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MANAGING YOUR CAREER

Interview Etiquette Begins the Minute You Walk in the Door

By JOANN S. LUBLIN

One afternoon in February 2003, Gateway Chief Executive Ted Waitt was supposed to interview a promising candidate for the top human-resources spot at the struggling personal-computer maker. But an intense session with his senior lieutenants lasted 30 minutes longer than expected.

Moments before Mr. Waitt emerged from his meeting, the contender walked out and took a company-provided limousine home. She felt annoyed "because she was kept waiting for Ted," says John Heubusch, Mr. Waitt's former chief of staff. "I remember being really shocked."

Most job applicants realize they should avoid such blatantly rude conduct during job searches. They treat support staff well, never slurp their soup and send thank-you notes promptly. But applicants often exhibit subtler forms of poor manners -- to their detriment.

"An overblown sense of entitlement can lead to a variety of candidate misbehaviors that will kill your chances," warns Mark Jaffe, president of Minneapolis recruiters Wyatt & Jaffe, which handled the Gateway assignment. His solution? "Always act like a guest."

Let's construct a job-hunt scenario to see how inadvertent impoliteness can derail you:

Your demeanor comes under scrutiny the moment you arrive at a search firm. "We are building a picture of you piece by piece," explains Dora Vell, managing partner of Vell & Associates, high-tech recruiters in Waltham, Mass.

The receptionist notices whether you read your National Enquirer rather than her employer's annual report. She may also keep tabs on your hygiene habits. Ms. Vell once worked for a small Boston search firm where the receptionist alerted partners if candidates using the guest bathroom failed to wash their hands. (She could hear the faucet.)

Escorted to a partner's office doorway, you march right in -- even though he's engrossed in a confidential call. Bad idea. Wait outside until he finishes.

You chat briefly, repeatedly peeking at your BlackBerry. Another dumb move. Twice in the past six months, aspiring vice presidents have pulled out these email devices during interviews with Dean Bare, a managing partner of recruiters Stanton Chase International in Atlanta. "It's time to turn that off," he sternly told them.

"I wouldn't want to recommend anyone that insensitive and lacking in social graces," Mr. Bare adds. To appear more considerate, inform the recruiter upfront that work crises require frequent email checks.

He next suggests taking your car to a restaurant for lunch because yours is parked nearby. There is a hidden motive: "Assume you're being judged by how you drive," cautions Jane Howze, a managing director at the Alexander Group, a Houston search firm, who says driving habits are a good measure of character.

A job seeker keen to become a partner at a management consultancy hit a vehicle during one such trip with Mr. Bare. The collision crumpled the prospect's car hood. "It clearly was his fault," the recruiter recalls. But the man blamed the other driver.

His poor road etiquette bothered Mr. Bare so much that Stanton Chase didn't recommend him. He should have admitted his culpability.

You survive the search firm's screening and agree to meet a possible employer. Keep your commitment! A vice president of a big telecom-services provider cut short his vacation and traveled to a different city so he could interview a general manager suggested by Ms. Vell. The candidate canceled the morning of their planned get-together, claiming he no longer was interested. "This was rude. He didn't get any more calls from us," Ms. Vell says. She thinks he should have at least withdrawn in person.

You also lose credibility if you are late for interviews with hiring managers -- or leave too soon. A well-qualified executive committed both blunders when he sought a roughly \$450,000 post at a global entertainment concern.

He arrived early for his 1 p.m. appointment with the head of human resources. He asked to use a conference room to make an important call. It lasted until 1:15. He didn't apologize to the HR executive about the delay. Following their abbreviated session, she was ready to take him to his 2 p.m. session with the finance chief.

That didn't happen on time either. "I have a 2 p.m. conference call I have to get on," the potential recruit announced, ducking back into the conference room. The call took 40 minutes. After finishing his second delayed interview, he refused to meet again with the human-resources chief because he needed to catch a flight.

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The prospect's boorish behavior struck company and search-firm officials as a fatal red flag. "We said, 'This person has a real strong etiquette and judgment problem,'" recalls David W. Gallagher, a managing director for Boyden Global Executive Search in Atlanta. He suspects many ill-mannered job seekers suffer from a similar, excessive sense of self-importance. "If you're going to interview for a job, interview 100%," Mr. Gallagher advises. "Put everything else out of your mind."