

Why we need to speak differently about ourselves in a job interview

You know the situation: a friend talks about their working day, you ask questions and want to understand more about the environment. Certain aspects need explaining so that you can follow. You drift off onto interesting side tracks. After an hour of conversational ping-pong, you are both content and order the next pint. Efficient? Hardly.

Peter Näf

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That is how we converse in everyday life – we allow ourselves to drift. After an hour, you may know more about your friend's professional challenges. But was that truly the aim of the communication? Probably not. It was less about information and more about – borrowing from our closest relatives in the animal kingdom – mutual grooming.

For presenting one's professional experience in a recruitment process, however, this type of communication would be useless. You would need countless sociable evenings with recruiters before a clear picture emerged.

Read the communication situation correctly

In Paul Watzlawick's model of the content and relationship levels of communication, our two conversational partners were likely focused primarily on the relational aspect. The factual content was secondary. Our protagonist might just as well have spoken about his last holiday.

For applicants, this means: the relationship is built during the conversation – the content is built in the preparation.

Normally, we speak about ourselves in exactly this unstructured way – without clearly defined objectives. As a result, we do not prepare. We

mistakenly assume that we can talk about ourselves spontaneously and fluently. In reality, we often work out the substance only during the conversation itself, guided by the questions of our counterpart.

This may explain why even strong communicators – seasoned sales professionals, for example – sometimes fail in interviews.

Good communication is compressed time

In a job interview, the factual content carries greater weight. The professional experience of the applicant determines whether an offer is made. And since there is no time for extended conversational back and forth, information must be structured, concise and vivid.

A strong self-presentation in a job interview is compressed time. In sixty minutes, a picture must emerge that would otherwise require weeks in everyday life. The interview does not replace long conversations – it condenses them.

A convincing self-presentation does not happen by chance; it requires preparation. I therefore advise my clients to prepare for a job interview as if they were about to give a presentation about themselves to an audience. That alone makes clear how much effort is involved.

And yet: structure convinces the mind – relationship opens the door. Even in a job interview, the best factual argument remains ineffective without a viable human connection. As in private conversation, both levels matter – simply in a different balance.

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