

Make the Right Impression at Interviews

Petro's Jennifer Scott Offers Expert Tips

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“Interviewing is an art,” says Jennifer Scott, manager of recruitment at Petro, the nation's largest home heating oil service and delivery company, based in Stamford, Connecticut. Scott has been working in recruitment since 1992 and has some strong opinions about what makes for a good interview -- or a bad one.

You Have 5 Minutes

What you're wearing has an impact on the first impression you make, the crux of the entire interview. “I guess the rule of recruiting is that a decision is made [by the recruiter or hiring manager] in the first five minutes, and [the hiring manager] spends the next half-hour trying to defend that decision,” says Scott.

“That's why first impressions -- being on time, being dressed appropriately and being prepared -- are critical,” she adds. “If you make a bad first impression, it's going to be a lot harder for you to convince me to hire you. If you make a great first impression off the bat, you're working a lot less towards trying to convince me you're the one we should get on board.”

While some job seekers bemoan the fact that hiring decisions can be heavily influenced by impressions the hiring manager forms during the few minutes of meeting someone, Scott explains that it is just an aspect of the hiring process. “No matter how hard you try to be completely impartial -- because you want the best-qualified person for the position -- the reality is that 80 percent of the hire is based on personality and 20 percent is based on skills,” she says. “As long as you meet the basic requirements -- and if you don't, you wouldn't have gotten in for the interview -- it's much easier to teach someone specific skills than how to get along with people or how to make a good impression. That's just reality.”

Scott also cautions that while you should be relaxed during the interview process, you must always be on your best behavior. “Everything for me in the interview process is a test,” she says. “What time you show up, how completely and neatly you fill out the application, the pace at which you walk in front of me or behind me on the way to the interview room from the lobby, being observant if there's something to observe, personality during the interview, flexibility if someone can't meet you exactly at the time they were supposed to, handshake, appearance.”

Bad and Good Practices

What can kill an interview before it gets started? “The worst mistake someone can make for an interview is being late,” Scott says. “Honestly, it doesn't matter how bad the traffic was. There's absolutely no excuse for arriving late -- ever.”

And what makes a good impression on a wily recruiter like Scott?

“Someone who's well-prepared all around,” she says. “They've dressed appropriately for the interview. They arrived on time or even a few minutes early. They've done some research on the company, and they have a list of questions they want to ask. They understand why they're here. They're articulate and well prepared in general.”

Scott also emphasizes the fact that “you're interviewing them as much as they're interviewing you.” You should be trying to find out as much as you can about the company and the work environment to make the right decision.

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