

Projecting Self-Confidence, Not Arrogance, in Interviews

By Eileen P. Gunn

We've been taught to put forth our most confident, capable and polished selves during job interviews.

But recruiters note that business-school students seeking jobs regularly slip from grounded confidence into arrogance and an inflated sense of entitlement. As a result, they often knock themselves out of contention for attractive jobs.

"We have top-talent indicators that we look for, and we also have several derailers in the back of our minds," says Chris Aisenbrey, director of university relations for Whirlpool Corp. in Benton Harbor, Mich. "Arrogance can raise a red flag, because it affects your ability to work in teams and with lower-level employees, and [affects] your ability to be customer-service focused."

There are things interviewees can do to leave the right impression, recruiters say. Here are five tips to help ensure that your air of self-confidence won't cross the line into arrogance.

1. Talk teamwork.

Avoid overstating your role in team projects. For some students, "everything is 'I did this, I did that.' It's off-putting," says Ken Bayne, assistant treasurer at Guidant Corp., a medical-device maker in Indianapolis, who's been recruiting M.B.A.s for seven years. During on-campus interviews, recruiters can meet several students who worked on the same project, he says, "and I'll get completely different points of views about who did what."

He prefers to see an interviewee "be clear about what the team accomplished and about what their role was," he says. "To be an effective person on a successful team is the best of both worlds."

2. Engage everyone.

Recruiters often worry that high-achieving M.B.A.s won't be able to engage and manage a diverse group of people, including those in the ranks below them.

Mr. Bayne says he likes to ask interviewees about when they had to motivate someone who wasn't a direct report. "It indicates they can get things done in an organization," he says.

And Mr. Aisenbrey keeps an eye on candidates' social interaction through the interview process. For example, the candidate's chit-chat when Mr. Aisenbrey is escorting them from an interview tells him about their social skills and whether they're enthusiastic about his company. During those few seconds of informal conversation, "I want to know what they know about Whirlpool and why they're excited about it," he says.

How candidates interact with other employees also is telling. "The administrative assistants will tell a recruiter if a person was rude or standoffish or high maintenance," Mr. Aisenbrey adds. Chatting with the receptionist when you arrive for your interview helps. So does returning calls promptly.

3. Convey interest with questions.

Knowing little about a company suggests to recruiters you thought you didn't need to bother preparing -- a signal that you think too highly of yourself or too little of their company. Asking detailed, pointed questions about the company is a good way to show that you've done your homework, recruiters say. "The questions will show when you know nothing about a company, too," Mr. Bayne says. For example, some M.B.A.s ask questions that are easily answered by looking at the company's Web site.

Asking questions about the company's culture indicates that you're looking for the job that will fit you best, rather than one that will provide the most prestige or biggest paycheck. Mr. Aisenbrey says that one of the best questions he's been asked was: What would a person see when standing in your parking lot at the end of the workday? The interviewee wanted to know if workers would come out looking stressed or talking with co-workers, or whether no cars would leave the parking lot until late at night.

"It was a creative way to get at the issue of culture," he says.

4. Don't fixate on your job title.

Some M.B.A.s get too hung up on titles. For example, Mr. Bayne says, he typically hires M.B.A.s into senior-analyst roles rather than manager positions. "But that senior analyst might be doing more managing than they expect," he says. He prefers candidates who are curious mostly about the work they'll be doing and about their likely career progress at his company, he says.

Mr. Aisenbrey shares the same view. "Chances are that your job is going to change soon after you get to the company," he says. "Your supervisor will move on, the job will grow or shrink, or you'll be promoted quickly because you're a great talent." As a result, he says, he likes interviewees to be most concerned with how they fit with the firm in general rather than what their initial title or exact role will be.

5. Have realistic expectations.

Employers who recruit M.B.A.s "want people who see themselves at the beginning of their career," says Andy Chan, director of the career-management center at Stanford Graduate School of Business. "The job isn't necessarily going to be at the bottom, but it will be somewhere in the middle."

M.B.A.s who believe they'll immediately get to use the management skills they learned in class to run a big-business division need to adjust their expectations. This is particularly important when changing careers, and especially if you're also changing industries, Mr. Aisenbrey says. "Just because you were a manager in engineering doesn't mean you're ready to be put in charge of one of our brands immediately," he notes.

At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management, Jacqueline Wilbur, the director of career development, encourages students to spend much of their first semester talking to alumni about their career paths, so they have a realistic idea of what their first job after graduation might be and where they might go from there. She says she particularly likes students to hear from alumni who have been out of school for about five years and have a longer-term perspective on their school experience.