviewers, or evaluator's global assessments. Therefore it was not a significant determinant of the interview outcome. The dress[2] of the applicants did however show significant predictions of the interview outcome.

An applicant's dress and physical attractiveness did not predict the interviewers' assessments, so what was driving the hiring decisions? Aristotle would suggest that the interviewers were able to read the applicants' personality traits from their face. This ancient Greek art called physiognomy (Brandit, 1980; Zebrowitz, 1997) suggest that a person's personality can be inferred from the face. The belief in physiognomy has surprisingly carried

into the beginning of the 20th century. In fact, many companies practiced physiognomy as their main tool for assessing candidates (Brandit, 1980; Zebrowitz, 1997). Even today, many still believe in physiognomy. In one survey a sample of Israelis were asked if they believed it were possible to know a person's personality from looking at his or her face. Surprisingly, out of 535 respondents, 75% believed in physiognomy (Hassin & Trope, 2000).

Another noteworthy finding was that the naïve observers showed as much consensus as the interviewers. In fact when examining the individual assessments, the naïve observers were as reliable if not more than those of the skilled interviewers on seven of the twelve attributes. This phenomenon is very striking. One would think that because the interviewers were trained and that because they were exposed to move relevant interview information, they should have agreed more closely with each other than 2 untrained observers watching a 20 second clip (Huffcutt, 1999). Training interviewers would establish constancy and increases the likelihood of candidates being evaluated equally. Training also teaches interviewers to gather and use information correctly. Unlike the naïve observers, the interviewers were also taking notes on the applicants. Note taking has been found to reduce the pre-interview expectations in interviewer final evaluations (Judice & Smith, 1999; Biesanz, 1999).

The role of the Evaluator is very important and should be noted. This person represents the link between the naïve observers and interviewers. The Evaluator, like the interviewers, was trained and had interviewing experience. The Evaluator was representative of the naïve observers because they were all bystanders looking onto the interview, but unlike the observers, the Evaluator viewed the entire interview, and not just the first impressions.

Limitations.

There are some limitations of the present study that should be addressed. The first involves the realism of the interviews. The interviewees in the study were students participating for a psychology experiment, not applicants applying for a job. However, studies have shown that ratings collected for administrative purposes as apposed to research purposes for structured interviews show more of the halo effect and are less valid (McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt, & Maurer, 1994; Sharon & Barlett, 1969; Veres, Field, & Boyles, 1983; Warmke & Billings, 1979).

The realism of the study is also challenged a second time. The goal of a typical job search would be to eliminate all candidates not evaluate their qualities. The interviewers and naïve observers in the present study were not given the responsibility to choose only one or two candidates from a group of applicants, they merely evaluated their qualifications. Therefore, when examining the individual interviewee evaluation scores from both the interviewers and observers, the data showed that the naïve observers were not able to predict the top three candidates chosen to be hired from the interviewers, they could only predict the overall impression of a candidate

Conclusion

It is important to emphasize that the present study does not discredit the interview process. The employment interview is an effective means of establishing rapport between a potential employee and an organization. But after reviewing the results of the present study, one would have to question the limits to the validity of an employment interview used as a selection device. If the goal of an interviewer is to find an individual who will have rapport and fit into an organization's culture, then it is apparent that an employment interview serves its purpose for selection.

Although past research has criticized the interview process because interviewer evaluations do not predict supervisor ratings, promotion, training success or tenure (Hunter &

Hunter, 1984; Reilly & Chao, 1982), it is important to remember that the interview can not reflect how successful or unsuccessful the rejected candidates would have performed the job if hired. We can not criticize the interview, because can not determine how well individuals not hired would perform in the job.

The results support the current theories of interpersonal perception in social cognition that state initial expectations, in this case when based on first impressions, are resistant to change. The present study applied this theoretical work to the business world, and demonstrated that interviewers may unwittingly decide how the interview will be evaluated within the first few seconds of the initial greeting. Although the results in the present study are theoretically consistent with those found within social psychology (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Ambady, Bernieri, & Richeson, 2000), they may be eye opening to those in the business sector.

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Table 1
Intercorrelations of Related Attributes From Interviewer Assessments

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Likable												
1. Warm	-	.77***	.55***	.66***								
2. Likable			.74***	.77***								
3. Trustworthy				.57***								
4. Polite				-								
Self-assuredness												
5. Confident					-	.76 *	.57***	.72***	-.55***			
6. Expressive							.68***	.73***	-.49***			
7. Extroverted								.57***	-.30**			
8. Ambitious									.28*			
9. Nervous									-			
Competence												
10. Hirable										-	.81***	.66***
11. Intelligent												.66***
12. Professional Competence												-

Note: N=59 interviews

Table 2
Assessment Reliabilities of Interviewers and Observers

Attributes	Interviewers		Observers		
	Agreement Correlation	Cronbach alpha	Estimated mean level of agreement[a]	Number Observers	Cronbach alpha
Likable	**.50**	.78	b	b	b
Likable	.55	.71	.28	15	.85
Polite	.28	.44	.30	17	.88
Warm	.26	.41	.27	17	.86
Trustworthy	.23	.37	.18	17	.79
Self-assuredness	**.56**	.57	b	b	b
Nervous	.23	.36	.23	15	.82
Confident	.49	.66	.27	17	.86
Expressive	.45	61	.38	15	.90
Ambitious	.42	.58	.25	17	.85
Extroverted	.18	.31	.36	13	.88
Competence	**.53**	.69	b	b	b
Hirable	.57	.73	.25	17	.85
Intelligent	.41	.58	.38	15	.90
Professional Competence	.19	.32	.18	15	.77
Median	.35		.27		

Note: 59 Interviews
[a]The estimated correlation between any two observers chosen at random.
[b]Not determined because different observers rated the different variable constituting the composite variable

Table 3
Correlations between Evaluators across 59 Interviews.

	Agreement between:		
Composite attribute evaluated	20 s Observers and Interviewers	20 s Observers and Evaluators	Interviewers and Evaluators
Likeability[a]	.46***	.35**	.44***
Self-assuredness[b]	.43***	.43***	.65****
Competence[c]	.39**	.34*	.41****
Global[d]	.45***	.41***	.53****

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001 ****p<.0001

[a]mean of likable, polite, warm, and trustworthy.
[b]mean of nervous, confident, expressive, ambitious, and extroverted.
[c]mean of hirable, intelligent, and professional competence.
[d]mean of the composite attributes of Likability, Self-assuredness, and Competence.

Table 4
Effects of Attractiveness

	Interviewer and Evaluator assessments of dress	Naïve observer assessments of attractiveness
Observer Global Assessments	.51***	.41**
Interviewer Global Assessments	.30*	.14
Evaluator Global Assessments	.38*	.14

*p<.01 **p<.001 ***p<.0001

Footnotes

[1] The original purpose of this interview study was to examine whether manipulations of nonverbal behavior can positively increase interview success (Gada-Jain, 1999). Half of the interviewees from this larger study were instructed to mimic subtly the behaviors of a targeted interviewer. The present study used all of the 48 control interviews and 11 of the latter experimental interviews. The data for both the control and experimental interviews were conducted separately and showed no significance difference. Therefore, the data reported here were collapsed across all 59 applicants.

[2] There were two assessments of dress, the interviewers and the evaluators. When computing the correlation of dress to the naïve observers and interviewers' global assessments, the interviewer ratings of dress were used. The evaluator's assessments were when correlating the global assessments.

Appendix A. Interview protocol of the active interviewers.

Interview Greeting

Interviewer 1: Hi! I am ____ (interviewee introduces themselves) – Handshake. I guess you are here for the screening interview. I am one of the interviewers on the panel today. [pointing to Interviewer 2] This is my colleague.
Interviewer 2: Hi! I am ___. How are you doing today?
(interviewee answers)
Interviewer 2: Good! Did you have any trouble finding your way here?
(Interviewee answers)
Interviewer 2: (respond to interviewee)
Interviewer 1: (respond to interviewee too and then…) Now, for the next 15 minutes we will conduct the interview (CHECK TIME). This interview is of a general type. The aim here is to screen candidates for a final selection interview. So, we have a few questions for you.
Let's begin by telling us who you are.

Interview Questions

1) Tell us a little about yourself…
   a. about who you are
   b. where did you go for high school?
   c. What hobbies do you have, are you part of any organizations on campus
2) Have you been living in Toledo for sometime? What are your feelings about living in Toledo?
3) What is your major here?
   a. status in school
   b. plan to continue
4) Tell us something about your general career interests.
5) Are you working at present? (if yes) What is your job? [(if no) Have you worked in the past? (if yes) What was your job?]
   a. What are your duties there?
6) What would you call your potentials or assets?
   a. Your personal characteristics at work.
   b. Why do you consider these as assets?
   c. Have these qualities helped you in the past?

In the past have you ever had any differences in opinion with your superiors?

   a. How did you handle that?

7) What do you think matters most in being successful – luck, abilities, experience or hard work?
   a. Why do you think so?
8) What kind of people do you like being around?
   a. as friends
   b. In the work environment?

What if a co-worker is highly critical of you in front of others, how would you handle that?

9) What is your most unique quality?
   a. How does your unique quality, your skills, give you a cutting-edge over other applicants?
10) Why should we choose you among all the other applicants?
11) What are your future goals regarding your career?
12) How do you picture yourself 10 years from now?
13) What is your biggest weakness?
   a. How will that hinder your performance?
14) What will be the ideal job for you?
15) If you are offered the job of your choice, what are your expectations from this job?
   a. What does your ideal job mean for you?
   b. In terms of values, salary, advancement opportunity?

In the past has your superior ever given you a mark lower than you expected or deserved?

   a. What did you do?

16) How do you think you can benefit the organization, if you are offered a job? Why should we hire you?
17) Finally, if we offer you a job, when can you start?

a. We have full-time and part-time positions available. Depending on your schedule, when can you start?

18) OK before we end, do you have any questions for us?