

## Katharine Hansen, PhD

520 Inchelium Hwy • Kettle Falls, WA 99141 • 386-871-9490 • DD\_kathy@tmd9.club  
<http://katharinehansenphd.com/WritingPortfolio/>

This article was initially published on April 13, 2009, on the Quintessential Careers site that was sold to Live Career in 2015 and eventually deleted from that site.

### **The Unspoken Secrets of Job Interviewing: How Your Nonverbal Presentation and Behaviors Impact the Impression You Make**

By Katharine Hansen, PhD

The content of what you say in response to questions (and the content of questions you *ask*) is obviously exceedingly important in a job interview. What is less well known is the importance of the part of the interview that isn't spoken – the way you present yourself and behave nonverbally.

If you think nonverbal behavior can't sink an interview, here's a story that might change your mind. In a past job, my boss asked me to screen applicants to fill a vacancy in our department and narrow the pool down to three finalists. I did so, and my boss then interviewed the trio. When I asked him his impressions of the candidates, he said he had already eliminated one of them because the candidate never made eye contact during the entire interview.

Let's look at each nonverbal factor individually:

**Interview attire and grooming:** A few simple guidelines can help you make sure you outfit yourself appropriately for an interview:

- *Err on the side of conservatism.* Job-seekers are often advised to dress in the manner of other employees in the organization in which they are interviewing, but hiring managers have been saying recently, especially at the executive and senior levels, that it's best to dress in the most conservative business attire (not business casual). That means a matching jacketed suit for both men and women, conservative colors (such as black and navy, though women can usually get away with a broader range of colors), polished shoes, and ties for men.
- *Keep your hair neat and off your face.* One of my pet peeves as an interviewer is seeing hairstyles that obscure my view of the candidate's face. Especially in a panel interview, remember that interviewers may see your face in profile, so hair should not block that view. Long hair is sometimes risky for men, even when neatly pony-tailed.
- *Less is more when it comes to makeup, jewelry, and especially fragrance.* Tone down these enhancements. Fragrance should be at a bare minimum or omitted completely because your interviewer could be allergic to your fragrance.
- *At the same time, don't stink!* Avoid bad breath and body odor (but don't chew gum or suck on a mint in the interview).
- *Watch your grooming.* Be sure your fingernails are clean. Although neat facial hair (beard, mustache) is only minimally risky for men, five 'o clock shadow is a turnoff.

- *Hide any body piercings or tattoos.* While these adornments are less risky than they once were, plenty of employers still disdain them, so make sure piercings and tattoos can't be seen.

**Items to bring to the interview.** Be sure to bring several copies of your resume. The interviewer may have misplaced his or her copy, and you may also interview with multiple people who don't all have copies of your resume. Consider bringing a career portfolio that will enable you to visually present examples of skills and accomplishments. You might also bring a briefcase or attache case, but if you bring a portfolio, you may want to skip this extra baggage. That's especially true for women, who will likely be carrying a purse as well.

**Facial expressions:** The default job-interview facial expression is your smile. Sure, there will be times in the interview when a smile is not appropriate, but smiling as much as possible in the meeting is key to showing your enthusiasm. One of interviewers' top complaints about interviewees is that they fail to show sufficient enthusiasm; a smile is the best way to show how much you want the job. A warm smile is especially important when you first meet your interviewer.

**Handshake.** Your handshake should be firm, but not bone-crushing. Avoid the "limp fish" handshake. Be sure your palms are dry; use a tissue or handkerchief on them right before the interview.

**Posture.** Once the interviewer invites you to take a seat, sit up straight and try the psychological trick of sitting slightly toward the edge of the chair to appear eager. My partner, Dr. Randall Hansen, once received an interview critique by a college recruiter during an on-campus job interview that he probably would not be considered for the job because he sat back in the chair in a too-relaxed manner.

**Eye contact.** As we've already seen, eye contact is extremely important. Some experts advise looking at the interviewer's nose to avoid appearing creepy by keeping your eyes affixed on his or her eyes. In a panel interview, look at the questioner when responding to a question, but also glance at the other interviewers.

**Hand gestures.** It's fine to use hand gestures in a job interview, but keep them small, contained, and close to your body. If you know you tend to get wildly carried away with hand gestures – or if nerves make your hands shake – try firmly holding a pen. When one of my students did that in her mock interview, I was amazed at how poised she looked.

**Bad habits and inappropriate body language.** Any number of quirky tics in an interview can derail your performance, and the worst problem is you may not even be aware you're exhibiting those behaviors. In a panel interview, I once had an interviewee who swept his hand back and forth across the table at which he was seated for the entire interview. Another sniffed loudly and nervously throughout the session. Both were unaware of what they were doing. Some typical inappropriate behaviors are tapping, drumming, leg shaking, fidgeting, twirling in a swivel chair, and playing with hands – and many interviewers have seen far worse. Also be aware of cultural preferences about personal space. While Americans prefer a couple of feet of personal space that we don't

want others to violate, members of some other cultures see conversation partners as rude if they are not in each others' face.

The most difficult nonverbal problem is profuse sweating because it is very difficult to avoid and deal with once in the interview. If you are prone to extreme sweating, first see if your doctor has suggestions. And be sure to take a tissue or handkerchief into the interview; you may have to subtly wipe sweat off your brow or face. My partner once saw a guy in an interview wipe sweat off his hand by running it through his hair. Ewww.

**Confident voice projection and avoiding verbal tics.** Technically, these are not exactly nonverbal behaviors since they involve speech, but because they do not relate to interview content, they're included here. The best way to demonstrate confidence – a hugely important interview factor – is to project your voice strongly. Avoid a weak, timid, or baby-soft voice. Among the verbal tics to avoid:

- *Pause words and phrases, such as uh, ah, um, like, you know.* These are hard to avoid for many of us, but practice, preparation for responding to frequently asked interview questions, and taking a few seconds to gather your thoughts before responding can help.
- *Trailing off at the end of a response.* You can almost hear the ellipses (...) at the end of this kind of response. The candidate sounds like he or she isn't finished, yet stops speaking. Be sure you end your responses definitively.
- *Raising your voice in a questioning manner or speaking in a sing-song rhythm.* We might characterize these as the "Valley Girl" way of speaking. The best way to avoid these habits is to be aware of them and practice speaking in a normal cadence.

What's the best way to ensure all your nonverbals make a great impression and you look right for the interview? Here are two suggestions:

1. *Engage in a mock interview in which your interviewer focuses entirely on and critiques your nonverbals.* You can do this mock interview with a career counselor or coach, but in a pinch, a family member or friend should do just fine.
2. *Have yourself videotaped in a mock interview.* This technique is especially useful for uncovering those tics and behaviors you may not be aware of. You may be amazed to see how you present yourself. Ideally you'll be amazed in a good way.

### **Final thoughts**

Remember that there is much more to preparing for an interview than practicing how you will respond to the questions. Consider the complete package and ensure that the nonverbal impression you present is as polished as is your content.