The most important things first!

My confusion grew. The more compelling arguments Judith (name changed) presented, the less I understood why I had already written her off just a few minutes earlier. Together, we were analysing job advertisements and identifying the strongest arguments for her application. Yet I had concluded that she lacked sufficient expertise for the role. What had happened?

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Judith was participating in an outplacement programme with me. The position we were discussing required extensive experience in a new investment topic—and her first argument was that she had already been exposed to the subject at university.

The picture had already been formed

I was disappointed. From a professional in her mid-forties, I had expected more recent experience. My conclusion was therefore: she probably does not have enough expertise. Why did I think that?

Unconsciously, I assumed that she would present her strongest arguments first—namely, practical experience in the field. Since she did not mention this, I jumped to the conclusion that her experience was insufficient. With the relevant arguments that followed, she had to fight against an image that had already formed in my mind. The following somewhat embarrassing example illustrates just how persistent such impressions can be.

Years ago, as a headhunter, I rejected a candidate for a position that required several years of leadership experience. When he called after receiving my rejection, I explained that I could not identify any leadership experience in his CV. He replied that he did, in fact, have several years of leadership experience. My response still makes me laugh today: “No!”

Influence before the decision is made

After we had both laughed about my somewhat hasty reaction in the heat of the moment, I asked him to send me his CV again. And indeed: he had led a specialist team for many years. How had I missed that?

He had been in his last position for a long time, and the bullet-point list of responsibilities was extensive. After the first four or five interesting activities, he listed a few administrative tasks. Apparently, at some point I stopped reading and decided that he did not meet the most important requirement for the role. I overlooked the very last bullet point: “Team leadership.”

People unconsciously assume that the most important information comes first. That is one reason why I recommend telling your career story in reverse chronological order (see article below).

And because people are generally reluctant to revise judgments they have already made, keep the following in mind: Influence the perception of your audience before they form an image of you. Present the decisive information first. Everything else serves to complete the picture.

Once people have formed an impression of us, new information must compete with that impression. That is precisely the trap of first impressions.

#storytelling #communication #jobinterview

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