

THE TOP 4 WAYS TO MAKE A GOOD FIRST IMPRESSION AT AN INTERVIEW: THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE



I can remember almost ten years ago learning that most hiring decisions are made in the first four minutes of an interview. The statistic was used to justify why interview skills training for interviewers was so important. Most interviewers make their decision about a candidate within the first four minutes and then spend the entire remaining time asking questions to justify their early impression.

My First Impression Research

At first, I didn't fully accept the amazing four-minute first-impression statistic. I absorbed, digested, and tested the four-minute theory. I analyzed the interviews and decisions of hiring managers I supported. I observed my own interviews with candidates and the interviews of HR peers, and I came to realize that the research findings were true. Most opinions of candidates WERE formed within a very brief period of time. When studied, I had to admit that most hiring decisions I observed were very heavily influenced by first impression.

Part of my job as an interviewing skills trainer was to teach interviewers to recognize the power of the first impression and resist its overwhelming influence. The fact remains that most interviewers, sometimes even the trained ones, are overpowered by their first impressions of candidates. **As a candidate, knowing this fact can give you a huge advantage if you take the opportunity to apply a few simple principles.**

As a professional interviewer, I found I had to deliberately force myself to delay any judgment until all of my planned questions were asked, and the quality of my interviews improved.

The Smart Job Seeker

Unfortunately, the vast majority of hiring managers, recruiters, and interviewers are not well trained enough to avoid this common interviewing mistake. There are many exceptions, but the lion's share of the folks in your job search will still be judging you in the first four minutes.

Given this fact, the smart job-seeker can shift the hiring odds in her favor by practicing, knowing, and understanding the art of a positive first impression.

Taking Advantage of the Four Minute First Impression

The focus of this guide will be to share the secrets of making a strong first impression. As a professional recruiter for nearly 15 years, I have interviewed thousands of candidates and witnessed both nasty and princely behavior. There are several pieces that make up the first-impression puzzle, and I'll endeavor to cover each in detail.

By the time you finish this, you'll know the formula that will position you for a successful interview. The areas we'll cover are in many ways common-sense, but some require practice:

1. BE PROMPT AND SHOW UP ON TIME

Don't Contaminate Your First Impression by Being Late

Promptness is critical to making a strong first impression.

Before you are even introduced to the interviewers, your promptness will speak loudly about who you are.

When you are late for an interview, several impressions attach themselves to you like unwelcome spiritual barnacles. Interviewers imagine you to be disorganized, irresponsible, and rude. For many interviewers, the sin of being late is unpardonable. There are several I know who will immediately turn away candidates who are late, and others who will grant the candidate a courtesy interview but will never hire someone who is late for the interview.

The hole you dig for yourself by being late is often so deep no amount of apologizing will dig you out of it. The negative first impression is so strong and smelly, it contaminates your entire interview.

If You're Late...

If you are late, you are telling the person you're meeting

- "I don't plan well"
- "I am disorganized"
- "I am unpredictable and unreliable"
- "I don't respect your time"
- "My time is more important than your time"
- **"Please don't hire me because I'll let you down"**

When you're trying hard to get a job, these are the last things you want to say to the person who could offer you one.

If You're On Time...

Conversely, when you are on time for your interview, you tell the interviewer

- "Your time is important to me"
- "I respect you"
- "I value this opportunity"
- "Hire me, because I am eager and reliable"
- "You can count on me"

Tips to Kill the Risk of Being Late

1. **Make sure you know where you're going.** Ask for directions if necessary. Don't be afraid of looking stupid by asking for directions. Being late is much worse.
2. **Make sure you know how long it takes to get there.** I just can't stress this enough. The most impressive candidates actually drive to the interview

location before the interview to make sure they know the traffic patterns, and how long it takes. If you've done this, try to let the interviewer know somehow that you did this during your interview. It marks you as "eager and responsible."

3. **Plan at least 15 minutes of slack time for the unexpected.** It is incredibly wise to plan for the traffic jam, just in case. I have found that timeliness does not happen without a plan for it.
4. **Arrive at least 20 minutes early.** Don't wait in the lobby that entire time, however. Enter the lobby about 5 minutes before your appointment time. Sit in your car or in some comfortable spot for the rest of the time. Pray, meditate, relax. Get your head prepared to make a strong first impression. It doesn't help your first impression if you rush into the lobby at the last minute, still on time, but pouring sweat because you were jogging up the hill from the parking lot to be on time.

- **See: Show Up on Time**

A SERIOUS WARNING:

For now, forgive me if I assume you know nothing about making a good first-impression, but **don't make the mistake of thinking you already know it all.** Most people, including myself, are blind to their shortcomings. Be on your guard when you find yourself thinking, "Hey, I already know this, so I'm just going to skip it." **Accepting these words from yourself can be one of the greatest enemies** to your learning and advancement. There are several elements to a positive introduction, and even one small mistake in any one area can cause your dream job to get away from you. Invest time and practice, and master these elements. Become your own best salesperson, and you too can maximize the potential of a strong first impression.

A Personal Example

Recently, I interviewed dozens of candidates for a reception position in the executive wing of the company I recruit for. The hiring clients were both powerful and selective, so I did my best to screen out candidates who would not reflect well on my ability to recruit and screen.

Out of the 60 or so candidates I personally interviewed, **about 10 were late for their interviews**, and about 10 were arriving significantly early (more than 30 minutes early).

The ten who were late all offered excuses: The bus was slower than expected, child-care didn't arrive on time, wrong turn coming up the hill, etc. **Not one of these candidates made it to Round 2 to meet the hiring manager.** As a Recruiting Manager, I refuse to risk my professional reputation on a candidate that isn't serious about the position. **The conclusion I reach** about candidates who are late: They aren't serious about the job.

Don't tune me out if you're an executive or middle manager! Lateness is not confined to junior-level administrative employees. And don't think because you're a computer geek that these rules don't apply. **If you break this foundational law of business, you can kiss your interview goodbye.** Wise job seekers will heed this advice, and it will put you ahead of at least 15% of the pack if you plan to be on time.

2. YOU NEED TO HAVE A GOOD HANDSHAKE

A Handshake Lesson from Goldilocks...

When Goldilocks entered the home of the three bears, she found three chairs, three bowls of porridge, and three beds. In all cases these items were too *this*, too *that*, or *just right*. In an interview, your handshake is a physical and emotional connection with your interviewer that must be *just right* to present the most favorable impression.

Think about your own experience for a moment. Have you ever shaken hands with someone who had a clammy, wet hand? How about the limp shaker, or the guy who pumps you twenty times and won't let go, or the person who crushes your hand or just grabs your fingers? Now imagine a firm, warm, inviting handshake. What images of ability or personality come to your mind?

When done correctly, your handshake can communicate confidence, professional fitness, and personal effectiveness before you ever say a word in your interview. Indeed, the images that come to mind during a handshake are powerful and can subconsciously flavor the entire interview.

Here are a few tips to help you get your handshake up to the Goldilocks Standard.

Rule #1: Use Your Right Hand

The correct handshake is always, ALWAYS done with the right hand. The only good reason to use your left is if you have no right hand (or it's in a cast or sling). In that case, it's acceptable and understood. Just last week, I had a promising Admin Assistant candidate interview for an important role. Her interview performance was flawless except for the left-handshake. Instead of shifting her portfolio to her left and shaking with her right, she allowed her right hand to be occupied and reached out with her left. Shaking hands like that with your left will leave the impression that you are socially awkward or possibly lazy, and these are not qualities most employers are seeking.

Rule #2: Square Your Body

As you approach your interviewer, make sure you meet me head-on, facing me directly. This body carriage communicates confidence, openness, and trustworthiness. The left-handed shaker above turned her body sideways to me, though her face was turned toward me. Facing your interviewer directly lets me know you have nothing to hide and are inviting a relationship.

Rule #3: Target Your Grip

There are several components in a correct grip. First, make sure you connect with the proper part of the hand. The fleshy part of your hand between your thumb and forefinger should interlock with the same part of the interviewer's hand. Your thumb and fingers should grip naturally around the hand of your interviewer (not my fingers).

Secondly, firmness of grip must be just right. Crushing grips are overbearing and obnoxious, while limp fish grips are not impressive and rather disappointing. Your grip should be just firm enough to apply comfortable pressure, communicating confidence and ability. Practice this with several people to dial in correct pressure.

If your hand is unusually small, you may have to apply more pressure or choose your grip more carefully. If large, take care not to accidentally hurt your interviewer.

Rule #4: Mind Your Pumps

Some candidates get so excited they get carried away during the handshake, pumping 5 or more times. Some are so distracted they forget to let go of the interviewer's hand, forcing the interviewer to disengage uncomfortably. Others grab the hand and let go so quickly there is no time for gut-to-gut communication. Ideally, you want to grip and pump one to three times and then tactfully release. Tune into your interviewer and release as I release. An impression of good communication between us begins at this point.

The exception to the above is if your interviewer doesn't release and continues to pump. Hang in there with your interviewer until you sense it's time to let go. The bottom line here is to be sensitive to the desires of your interviewer.

Other Important Handshake Tips

Many people suffer from nervousness and sweaty palms when faced with an important interview. If you're one of these folks, discretely dry your hand on your pants or skirt just prior to shaking hands. It would honestly be better to dry your hands on a bath towel before shaking than to force your interviewer to embrace your soggy mop.

I can't emphasize this enough: Practice these techniques with several willing partners who can give you objective feedback on your handshake. A perfect handshake will serve you well throughout your career, whether you are a man or woman, no matter what your line of work. It is worth working for. Practice these tips until your perfect handshake is natural and automatic.

My first job after college was working as a bilingual recruiter for a temporary agency in Oregon. I'll always remember meeting Miss Cruz, a young well put-together sales rep for the company. The most amazing thing about her was her handshake, and years later I remember being surprised and impressed by it. Just right. Perfectly formed, firm, and confident. Her handshake formed the bulk of my impression of her: Assertive, trustworthy, and highly capable. Practice your handshake, and you'll be on your way to a very positive first impression, just like Miss Cruz.

DISCLAIMER

The suggestions here are intended for the US population and represent cultural norms of the United States. In Sri Lanka (and, I'm pretty sure, other places), this advice is going to be next-to-useless.

3. YOU NEED TO HAVE THE RIGHT BODY LANGUAGE

Body language is the last significant piece of first impression artwork.

After being on time, looking good, and shaking hands well, a picture of who you are, complete with personality characteristics and work habits, is forming in your interviewer's mind. Your eye-contact, energy level, and body language will now either float your boat or sink you altogether.

Eye Contact and First Impression

Eye contact is critical and carries yet more information to the interviewer. Candidates with poor eye contact are routinely suspected of hiding something.

The worst thing about eye contact and body language is that the interviewer may not even realize why he's judged someone poorly. Body language clues are culturally driven, often subconscious, and very strong influencers of opinion.

I remember a couple of years ago when I phone screened an outstanding e-commerce applications developer. He had rare technical skills and gave solid examples of success under deadline pressure, working well with peers, and negotiating goals with his manager. The candidate came in to interview with the hiring manager. Before I'd had a chance to interview the candidate face-to-face, I passed the hiring manager in the hallway.

Stan, I said, "so, how'd it go this morning with Sanjay? Is there anything you'd like me to follow up on during my interview?"

"No, I don't think this guy is going to work out. What other candidates do you have in the pipeline?"

"Uh, before we go there, what was it about Sanjay you didn't like? He did very well with me on the phone."

"Well," Stan stopped for a bit to think. His eyes drifted upward as he replayed the interview in his mind. "I didn't get a very comfortable feeling about that guy. He was ... shifty. I just didn't believe anything he was telling me. You know?"

"Yeah, I think I know," I said. "So, what did he say?"

"Uh, it's not so much what he said, but how he said it. I don't think he looked me in the eye the whole time we were talking, and he slouched. I just didn't think he'd fit in here."

Stan had just made a classic interviewer's blunder in listening more to his first impression gut feeling than to Sanjay's answers, the cultural message Sanjay sent with no eye contact and slouching was so powerful to Stan, he just couldn't hear the quality through all the non-verbal noise.

Of course, I reminded him that in India (Sanjay's home country), it's considered rude and challenging to look a supervisor directly in the eye, but the damage had already been done. Stan had formed his opinion and rejected Sanjay before the fourth minute was up.

In the United States, eye-contact with your interviewer is expected. For many interviewers, eye-contact is so important they will absolutely reject without it. Eye contact in North America suggests an open and honest dialogue. Lack of eye contact, conversely, means you are lying, shameful, or embarrassed. If you don't look your interviewer in the eye, he'll get a subconscious whiff of dishonesty, and that's not the perfume you want to be wearing.

Improving Your Eye Contact

If you're uncomfortable looking strangers in the eye when you meet them, you absolutely have to get over it for the sake of your interview success. **Practice, practice, practice.** Go to the mall and look the cashier in the eye. Look the fast food clerk in the eye. Look the bank teller in the eye. Practice until you don't recoil, and practice with strangers.

Of course, constant eye-contact is not always wise either. There are times when you will break eye contact to think about the answer to an interview question, and this is quite normal. When you answer the question, return to the interviewer's face, and talk to me, not the floor.

What Posture Says About You

Body-carriage can also be important. It's far better to lean slightly forward during the interview, as this shows you are interested in what the interviewer has to say, and you are excited about the interview. To slouch, on the other hand, screams that you are bored and apathetic. Would you want to hire an apathetic employee? I certainly wouldn't recommend it.

The Importance of Energy Level

Lastly, the energy-level you display during your interview is very important. Ask questions, be curious about the business, and **show some excitement.**

Lots (or lack) of energy comes through your handshake, but make sure you follow that up with excitement during the interview. Again, you don't want to come off as **passive, uncaring, or apathetic.** Nobody wants to hire those characteristics. Make sure you follow that up with excitement during the interview. Again, you don't want to come off as **passive, uncaring, or apathetic.** Nobody wants to hire those characteristics.

Tips for Improving Body Language and Energy Level

Sadly, most of us are blind to our body language. Here are some quick tips to polishing up your body language to **maximize your first impression:**

1. Practice with people you're comfortable with.
2. Get feedback from your practice dummies
3. Record your practice interview, if possible, and observe your style. What do you see?
4. While you're watching your videotape, turn off the sound. Answer these questions:

- How engaged are you?
- How charismatic are you?
- Are you smiling or scowling?
- Are you leaning forward or slouching?
- Do you have any nervous habits that are unflattering?
- Are you an energizer bunny or a dead fish?
- Are you looking your interviewer in the eye most of the time?

One last energy level tip: In a phone screen interview, try standing up during your conversation. I have noticed that candidates who stand during phone interviews tend to express higher energy level than those who don't. Odd, but true.

4. YOU NEED TO DRESS AND GROOM CORRECTLY

This goes without saying. You need to be well-groomed and look as professional and put together as possible for all interviews.

- See: [What is the Appropriate Way to Dress for an Interview](#)

Conclusion

Most of this article falls into the realms of common sense, but as a professional corporate recruiter, I have seen example after example of candidates who do not know or practice these basic tactics.

The majority of hiring managers are still making hiring decisions on instinct. Take advantage of that fact! The majority of your competitors won't be as prepared as you to take advantage of the **FOUR MINUTE FACT.**

If you maximize the impact of the four basic tactics of promptness, handshake, body language and dress and grooming, you will be MILES ahead of the tangled competition. You will make a strong first impression.

See: [21 Interview Mistakes to Avoid at All Costs](#)