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The importance of nonverbal communication during job interviews



Photo: [Martin Boulanger](#)

For most people, a job interview can be a nerve-racking process—even though this necessary evil can lead to great career opportunities. It's stressful to think about all of the competition you may face, particularly if you're competing for a job that you really want.

Most career advice that you hear stresses the importance of practicing what you will say to a potential employer during an interview. While that's certainly an important way to get a leg up on your competition, it's really what you *don't* say that can make or break your candidacy. Your nonverbal communication can say a lot about you and if you don't manage these cues wisely, you can potentially turn off a hiring manager, even though you may otherwise be an ideal candidate for a position.

In fact, nonverbal communication makes up the majority of what we convey when interacting with others—60 to 70 percent—so in order to give a good impression to an interviewer, you should manage your gestures as thoroughly as you do your words. When we don't pay attention to our body language, we can put other people off in ways they are not even consciously aware of.

"In the end, the interviewers may have this gut feeling about whether they like you or not and it's often the nonverbal communication that gives them that feeling," said [Ron Krannich](#), author of *[Savvy Interviewing: The Nonverbal Advantage](#)*.

Before you think, "oh, great, another thing I need to worry about when looking for a job," rest assured that managing nonverbal communication can be easy with a little practice.

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Nonverbal behaviors during interviews

Punctuality. Our culture is very time oriented, as evidenced by phrases like "time is of the essence," "time is money," and "the early bird catches the worm." Although it may seem obvious that you should arrive to a job interview on time, many people still make a late entrance—and a bad impression on their prospective employer.

"It's unbelievable how many people can't get to an interview on time. Probably 30 to 50 percent of people arrive to their interviews late," [Krannich](#) said. "That just really leaves a bad impression. If you can't get to the interview, what does that tell me about you? You've basically flunked the interview by coming in late."

Less is more. When going on a job interview, too much of anything—like perfume or cologne, jewelry, visible tattoos, or makeup—can push an interviewer's buttons in the wrong way. Also, to be on the safe side, wear neutral colors and make a point of dressing one step above what is appropriate for the job that you're seeking.

It's not just what you say. Paralanguage, or the way that we say things, is just as important as the words we use themselves. If you have a flat voice while you're telling an interviewer how excited you are about a position, it will make you sound disingenuous. Be sure that the tone and pitch of your voice reflect the enthusiasm that you are declaring.

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Also, try to keep verbal pauses—like "ums" and "ahs"—to a minimum. Too many of these can make you sound woefully unprepared for the interview or give the impression that you don't know what you're talking about.

Don't stand so close to me. Fans of "[Seinfeld](#)" will remember the "close talker" episode where Elaine's boyfriend made everyone uncomfortable by disregarding the rules of [proxemics](#)—the amount of space between people. Just as Jerry, George, and Kramer winced whenever the close talker invaded their personal space, an interviewee will elicit the same response when getting too up close and personal with a hiring manager. In this kind of setting, staying at arm's length with your interviewer is most appropriate.

Likewise, resist the urge to pick up the knickknacks on your interviewer's desk. While it sounds like a no-brainer, sometimes when we are nervous we want to hold something in our hands and start grabbing at things without even thinking about it.

The eye of the beholder. Making eye contact lets other people know that you are listening and interested in the person you are speaking to. But be careful—too much eye contact can be interpreted as aggression, while too little can convey dishonesty. It's best to shift your eyes periodically to show that you are being attentive, but not inappropriate.

Don't curb your enthusiasm. During an interview, you want your body to show that you are interested in the job and carefully listening to your interviewer. Be sure to sit up straight and display openness with your arms and facial expressions.

Be consistent. Make sure that your nonverbal communication is consistent with your words. If there is a discrepancy, the interviewer will believe your body language—no matter how good your words sound.

More interviewing tips

Although the majority of our communication is nonverbal, it's still important to carefully plan what you will say during a job interview. The following tips can help put your best foot forward when speaking to a prospective employer.

No blame games allowed. Though it may be tempting to talk about how your previous [boss](#) was incompetent or how the company you worked for was filled with unscrupulous slave drivers, that's not going to endear you to an interviewer. When asked about your experiences at your past jobs, talk about what you learned from your former positions without trying to make others look bad.

Research, research, research. With all of the information that we have access to, employers expect you to do your homework before an interview. Be sure to read up on the company and impress your interviewer by referencing specific facts that you learned about the organization. Also, use the information you learned as a springboard when preparing questions of your own. Interviewers expect the process to be a two-way street and become concerned with candidates that ask no questions.

Keep it real. When interviewers ask questions about the failures that you have experienced in your career, they are not trying to find the more perfect employee in the pool of candidates. In fact, they want to hear about your real failures—particularly how you handled them and what you learned from what went wrong. If an interviewee claims to be devoid of mistakes, this is a huge red flag to a hiring manager.

This article originally appeared on my [Workplace Communication Examiner](#) page on June 13, 2009.

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Posted by Kenya McCullum at [May 1, 2010](#) 

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