

The Sound of Intellect

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Richard Nelson Bolles, a former Episcopal pastor, decided to self-publish his advice for job hunters in 1970, in the midst of a tough job market for newly-minted college graduates. The handbook—*What Color is Your Parachute?*—immediately gained popularity by word-of-mouth, and was soon on its way to the best-seller list. In the decades since, it has become the bible for young professionals entering the world of work. It has been revised almost every year, and has sold more than 10 million copies worldwide.

The career guide is known for its original and strategic job-hunting advice—including the so-called “informational interview.” The author recommends that job seekers set up brief meetings with seasoned professionals and recruiters, even when there is no specific job opening—just to explore the field in general and to learn about a corporation’s culture. The informational interview is a way of getting a foot in the door and begin networking. The idea is to put a human face on one of many unsolicited resumes that cross the typical employer’s transom.

And perhaps a human voice, too. Psychological scientists Nick Epley and Juliana Schroeder of the University of Chicago believe that there is something about speech itself that conveys not just the content of a person’s mind, but also the basic capacity to think—the capacity for reasoning, thoughtfulness and intellect. Changes in tone and cadence and pitch may act as cues, the scientists say, revealing a lively, active and capable mind in action.

If the scientists are right, then job seekers should appear to be more thoughtful and intelligent when they are given the opportunity to speak, rather than write, about themselves. That’s what Epley and Schroeder set out to test in a series of experiments, all meant to simulate job seekers’ real-life “elevator pitches” to employers.

In one study, for example, they videotaped MBA students making a 2-minute verbal pitch to the company they most wanted to work for. The scientists then asked the students some questions to gauge their expectations—whether they would be judged more favorably (and perhaps hired) following the written or the spoken pitch.

Then a group of hypothetical “employers”—recruited volunteers—actually judged the pitches. They either watched and listened to the video recording; listened to the audio only; or read a transcript of the spoken pitch. And then they answered these questions: How competent was the candidate, compared to the average candidate? How thoughtful? How intelligent? How much did you like the candidate? How positive (or negative) was your overall impression? And finally, how likely would you be to hire this job candidate?

The results were convincing. First, the job applicants had no expectation that speaking would help them or hurt them. But speaking did indeed help them, and quite a lot. Employers who heard the pitch rated

the candidate's intellect more favorably, compared to employers who read the same pitch. They also had a more favorable impression of the candidate overall, and they were much more likely to hire that candidate. Importantly, employers who also watched the video did not rate the candidate differently than those who just heard the pitch. So adding more information about the candidate—through physical appearance and mannerisms—did not change judgments of the candidate's mind. Intellect was conveyed primarily through voice.

So it does appear that speech contains natural cues that express thought, and in so doing reveal a person's mental capacity. Epley and Schroeder ran other versions of this experiment, in one case using actual professional recruiters from Fortune 500 companies—the very people who would be evaluating these new MBAs after graduation. In every case, as reported in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Psychological Science*, the evaluators rated the candidates as more competent, more thoughtful and more intelligent when they heard the pitch. They were also more interested in hiring the candidates who got a chance to speak. In short, the words that come out of a person's mouth convey the presence of a thoughtful mind more clearly than the words typed by a person's hands.

But why? It's not entirely clear which linguistic cues are at work here. The scientists suspect that variance in pitch, or intonation, can convey enthusiasm and deliberation—a lively mind—just as variation in motion indicates a lively body. Evaluators do not spontaneously add pitch and cadence when they read a written text, so even well-written text remains monotonous—and indicative of a dull mind.

The practical lesson for those entering the world of work? As career guru Bolles suggested more than four decades ago, do what you need to get even a few minutes of face-to-face time. Your voice carries the sound of your intellect.

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