

## Interviewing International Candidates

Since interviews are an integral part of nearly all recruitment and selection strategies in Canada, employers need to be aware of cultural differences, sensitivities and unique needs that exist for new employees. Interviews can be easily derailed by misunderstandings as some candidates from diverse backgrounds may attempt to demonstrate that they are the best person for the job based on their own world view. This may differ from “Canadian” norms. When some behaviours are interpreted negatively by employers, the candidate may lose a job opportunity for reasons unrelated to their competencies, skills or knowledge. Embracing diversity in the workplace is not a weakness; *rather* it is an organizational strength.

The influence of culture on human behavior is well-researched and documented. The following section is derived directly from a variety of references cited at the end of this module and contains some generalizations about cultures and the people within them. While stereotyping based on perceptions of an individual’s background can be dangerous, information and knowledge about diverse values, beliefs and customs may be helpful to an employer when it provides insight into people’s behavior. The information provided will highlight some of the differences employers may encounter. Speaking the same language does not mean sharing the same culture. Keep in mind that your behaviour as an interviewer may seem as unfamiliar to the candidate, as their behaviour may seem to you.

### Greetings

Interviews may derail from the beginning when greetings do not match employers’ expectations. The handshake is not a universal greeting ritual, nor is the manner in which it is executed. For example, people from East Asia may have a gentle handshake, which might be perceived as weakness in Canada. Since many employers interpret a firm handshake as a sign of trustworthiness, they may downgrade East Asian candidate’s right from the start.

Male candidates coming from Muslim countries may not shake hands with female employers, or vice versa. Bypassing the handshake may put off the employer and start the interview on the wrong foot, as some Canadians may interpret this as rude. Female employers could then perceive that the candidate will have difficulty taking directions from female managers. However, this gesture may indicate respect in the minds of many such candidates.

### Personal Space

A vast majority of IEHPs come from countries with much higher population densities than in Canada and therefore are used to less personal space than Canadians. Using this as an example, candidates may attempt to position themselves relative to the employer at a distance that feels right for them. They are at the right distance by their standards but too close by an employers’ standards.

In this case, interviewers may physically move back in order to recreate the space they need to be able to carry on the conversation. Some candidates may interpret this reaction as implying that something is wrong or that that employers dislike them, which can impact the interview from the very beginning. Similarly the employer who allows the candidate their own cultural proximity during the interview may experience a feeling of personal discomfort through the interview. This could result in the interviewer hearing the candidate’s words but not actually retaining what was said. Despite the experience and skills of the applicant he or she could be taken off the list of potential new hires for no apparent reason. In contrast, some candidates may leave extra distance between them and interviewers as a way to show deference and respect. Indian male candidates may do this with female employers. The female

employers may interpret this behaviour as implying the opposite, perhaps as a lack of respect and a sense of superiority. Personal space can have a profound effect on the entire interview experience.

### Small-talk

Most Canadian employers will preface an interview by chatting about weather or traffic or a given sport. Topics such as religion or politics are generally taboo in this realm. In contrast, Latin Europeans may start the conversation about family and politics. A Canadian employer may be very surprised if a candidate starts the interview by asking the employer about their family. For example, the candidate might ask if the employer is married or has children or about the employer's political opinions. This may make the employer uneasy, as these topics are generally perceived as private by North American standards.

### The Issue of Time

Time in Canadian culture is like "gold" or "money" it can be bought, sold, made, and sometimes even considered as a possession. Expressions like "I don't have time" or "I will make time" is ingrained in the Canadian culture because time matters. However, being on time means different things in different countries. People in Latin America may consider themselves truly late only if they arrive more than 30 – 45 minutes beyond the appointed time. While Latin Americans are likely to arrive closer to the appointed time for an interview than for regular meetings, being 5 or 10 minutes late for an interview may not seem like an issue to them whereas it is usually considered egregious by many Canadian employers and those operating in a typical North American business paradigm.

### Showing Emotion

Canadian norms suggest that interview candidates generally refrain from showing a lot of emotion. They are expected to show interest in the position with moderate enthusiasm and excitement. Depending on their culture, candidates may show too much or too little emotion during an interview relative to the Canadian standard.

Some cultural norms typically sanction more emotion in the workplace than in Canada.. Latin Europeans, and Arabs for instance may be perceived by Canadian employers as being "out of control" or "aggressive". In contrast, there are cultures where one typically displays less emotion in the workplace than in Canada; for example the east Asian community may be perceived as not being as interested in the position.

In many cases, these candidates may be passed over in favour of individuals who show the appropriate level of interest relative to the interviewer's expectations and cultural mores.

### Excessive Deference

Most IEHPs come from cultures that are significantly more hierarchical than Canada. During interviews, these applicants may see themselves in a subordinate position relative to the employer. They may show a deference to employers in ways that Canadian employers either don't notice, notice but ignore, or find annoying or inappropriate. For example, candidates may:

- Continue to call the employer "Sir" or "Madam" even after the employer asks them to use their first name;
- Stand until they are told explicitly to sit down;
- Insist on letting the employer go through doors first;
- Offer to carry things for the employer
- Refer to people by their title rather than by their name. For example, instead of saying, "As I was saying to Peter...", they might say "As I was saying to your manager..."

This fact becomes even more of an issue during panel interviews. Many candidates have learned (in their home country) to identify the highest-ranking person in the room and to focus her or his attention on that person. In these cases, even though other panellists ask questions, the individual will answer to the highest-ranking person in the room.

## The Concept of Accomplishments

The concept of expressing individual accomplishments as a means of impressing a potential employer is by no means universal. Individuals in many cultures are taught to minimize and downplay their accomplishments. This is the opposite type of individuals that many Canadian employers wish to hire. These candidates struggle during the interview because they may not know how to convince the employer that they have the right skills for the job.

Many job applicants also come from collectivist countries where work is done in tightly knit groups with little or no separation between individual responsibilities. In China and India, team members do not divide team objectives into individual roles and responsibilities – the whole team is responsible for the outcomes of a given order. These candidates might mention completed projects on their resumes but when asked to detail their particular involvement, will simply respond that the team was responsible for the project. Candidates who use the pronoun “I” in China or India are considered by Chinese or Indian employers to be poor team players and may be eliminated from consideration for a given position. Contrast this with the situation in Canada, where anyone saying “we” during job interviews may be perceived by employers as hiding behind the team because he or she did not excel or adequately contribute.

## Inappropriate Responses

Behavioural interviews may be a source of confusion for some candidates because this style of interview is not common in many other parts of the world. Candidates who come from a so-called “risk-averse culture”, such as France, where theoretical knowledge trumps practice experience in an interview setting, tend to answer questions like “Tell me about a time when you had to deal with a difficult patient”, by describing what they would do rather than giving an example of a past situation where they dealt with an actual patient. The employer may interpret this as if the candidate had never experienced this situation, when in fact they may have but they understood the question as trying to get to the theory rather than focusing on the practice.

Usually the last question asked of candidates in Canadian interviews tends to be “Do you have any questions for us?” This may create a lot of stress in some candidates who come from hierarchical cultures since they have never had to deal with this situation. In their home country, since these candidates are in the subordinate position during interviews, they are usually not given the chance to ask questions. Asking questions like “Who would I report to if I am offered this position?” or “What managerial style is preferred in your organization?” is completely out of bounds in their home countries, so they end up asking questions about benefits or other noncritical topics. These are safe questions back home but reflect poorly here as corporations typically do not want to hire an individual focused on mundane issues and would rather hire someone who appears more thoughtful and probing.

## Awkward Silences and Speaking Up

What about the issue of silence and pause in the interview process? Culture plays a major role here. People from Latin America, Latin Europe, the Middle East and South Asia often speak at the same time, because the social norm states that people should start to speak as soon as they have understood where their counterpart is trying to lead them. This shows interest and engagement. In Canada, this

communication style is perceived by employers as rude and as demonstrating poor listening skills, since these candidates continually interrupt.

By contrast, people in East Asia are taught to leave pauses between speakers during a conversation. These pauses indicate that the person said something interesting and important that deserves to be pondered carefully before formulating an answer. During interviews East Asian candidates may leave a pause that may be construed by Canadian employers to mean that they have not understood the question. Employers may react by restating the question to prime candidates, however East Asian candidates can perceive this as an extension of their previous question so they wait again for a long pause – long enough by their standards. Canadian employers can become uncomfortable with this much silence and start to speak before the pause becomes too long. These candidates may be rejected because employers perceive them as having limited communication ability, whereas candidates may feel they never had a chance to properly express themselves.

### How Can You Reduce the Impact of these Issues?

Some of the steps recommended by Laroche, L. and Rutherford D. in their *Recruiting, Retaining, and Promoting Culturally Different Employees* reference have been adapted as follows:

- ✓ Be prepared for surprises during the interview process. Don't be put off by the unexpected. Try to suspend judgments and assumptions until you have more information. Remain flexible.
- ✓ Include HR professionals and/or diverse people in recruiting teams. While this may sound obvious, it is often not followed, particularly in smaller organizations.
- ✓ Provide training to people involved in the recruitment and selection process on a regular basis so that they know how to identify and appreciate culturally determined behaviours that often lead to the rejection of candidates.
- ✓ Focus on transferable skills. Some international candidates may have worked in industries that require the same technical skills even though they initially appear to be different.
- ✓ Consider hiring candidates with strong potential who may need to learn more about the Canadian system at the lower end of the pay scale, and place them in mentee positions with managers who know how to professionally develop new staff. Effective mentors possess the patience and time to guide and orient the new hire to workplace norms and expectations.
- ✓ Create tests to evaluate candidates in real-life situations.
- ✓ Use short term contracts (whenever possible) to ensure the right fit.
- ✓ Use volunteer and/or shadow positions to evaluate the potential of new candidates who show potential.
- ✓ Describe on your website your recruiting process used by your organization, including sample interview questions and answers. This kind of detail can help every candidate show their true abilities.
- ✓ E-mail questions to candidates 48 hours before the interview, and ask them to respond in writing by email. This gives the candidates an opportunity to look up words and to figure out how they are going to present more complex concepts. Giving employers a chance to read candidates' responses to the first set of questions also allows them to cover more ground in a limited time interview by asking follow-up questions.
- ✓ Determine specific candidate-ranking criteria at the outset. Otherwise, candidates can often end up being second best on everyone's list, for a variety of reasons.
- ✓ Define up-front the English-language skill level required for the position. Be prepared to test for language proficiency rather than assume the person's skill level.