

Credibility in Job Interviews

What do you think makes a scientist credible? The first thing you're likely to think of is their technical skill base. You might say that a cell biologist projecting credibility must have a fair number of publications in their area of expertise, or a very special niche that they are known for, right? To some extent, you'd be correct—but that's only when it comes to technical credibility. In reality, your overall credibility is composed of much more than that technical skill base.

This is particularly true early in the interview process, when you must get past nonscientific interviewers such as recruiters or human resources (HR) personnel. If you have an interesting CV, the first step of the interview process is likely to be a 20 to 30 minute phone call with a recruiter or HR professional to establish mutual interest. The crucial thing to remember about these screening interviews is that, to make it to the more detailed onsite interview with the scientific experts who will respond to your technical expertise, you first have to establish a general sense of credibility.

The word "credibility" comes from the Latin "crēdere," which means "to believe." Sure, it's easy to believe a cell biologist speaking about CHO cells, because they've published six papers dealing with the subject. But how many HR professionals do you think will quiz candidates on their knowledge of CHO versus HeLa cells in therapeutic product development? Not many! Your hiring manager contact will want to hear all about the experience you've had working with various cell lines. But to get to that point, you first must be seen as a credible candidate by the HR screener or recruiter.

This kind of credibility is based on traits that are more about interpersonal relations and less about publication lists and scientific standing. Thinking about it this way, even the cell biologist with a half-dozen publications could still come across as lacking in the credibility department.

I was recently discussing this topic with a HR staffer friend. "To me, even a knowledgeable source on a given topic can still lose points on credibility by the way they manage our initial interactions," she told me. "I'm looking for sincere people with an interest in what we do. Someone who comes across in any way as phony loses all credibility, even on topics in which they may have studied for a decade. Candidates need to couple their technical authority with words and actions that reinforce a general sense of confidence, a self-knowledge and presence that gives the interviewer comfort that they are talking to a real person."

How to project credibility

Now that I've convinced you of the importance of credibility, you may be wondering how to do it. These tips will point you in the right direction.

Don't answer interview questions with canned responses. The worst thing you can do for your credibility is to memorize responses to interview questions, or to use the approach recommended in books that talk about what interviewers want to hear. There are no scripted interview responses in these books that will do you any good. In fact, the moment I hear something that sounds staged, I lose interest. HR staffers will try to ask questions that can't be answered easily for just that reason. Despite this, we still sometimes find people who sound like they have a script in front of them. Don't be one of them.

Use prompts to shape your answers. Don't rely on entire prepared speeches, which come across as artificial—but do make sure you're prepared. First, keep a copy of your CV in front of you to remind you of dates and other details. Beyond that, write an outline you can refer to that reminds you of important details for each section of your educational and career history. Keep it simple—just a few notes incorporating words or phrases that will trigger your memory in the pressure of the moment to communicate something that will resonate with the employer. Then, aim to incorporate these points into the conversation in a way that doesn't sound rehearsed or forced. That doesn't mean you can't do a practice interview with a friend; it just means you don't want to write it all down and read it!

The sound of your voice is important. The pitch, volume, and tempo of your voice tell the person on the other line, at a subconscious level, how comfortable you are and how much credence they should put into your interview responses. It may sound like a very odd piece of advice, but I think the best approach is to care a bit less about the outcome. The more desperation that creeps into your voice, the less interested a company will be in hiring you. When you care a bit less about the results and treat an interview like any other professional conversation, your voice will project confidence instead of anxiety. That alone can move you forward to the next step. Lastly, make sure you are well hydrated. Having a bottle of water next to you is as important as that CV and your notepad.

Use your passion for what you do to introduce yourself. Get comfortable telling brief stories that highlight your experience—and your passion for your work. In a 20-minute lightweight interview, you may not have time for a host of these, but have at least one ready to go. (These are the only parts of your interview that can be rehearsed.) There's not a screening call that goes by where I do not ask my candidate to tell me about how they got into science and what they wanted to do with their career choice. That's the perfect opportunity to interject sincere enthusiasm into the conversation, and there is nothing better than this passion to add credibility to the discussion that follows.

This is where many newbie interviewees get into trouble. It isn't rah-rah phoniness that your interviewer is hoping to hear. It's a genuine interest in the employer, combined with a couple of good questions and an eagerness to learn more. Remember, your interviewer will be subconsciously rating your credibility on a sliding scale, with "credible" on one side and "pure BS" on the other. It's up to you to make sure you're placing yourself on the right side.

Credit: <http://www.sciencemag.org>