

# Standing out from the crowd

By [Diana Clement](#)

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Many an employer sees more than 400 candidates' CVs for a single job. Making yourself stand out takes some doing.

Even getting your CV read at a large corporate such as Gen-i may mean passing a web-enabled questionnaire beforehand.

Huma Faruqi, HR manager at Gen-i New Zealand, says the company uses the web-based selection process to ask key questions tailored to each job.

"We might ask details of someone's experience in project management and what the most complex projects have been that they have worked on previously.

"We look at how they have responded to the web-enabled questions before we open the CV, which comes as an attachment."

It's essential to tailor it to the position in question, not simply send in a standard CV. "[Impressive candidates] will use their CV to highlight their ability and the skills they will bring to the roles they are applying for," says Faruqi.

"A CV should be short and sweet with an executive summary. We don't read 10-page CVs.

"It should cover their profile, professional identity, career objectives and professional qualifications.

"It should also include function-specific or technology-specific skills relevant to the role they are applying for."

Faruqi remembers one that stood out where the potential employee had a short, snappy profile outlining his professional identity, what he was looking for and how that would be relevant to the job, as well as fitting in with his long-term career objectives. It also had a photograph, which enabled Faruqi to build a picture of the candidate in her mind.

Trevor Taylor, chief executive of Outward Bound, says well-tailored CVs are also important for smaller organisations because they can't afford to make a mistake in a small workforce.

One of the CVs he remembers particularly vividly was from a candidate who didn't have the experience requested but got the job anyway and is still there three years later.

## Interviews – act fast

For candidates who make it past the first hurdles – CV and possibly web-based questions – the next

step is the interview.

It must be conducted with great care because employers often make snap decisions.

Executives polled recently in a survey by Robert Half Finance & Accounting were asked: "How long does it typically take you to form either a positive or negative opinion of a job candidate during an initial interview?"

On average, they said it took 10 minutes.

As for Taylor, he can see within 30 seconds sometimes if a candidate will fit.

Potential employees should also make sure they research the company and the person who will be interviewing.

It's astounding how often candidates arrive to be interviewed and ask for "Mr Faruqui", says Faruqui, not having even found out whether she was male or female.

Kim Smith, division director of Robert Half Finance & Accounting in Auckland, adds: "The interview begins the moment the job seeker arrives, so applicants need to project enthusiasm and confidence from the start."

At the interview, the three key things Faruqui is looking for are:

- \* Presentation.
- \* How you articulate yourself in an interview.
- \* How well prepared you are.

Faruqui says "someone who is smart, on time, engages pretty quickly, is well prepared and knows the questions they want to ask" is more likely to make the grade at an interview.

At Gen-i, someone who shows an interest in the regulatory environment and how changes may affect the business is more likely to make a good impression than those who don't follow the issues facing such a business.

Some of this is Interviewing 101 technique, yet many potential employees haven't swotted up. Some may have been with the same employer for years and have rusty or non-existent job-hunting skills.

### **Questions to prepare for**

Smith says five key questions commonly asked at the start of an interview that candidates can prepare for are:

- \* Can you tell me a little about yourself? Smith says you should briefly discuss your professional goals and interests as they relate to the job. "Do not discuss your hobbies or what you do outside work."
- \* What do you know about our firm? This is where your homework pays off. "Be prepared to describe how your experience and skills will help you contribute to the success of the firm."
- \* Why do you want to work here? "Respond in a way that shows you understand the organisation's priorities and objectives."
- \* Why are you looking to leave your current position? Focus on the opportunity and avoid being negative about your colleagues and bosses.
- \* What is your most significant professional accomplishment? "Cite an achievement that shows your ability to deliver tangible results."

## **Why be prepared?**

Taylor is sometimes astounded at how unprepared some candidates are, not even looking at Outward Bound's website before the interview.

"We ask some people, 'What do you know about Outward Bound?' and they say, 'Not a lot'," says Taylor.

Donna Whittle, director of Fashion Personnel, said one candidate who did prepare well for the interview gave the employer little choice but to take her on.

"It was for a sales and marketing role in golfing apparel," she says.

"She had gone to the extent of visiting several of the outlets and golf courses where the range was stocked and asked questions about the range.

"She brought to the interview golf magazines where she had marked the company's adverts and promo shots, and written a list of questions that she went through at the end of the interview to make sure that everything had been covered.

"The interviewers hadn't even seen some of the promo shots she had found or visited some of the retailers she had questioned.

"In my experience, few candidates bother doing any research at all, so a candidate who is prepared to do this much preparation just stands head and shoulders above all other applicants."

## **Do gimmicks work?**

Gimmicks do work sometimes – at least they can grab an employer's attention. I once knew a journalist who sent a photo of himself to an editor with the words "who is this man?" scrawled across it.

The next day he sent another picture of himself, a covering letter and CV. He got the job – even though there hadn't even been one advertised.

But at Gen-i, while gimmicks may lighten the HR staff's day, having the skills, experience, and the right professional personality will always win out over a gimmick, says Faruqui.

One CV she remembers standing out was from a particularly creative candidate who made her CV appear like an X-File from the 1990s cult TV programme.

"There was a big red arrow. It drew your eyes to the CV."

The CV did get a second look, thanks to the gimmick but sadly "the candidate didn't progress because they didn't have the right skills".

## **Polish yourself first**

Iain McCormick, director of the Executive Coaching Centre, says some employees need to overcome personal hurdles before they can impress employers on paper or during an interview.

"I have recently worked with a senior executive who changed jobs. The key to his success, after many failures, was to understand and challenge his own underlying pessimism, to portray his optimism and release his energy. He ended up with three job offers.

"His optimism showed in his descriptions of his past experience and achievements – which were now no longer tinged with a sense of regret or apology."

Lee Brodie, director of Career Dynamic, a career change consultancy in Auckland, says candidates need to understand their own brand and project it. He says many people are haphazard in the process of

applying for jobs.

"Most people use the bus stop method of career planning. They take the first bus that comes along because they are not convinced there will be another one along."

### **Be prepared**

- \* Employers often make decisions in minutes or even seconds.
- \* Tailor the executive summary in your CV to the position.
- \* Do your homework on the company and the interviewer.
- \* Consider gimmicks, but be aware that they don't always work.
- \* The best interviewee, not the best candidate, often gets the job.
- \* At the interview dress for success and ask good questions.
- \* Sell yourself as a team player.
- \* Practise to deliver a winning performance.

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