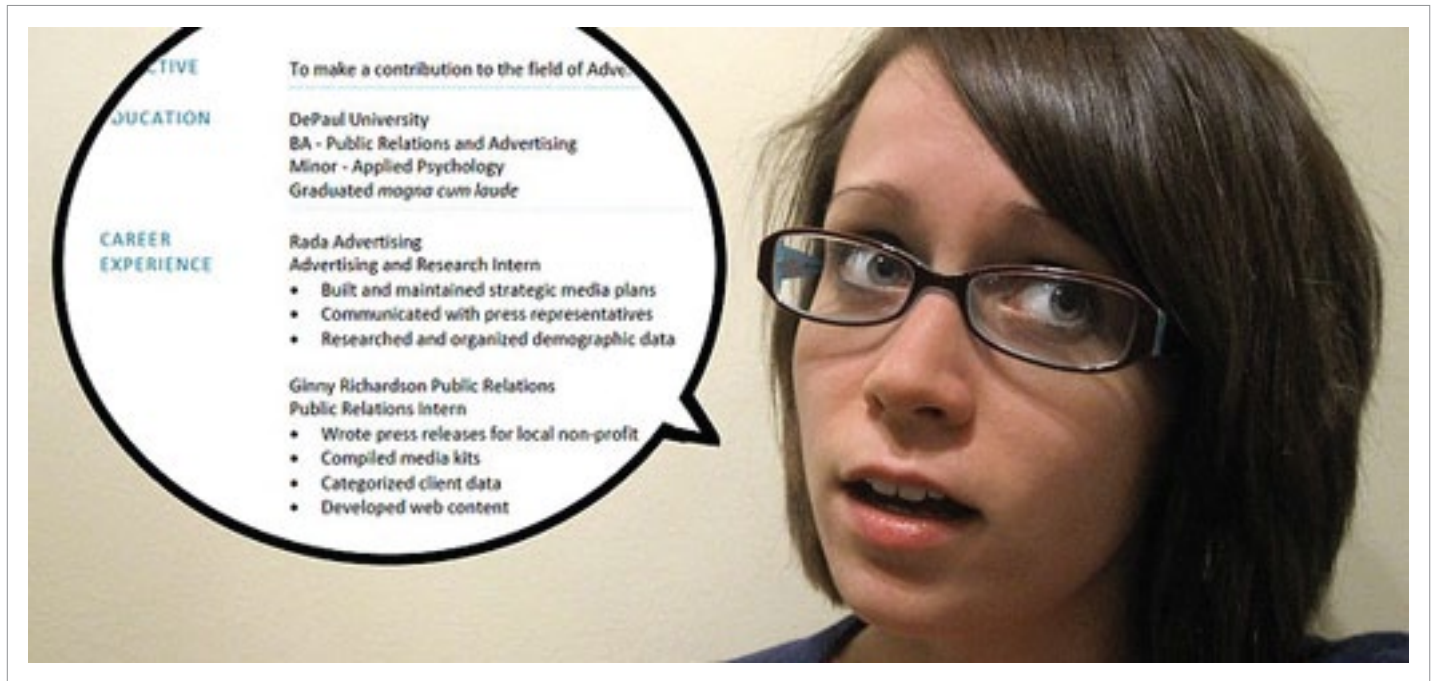


SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF THE INTERVIEW

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What you say is important, but how you say it can be just as crucial, says Shel Leanne in this excerpt from *How to Interview Like a Top MBA*

In today's business world, diversity is seen as an asset. Diversity does not simply mean ethnic or cultural diversity, but also geographical and professional diversity. This excerpt focuses on the interviewing candidate with a nontraditional or nonbusiness background – that is, a candidate without a background in business, economics, finance, or accounting. Recognizing the value of diverse experiences and how they can lend themselves to innovation, interviewers today are often interested in not only traditional hires, but also in candidates who have majored in public policy, engineering, medicine, computer science, and other nonbusiness fields.

Often, when nontraditional candidates fail to secure mainstream business jobs, it is not because they are nontraditional candidates, per se. More often, the reason is that they did not know how to communicate the value and relevance of their training, skills, and experiences to the interviewer in a way the interviewer could understand and value. When interviewing for a business position, you must in a minimal way be able to speak in the language of business, conveying your experiences and skills in a way that uses terms familiar to the business interviewer and that emphasizes skills relevant to the business world.

For instance, I have worked with engineers who have decided to embark on a business career, hoping to eventually blend their engineering expertise with business knowledge and run an engineering company of their own.

They approach consulting companies to secure general strategic management positions that will not draw directly on their engineering expertise. When often interviewing, these engineers make the mistake of minimizing the relevance of their experience. Moreover, they often speak in terms that the interviewer has difficulty understanding and does not value.

Consider Shawn, who served as an engineer at a telecommunications company for four years before trying to secure a job as a consultant at a top mainstream strategy consulting company. The interviewer asked Shawn to explain how his responsibilities in his current position as an engineering project manager were relevant to the position he was seeking as a business consultant. Shawn made a typical mistake and offered this reply: Well, as a project manager, my role is to implement the

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information technology projects requested by our clients. I match the specifications of their systems to the products we offer, and I work with other engineers to ensure that the projects can be implemented in a timely fashion. Sometimes, I find incompatibilities between the servers they use and the Internet interfaces they need to develop. Similarly, if they need to have remote access to computing services, the type of databases they use can pose problems. In much of our work, I have also found it is better to work using some of the older matrix configurations, rather than using some of the more recent derivatives. My work has not involved much business strategy work, which is why I am applying for this position at your company. I am hoping to pick up the skills that will help me to achieve my longer-term goal of running my own company.

Ding! Most likely, Shawn would have lost the job opportunity with that answer. Many elements of this response are less than ideal. First, Shawn launches into a discussion of the technical aspects of his job, using references to interfaces and matrix configurations that the interviewer might not understand. Most likely, the interviewer is thinking, "What? I can't understand a thing Shawn is saying." The interviewer would next think, "This candidate would not be able to converse easily with a business client of ours."

Second, Shawn keeps referring to himself – "I match the specifications," "I have found it is better to work using some of the older matrix configurations," and so forth. Yet his title is project manager, which implies he is managing a project. Normally in projects, there are multiple team members. Shawn's

continual reference to himself is not necessarily a hint that he does not work well in teams, but it clearly indicates that he does not understand the importance of conveying that he knows how to work in teams. In many companies today, teamwork is critical, so Shawn should be emphasizing his team leadership, using we and terms associated with teamwork and leadership.

Third, Shawn indicates that his skills are not relevant by stating, "My work has not involved much business strategy work." While companies may hire you with no relevant experience, most companies would like to hear you explain clearly the relevance of your experience. Let's explore how a nontraditional hire can convincingly portray the relevance of his or her experience and skills.

TRANSFERABLE SKILLS: MAKING A NONTRADITIONAL BACKGROUND RELEVANT

The concept of transferable skills is particularly important for nontraditional job seekers who must demonstrate that their education and work experience have given them skills that – though used in a totally different context before – can be used or adapted in the new environment to enable the candidate to succeed in the workplace. To demonstrate how a candidate with a nontraditional background often picks up business-relevant experiences, consider these dimensions of work experience, which provide transferable skills you might employ whether you are working in the health care industry or in a computer consulting company:

- Performing analysis
- Performing math computations
- Problem solving
- Delivering presentations
- Prioritizing tasks
- Participating in high-performing teams
- Leading teams
- Setting goals
- Communicating goals
- Delegating tasks
- Managing work flow
- Setting clear deadlines
- Coaching team members
- Communicating effectively with superiors
- Communicating effectively with peers
- Communicating effectively with clients
- Developing business plans
- Securing buy-in for a project
- Marketing a project
- Implementing change

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PHRASING MATTERS

This list suggests types of activities and skills that an interviewing candidate might have developed during jobs in fields as diverse as engineering and public policy. To convey nonbusiness experience in relevant terms, therefore, nontraditional candidates should draw on the language of business to speak about their work, conveying in compelling terms the business relevance of their experience. Considering this, Shawn could have come up with a very different answer to the question of how his responsibilities in his current computer company position are relevant to the position he is seeking as a general business consultant who will not have special responsibility for computer clients but will serve a broader set of clients from a wide range of sectors. As he explained how his responsibilities in his computer company position are relevant to the available job, Shawn might have replied this way:

My role as a project manager at our computer company centers on leadership and on effective team management. In my projects, I manage teams of seven or eight talented individuals on complex projects designed to help our clients offer better products and services. We are the point of

contact between my company and our clients, so it is key that our work goes well. We are responsible for keeping my company's client base strong and growing our business. Part of my role, of course, is technical – I match our best IT products to our clients' needs. I am able to draw on my analytical skills to ensure a great match. But more importantly, I harness the energy and talents of the team to come together and brainstorm about these issues, and together we always emerge with excellent alternatives for clients. I enjoy implementing our solutions. I have succeeded in my position because I have mastered many of the important team management skills that bring success – such as time management, setting goals, and problem solving. I also know how to work with clients and implement solutions. I bring all of these skills with me to your company. I hope to further refine those skills while also learning and employing broader business principles through my new position with your company.