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- » Administrative
- » Arts & Media
- » Biotech/Phrm.
- » ECommerce
- » Education
- » Energy
- » Engineering
- » Executive
- » Finance
- » Healthcare
- » Hospitality
- » HR
- » Insurance
- » Legal
- » Marketing
- » Production
- » Retail
- » Sales
- » Science
- » Trades
- » Students
- » Technology

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 - » Resumé Writing
 - » Interviewing
 - » Networking
 - » Salary Negotiation
- » Ask a Career Advisor
- » Research An Industry
- » Find Salary Info

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- » My Resumés
- » CareerAlert!
- » My Job List
- » Saved Searches
- » Personal Information

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Employment News from the Globe and Mail

Quick encounters of the hiring kind

Speed job interviews are growing more popular -- but experts are split on whether lightning-fast meetings are the right way to size up candidates, WALLACE IMMEN finds

WALLACE IMMEN
Wednesday, February 8, 2006

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For sheer performance anxiety, speed dating has nothing on speed job interviewing, says Heidi Reinhart, an articling lawyer at Ogilvy Renault LLP in Toronto.

She should know, after undergoing an exhausting four-hour circuit of 15-minute mini-meetings with 14 law firms at the University of Windsor last year.

"Knowing everything rests on such a short interview, the time and performance pressure built up into a very stressful situation," she says.

But she came prepared with an "elevator speech" and points designed to make a fast impression, and she found that the butterflies disappeared when the meetings began.

She hit it off almost immediately with the recruiter for Ogilvy, and landed an internship in Toronto, which led to her current position.

Speed interviewing is growing in popularity. It's a recruiting technique that gives candidates no more than 10 or 15 minutes to spark a relationship with a potential employer before a bell signals that it's time to move on to another encounter.

Though it worked for Ms. Reinhart, the experts are divided on whether the rush to speed up interviews is effective when careers are on the line.

Those who favour lightning-quick interviews say they give recruiters and candidates more possibilities to make a match than is possible with traditional hour-long meetings.

Skeptics, however, say that a few minutes is not sufficient time to reveal a person's true character and ability to do a job.

Like it or not, though, quick encounters of the hiring kind are a growing wave in recruiting.

The largest speed interview event in Canada happened in Montreal last October, when Vidéotron Ltée., a division of Quebecor Media Inc., held a job fair to hire 300 new employees, ranging from systems architects, technicians and analysts to sales representatives, for its new Internet telephone service.

More than 2,000 applicants showed up and formed long lines out the doors and onto the street, says Isabelle Dessureault, Vidéotron's general manager for communications in Montreal, who estimated it would have taken weeks to interview them all one by one.

However, the line moved quickly because résumés the candidates submitted on-line were pre-screened, and each arrival was assigned to a circuit of five- or seven-minute interviews with recruiters and company officials in their specialties.

About half of them made it through the first round, then wrote a half-hour test. Those who made the short list got second interviews, lasting just 15 minutes to half an hour.

The company says it worked. "We were very successful," Ms. Dessureault says.

"By the end of the day, we were able to fill 200 of the 300 positions. It will definitely be used again because it saves a lot of time and effort."

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- » Sports
- » Arts & Er
- » Editorials
- » Columnis

So far, the speed approach is in widespread use mostly to assess large groups of applicants for entry- or lower-level jobs, but Tim Cork, president of the Toronto career transition company Nexcareer Inc., believes speed interviews should be used in recruiting at every level, all the way up to senior executives.

"Why shouldn't they be? In any interview at any level, the first few seconds of an interview are the most critical and telling," Mr. Cork says

The speed approach has been spurred on by the success of the bestselling book *Blink, the Power of Thinking without Thinking* by New Yorker magazine science writer Malcolm Gladwell, Mr. Cork explains.

Mr. Gladwell presents evidence that, as a survival mechanism, the human brain is capable of making instant judgments with great precision. He goes on to present evidence that a decision made in literally the blink of an eye can be just as correct as months of mental analysis.

"We're stuck in this mode that we have to spend a lot of time to get to know people, but in reality, you don't need to do that until you get to the final strokes on a short list of candidates," Mr. Cork says.

However, other recruiting experts remain wary.

"Personally, I have doubts speed interviewing will be a lasting trend," says Gabriel Bouchard, vice-president and general manager of on-line job site Monster.ca.

"It's funky and it's new, but while it can be a way to get a first impression quickly, all you can really assess is personality and not experience and ability."

For positions that require experience or a comprehensive skill set, employers are still better off using the more traditional combination of in-depth interviews and psychological and skills tests, he says.

However, those who use the speed approach regularly say they have become believers.

"I am surprised by how accurate a first impression is," says Jeremy Devereaux, a partner and chairman of the student committee for the Toronto office of Ogilvy Renault, who has been doing speed interviewing of candidates from law schools for the past four years.

He says most big law firms in Canada are now adopting speed interviews in recruiting.

"There are clearly limitations on how much you can go into their backgrounds and what they have accomplished. But I've found you can get a good initial impression of what the candidate is like and whether they are suited to the firm."

For Ogilvy, the speed interview is only the first step, he adds. Those chosen still receive more extensive interviews with members of the firm before they are hired.

The approach has benefits for candidates, Mr. Devereaux adds.

"We find there are people we might not have interviewed because on a résumé they don't look as impressive as other candidates, but when you meet them, you are tremendously impressed," he says. "This means they can get in the door not simply on their paperwork."

And special skills can be learned to make that first impression memorable, says Iris Unger, executive director of Youth Employment Services in Montreal, which has become a proponent of the speed-dating approach in its job fairs.

The non-profit organization that assists recent graduates and immigrants up to about age 35 coaches job candidates to make eye contact, smile and come prepared with a 30-second introduction of who they are, what they offer and some examples of how they have used their skills to solve problems.

Candidates are urged to do some research about the employers they will meet, and come up with specific examples from their work and volunteer experiences that demonstrate their suitability for the job.

Accuracy, clarity and brevity are special virtues in speed interviews, Ms. Unger advises. Candidates are coached not to speak for more than two minutes at any time.

Ms. Reinhart says she found it helpful to practise mock interviews with friends.

Not only did she check the websites of the firms she would be interviewing with but

she also tried to find out who would be doing the interview and get some information on their specialties and experience.

Questions are always asked about your résumé, Ms. Reinhart found, so it is important to be able to answer questions about the dates and specifics of everything on it.

Interviewers will always ask if you have questions about the firm, and "it's really important to have one or two prepared."

Because Ms. Reinhart was interviewing for a summer program, she decided to ask about how much interaction she would have with other lawyers and whether there would be a rotation of jobs to give her a variety of experiences.

Because everything goes by so quickly, Ms. Reinhart found it was helpful to take notes.

"I scribbled down my impressions at the end of each of the meetings on a pad of paper. Otherwise you can tend to forget by the end of a long day."

However, she says the impression she got of her current employer in 15 minutes turned out to be surprisingly -- and pleasantly -- accurate.

Would she do it again? "I would feel uncomfortable to think my career depended on it, she says."

Nevertheless, "speed interviewing is a good test of how people behave and perform."

Make a fast impression

1 **Know what employers want.** Read posting descriptions for specific qualities being sought.

2 **Research.** Use company websites or reports to get a feel for how it is organized and what you would be expected to do in the role you are applying for.

3 **Prepare an "infomercial"** introduction of your experience, your goals and a benefit you offer the organization. This should take no more than 30 seconds.

4 **Suit up.** You want your dress to give the first impression that you are a professional. This will automatically make the interviewer take you seriously.

5 **Bring extra copies** of your résumé and a list of references. Organized interviewees always get taken more seriously.

6 **Demonstrate confidence** by making eye contact when introduced, and sitting up straight.

7 **Set a serious tone.** Being overly sure of yourself can make you appear smug. Being too casual with your interviewer can be seen as lack of sincerity. Ch chattiness can make you look nervous.

8 **Listen carefully** to what you are being asked. You've got little time, so make sure you understand the questions and listen for clues to what the interviewer is specifically looking for.

9 **Answer questions completely** but do not speak for more than two minutes at any one time.

10 **Stay positive.** Don't badmouth previous employers or job experiences. Talk about what you enjoyed and learned.

11 **Prepare questions** to ask about the job and about the company, such as: "What would a typical day look like for someone with my responsibilities?" This will demonstrate your interest in the position.

12 **Schedule a follow-up.** Ask a question such as: "Would it be all right if I called you to follow up on the status of my application?"

13 **Demonstrate you are keen** by ending with a statement such as "I look forward to working with you."

14 **Network.** At some events, there may be a chance to continue chatting after the interviews end. Take advantage of it.

15 **Send a thank-you** card or e-mail. This will leave a final good impression.

Get straight As

In a short interview, it is particularly important that you get "straight As," says Tim Cork, president of the Toronto career transition company Nexcareer Inc. Recruiters will be most impressed by:

Attitude, which shows up in being relaxed and confident. "The thing to keep in mind is if you feel good about you, I feel good about you," Mr. Cork says.

Aptitude is not just what you have to say on paper in your résumé. What makes an impact is the way you demonstrate your enthusiasm and how your skills could be applied to the job at hand, he says.

Action is the thing that seals the deal, Mr. Cork says. You've got to present proof that you are effective, persistent and dependable. It's particularly impressive to interviewers if you provide references and testimonials from employers or clients.

But don't overdo it, cautions Gabriel Bouchard, vice-president and general manager of on-line job site Monster.ca.

A common mistake he sees is candidates who rush through lists of things, trying to deliver as much content as possible. He recommends coming up with two or three key messages. Do research on company websites about culture and values to find key points to emphasize.

It is also important to take control of the agenda, he adds.

If an interviewer is getting into areas you haven't prepared answers for, he recommends trying to bring the discussion back to your strengths.

"Use what the person asked you as a bridge." Give a brief answer, then switch the topic to a point you want to make.

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