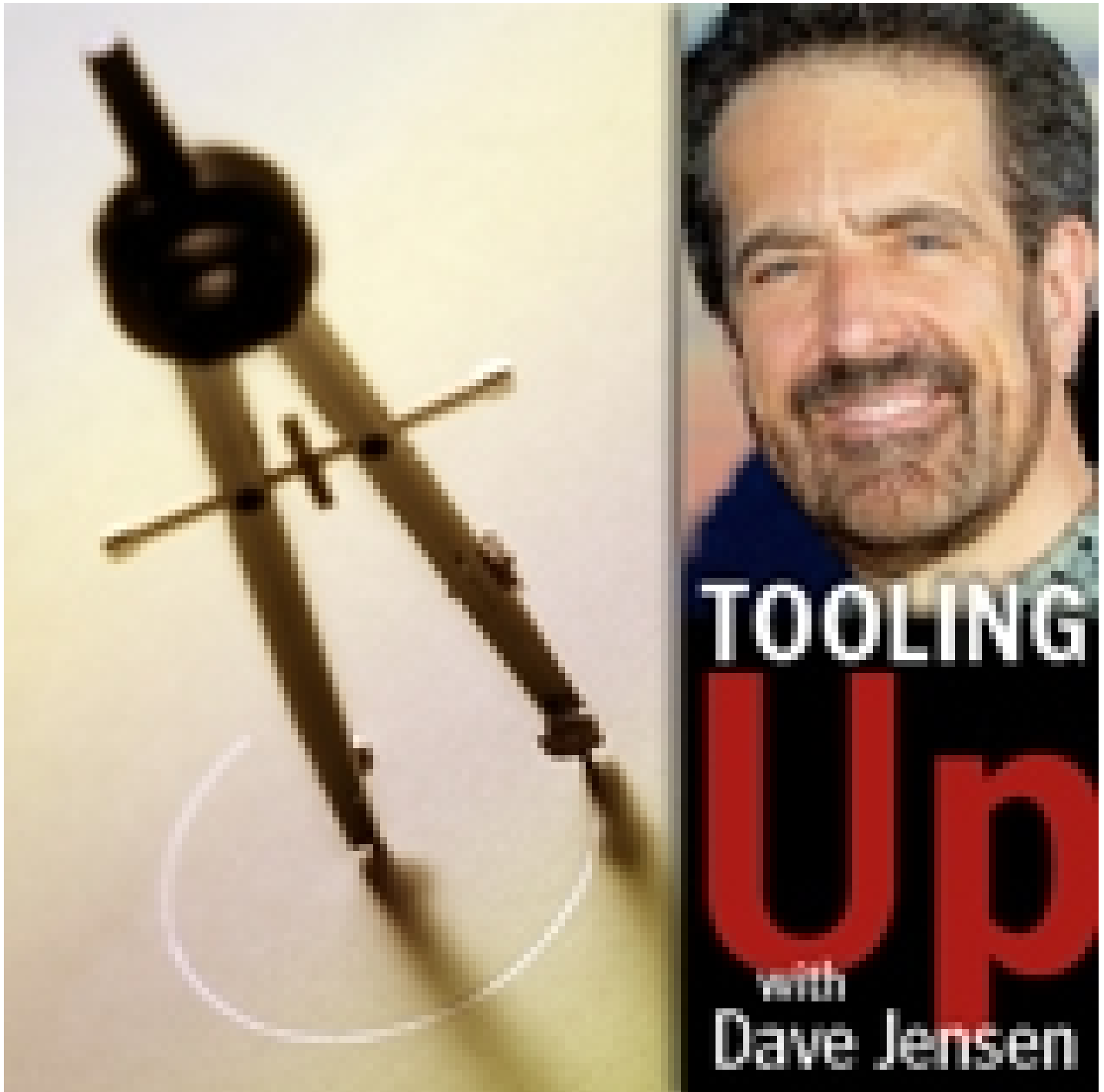


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Tooling Up: The Finer Points of Giving a Job Talk

By [David G. Jensen](#) | Jun. 20, 2008 , 8:00 AM



My personal income goes up and down based on how many people our recruiting company's clients decide to hire. That's why I've paid a lot of attention over the years to preparing candidates for their big interview. You'd think that senior staff such as directors and vice presidents would know how to interview, right?

Wrong. They get hung up just as often as newbies on that most deceptive of interview elements: the "job talk." These are the seminars given by company applicants on interview day, and they are often judged entirely differently than other types of presentations.

Recently, I talked with John, a candidate for a director of manufacturing position for a mid-sized and growing biotech company, a couple of days before his interview. Although John already had 10 years of experience in industry, I reviewed the major highlights of his interview schedule and some things to be cautious of. He asked a lot of thoughtful questions and made notes, as he hadn't interviewed in many years.

But during my job-talk advice, he seemed to lose interest. When he commented about his many years of experience in giving seminars, I should have realized he was overconfident about giving his job talk. And sure enough, he blew it. John forgot that the type of communication required for a job talk is entirely different from delivering scientific talks or presentations at management meetings.

These were his key mistakes:

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- Softer issues such as his eye contact, appearance, and presentation "voice" were not optimized for the job talk.
- He didn't close the deal with the audience.

In the rest of this column, I'll talk about each of these points.

Know your audience

Recently, I gave a presentation for a branch of the U.S. government. My host and I had discussed the audience makeup at length, but I made the mistake of not clarifying *her* role. I assumed--the operative word here--that she was another scientist. Only later did I learn, after a string of my usual human resources jokes, that she was an HR person herself. I learned a valuable lesson about ensuring that I know something about *everyone* who is sitting in my audience.

John expected to talk to chemical engineers about chemical engineering issues. But his audience--as will yours--consisted of people from a broad range of disciplines: scientists, HR staff, and management types. John didn't take the time to make these attendees comfortable with his subject material.

Job-talk audiences have a different set of priorities than your "usual" talk attendees. For John, they were there to determine his personal style and capabilities. Is he likeable? Can he present his ideas clearly? Would he be a good leader? Can he put together a team?

My suggestions: Use fewer slides than you'd normally use in a scientific talk and spend more time with them to ensure that everyone in the audience is up to speed. In addition, drop the use of jargon that might be specific to your niche or clarify it before you use it.

Address the concerns of the audience

Everyone in the audience for your job talk has a slightly different reason for being there, but figuring out what's important isn't that hard. If you're auditioning for a management job, the audience will expect something different from what they'll expect at a job talk for an entry-level science position. But one thing every important member of the audience has in common is that they're less interested in science than they are in *you*.

The people present for your job talk aren't there to hear a strictly technical presentation; they want to know what *your* involvement was on projects, where you *collaborated* with others, what kinds of *thought processes* you used to develop your strategy, and so on. And most of all, they'll want to know *what kind of person you are*.

In this case, my client wanted confirmation that John was a leader, and that's what he should have tried to convey in his presentation. Instead, he delivered a "me, me" talk, focusing on his

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been important if they wanted to hire a consultant, it didn't convince anyone that he could put their team together and make that department work well.

When you are developing your talk for interview day, consider all that you know about the job you are interviewing for and everything that might be on the minds of the members of the audience.

Remember the soft side of the presentation

Another important aspect of the job talk is that this mixed audience will make decisions about you, many of them subconscious, based upon softer issues than your technical knowledge. Eye contact with members of your audience is more important in this presentation than in any other. Smile and project humor, because you will want to be seen as a person who would be easy to work with.

John maintained very poor eye contact. He didn't engage everyone in the room, and when he did look at the audience, it was to connect with the same one or two people. He left much of the audience feeling lost.

Before you leave for your interview, practice the presentation many times, getting the timing down. (Most talks last for 35 to 45 minutes plus 15 minutes for questions.) Make sure that you work all traces of nervousness out of your voice and keep the content of your slides readable from all areas of the room. Make sure that you incorporate areas in which you've excelled in the work personally, as well as examples of when you've collaborated with others in a team.

Close the deal

In the early part of your job search, you are fighting people who want to screen you out of consideration. That isn't the case on interview day. Your job-talk audience *wants you to succeed*. They have an open position that needs to be filled and obligations on their team that are not being met because of that open slot.

All you need to do in this short period of time is convince them that you are the right person for the job. If you succeed at this, they will support you. By John's conclusion, the audience knew that he was an expert in manufacturing-related quality issues, but he had given them no evidence of his ability as a leader.

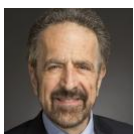
That's why it is critical to include detail in your presentation that is derived from the company's job description and any other information about the position you've been able to learn. Prove to them that you can tackle the job's particular challenges and become a contributor from day one. The audience wants a reason to hire you. Give it to them!

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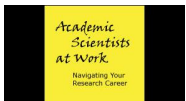
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