

Post your event at [www.ScienceCareers.org](http://www.ScienceCareers.org)



Science



Magazine

News

STKE

SAGE KE

Careers

Collections

ScienceCareers.org We know Science

Jobs

Funding

Meetings and Events

Career Development

For Advertisers

About ScienceCareers

[Home](#) > [ScienceCareers Home](#) > [Career Development](#) > [Previous Issues](#) > [2004](#) > [2004-08-20](#) > [Jensen](#)

## CAREER DEVELOPMENT : ARTICLES

[E-Mail This Article](#) [Print This Article](#)



### Tooling Up: First Impressions--Are Interview Results Preordained?

Dave Jensen  
United States  
20 August 2004

DAVID G. JENSEN, A WRITER AND SPEAKER ON CAREER ISSUES WORLDWIDE, IS THE FOUNDER AND MANAGING DIRECTOR OF CAREERTRAX INC., A BIOTECHNOLOGY AND PHARMACEUTICAL CONSULTING FIRM LOCATED IN SEDONA, ARIZONA.

#### [PREVIOUS COLUMNS](#)

Perhaps the best advice is that because there's nothing you can do about it anyway, you might as well be yourself. There's something liberating about the idea that you don't really have to perform, to pretend to be something you're not.

This month in "Tooling Up," I was scheduled to finish a three-part series that needed a conclusion, and I was at work on that article when something caught my eye. I was in the dentist's office waiting (and waiting, and waiting) for my appointment when I picked up an older copy of *The New Yorker* and read what I think is one of the scariest articles ever on the topic of first impressions. I knew immediately that I'd have to hold off the conclusion of my series until I updated readers on this subject.

First impressions are really important. I've always known that. Whenever I've interviewed candidates who fumbled in the first few minutes, I knew what a tough time they'd have getting back on track. I also knew that managers make up their minds on the subconscious level long before they make the formal hiring decision. So why was I surprised when I read columnist Malcolm Gladwell's May 2000 piece about the power of first impressions? Because I learned that everything I thought I knew about the subject was just the tip of the iceberg; the reality is much worse than I had ever imagined.

It appears that people *really do* make up their minds about you in just a few seconds. They may not even realize they are doing it, but just a few moments into a conversation you have already been judged. Reviewing the research, Gladwell concludes that interviews are often decisive within the first few seconds. As a consultant training both managers and job applicants in various elements of the interview process, I feel a bit powerless.

Are interviews really determined by first impressions?

#### **The New Yorker Story**

In "The New Boy Network," Gladwell describes what may be replacing that group of old boys in hiring circles. Instead of basing their hiring decisions on cronyism, employers now hire based on subconscious decisions that are made very early in the hiring process. The article begins with a true story of two people who meet very briefly: an information technology student from Harvard University by the name of

#### BUSINESS OFFICE SUPPLEMENTS

Careers in Translational Medicine - From Bench to Bedside  
26 May 2006

California - A Sunny State of Opportunities  
12 May 2006

[More](#)

#### CAREER TOOLS AND RESOURCES

##### Current Employers

Learn more about the employers advertising positions on our site.

##### Science Careers Forum

Post a question, get an answer on our online community

##### Graduate Programs

Browse our database of program profiles

##### How-To Guides

- [Writing a resume/CV](#)
- [Beating the interview](#)
- [Getting funding](#)
- [Managing a lab and staff](#)
- [Building your network](#)

##### Salary Tools

Find out how much you're worth with our salary calculator

[To Advertise](#) [Find Products](#)

Nolan and the CEO of Microsoft, Steve Ballmer.

Nolan meets this CEO when he delivers an address at Harvard. In a 2-minute Q&A exchange, the seed is planted. That seed germinates, sprouts, and blooms by later that evening, when a Microsoft recruiter comes up to Nolan: "Steve wants your e-mail address." They exchange e-mails. Ballmer even calls Nolan in his dorm room, offering to be a mentor. After a number of interactions by both phone and e-mail, Nolan decides to go to a young start-up company and not to Microsoft.

So what convinced this CEO of a \$400 billion company that Nolan, instead of hundreds of other students, was worth pursuing? What was it about Nolan that drove this relationship forward? As Malcolm Gladwell notes in this article, Ballmer actually knew very little about this college senior. He had only a snapshot to work from, along with intuition and gut feeling. In other words, all he had was a first impression.

### Research on the Subconscious Decision Process

A few years ago, Nalini Ambady and Robert Rosenthal, experimental psychologists at Harvard University, analyzed the nonverbal aspects of good teaching. Harvard teaching fellows were videotaped and a 10-second *silent* piece of that video was shown to outside observers, who were asked to rate the teachers on a 15-item checklist of personality traits. Even when Ambady cut the video back to 5 seconds--even to 2 seconds--the ratings remained the same. All the important stuff happened, apparently, *in the first 2 seconds*.

Here's the scariest part: Ambady and Rosenthal discovered that a person's conclusions after watching that 2-second video clip of a teacher he has never met are very similar to the conclusions reached by classroom participants after an entire semester's exposure.

Another research project, this one conducted by Frank Bernieri at the University of Toledo in Ohio, dealt with job-interview impressions. This researcher selected two participants to act as interviewers and had them professionally trained for 6 weeks on interview techniques. These two later interviewed nearly 100 people of various backgrounds and filled out an extensive six-page interview questionnaire on each. Bernieri's goal was to determine whether there are particular mannerisms that could ingratiate some people with interviewers.

He found that wasn't the case. There don't seem to be any particular tricks one can use to win at an interview.

But then one of Bernieri's students asked if the videotapes of these encounters could be used for another purpose. She had heard that "the handshake is everything" and wanted to test that old adage. Using a 15-second piece of video showing the candidate knocking on the door, shaking hands, and being greeted by the interviewer, she asked a group of new participants to rate these applicants on the same criteria that the two trained interviewers had been using.

"On nine out of the 11 traits that the applicants were being judged on, the observers significantly predicted the outcome of the interview," Bernieri told *The New Yorker*. "In fact, the strength of the correlation was extraordinary."

This is a disturbing conclusion. Here were well-trained interviewers, knowing just what to look for and how to get the information they sought, filling out a detailed, five-part form ensuring a complete and unbiased interview. Yet total strangers, who viewed only 15 seconds of video, arrived at similar conclusions.

All the formality of the interview process, it seems, is just a ruse. Despite the niceties and the formal procedures, interviews are all about gut feelings.

### What Can You Do About It?

It's obvious that the most qualified person doesn't always get the offer. Instead, the qualified candidate *who makes the right first impression* gets the offer. So what can you do to optimize your situation? You won't find any gimmicks or canned responses here, because it is my opinion that a good first impression is made just by your being at your best. It appears to be really hard to "fake it" in an interview in order to generate a good first impression. Perhaps the best advice is that because there's nothing you can do about it anyway, you might as well be yourself. There's something liberating about the idea that you don't really have to perform, to pretend to be something you're not.

And yet, this advice may lead some to walk into the interview room with the attitude of "Here I am, take me or leave me." What a mistake that would be! I asked Bernieri, now chair of the psychology department at Oregon State University in Corvallis, for some advice. Bernieri is one of the world's foremost authorities on nonverbal communication. Here are his recommendations:

- Make yourself a better candidate for a good first impression: "While first impressions are indeed

perational, there are things that you can do before an interview to improve the odds. For example, being well dressed and nicely groomed is in your control. You wouldn't believe the impact of attire on the first impression."

- "Contrast Effect" will affect an interviewer's impressions of you: "Remember that an interviewer may see a dozen people or more in a day. He or she remembers those who stand out, either good or bad. Individual differences jump out at interviewers. If all they see are sneakers all day long, your dress shoes suddenly look very memorable."

- The handshake is in your control: "I'm the first one to admit that when things aren't in your control, don't worry about them, but this critical first impression element can be practiced. The important thing isn't the strength of your grip, it is meeting 'web to web' and matching up hands so that the interviewer doesn't get a handful of fingers. In our research, men consistently get better marks on handshakes, but that is only because they've had much more practice."

### **Animals and Humans Too**

There's something almost prehistoric about this innate ability people have to make decisions about us from their subconscious. It reminds me of how some animals respond to humans in wildlife-human encounters.

When I first moved to Arizona about 20 years ago, I was told to be careful of javelina. This animal, a type of wild boar, will sometimes weigh in at nearly a 100 pounds, with large tusks and a nasty demeanor. Generally, javelinas react only if they feel threatened, or if the human they encounter starts screaming for help. One day my family and I were out hiking when suddenly we turned a corner and we were in a herd of these creatures--perhaps 30 of them, babies and all. We were quite scared at first, but soon a strange sense of calm came over us. We watched as the alpha male in the group went from anger to gentle watchfulness, as he saw no trace of hostility in our party. They grazed within inches of our legs and continued in the direction they had been headed.

The research reported in *The New Yorker* shows that most of us have this same sort of unexplained, prerational ability to make decisions about other creatures. Although it doesn't bode well for the interview process, it does prove that a gentle, easy nature isn't a bad thing to bring into the interview room.

And a good handshake wouldn't hurt, either.