

Soft Skills at Work: First impressions may be the last impressions

By MARCIA HALL, For The Capital

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A few years ago, I participated in a job fair at Anne Arundel Community College.

Lavenia Nesmith, vocational rehabilitation supervisor with the state Department of Education Division of Rehabilitation Services, was seated at the table next to mine. We had a good location to observe job candidates as they arrived.

Students and community members of all ages attended the fair. I had come to talk about essential workplace behavior skills and was particularly focused on the impressions job candidates were making. Lavenia, who as a representative of her division matched people with disabilities to job openings, shared this interest and together we watched people enter the room.

We saw young men wearing baseball caps and jeans with their shirt tails hanging out. There also were a few women who wore outfits suitable for a night club.

Then, a young man who was dressed in a nicely pressed suit walked by our tables. He glanced our way and smiled. I couldn't resist complimenting him on how professional he looked.

We started talking about what type of job he wanted. He looked me in the eye while speaking and displayed enthusiasm that would be appealing to any employer. During our conversation, I remembered one of the exhibitors in another room who might be a good fit for this young man. I spoke with that employer and then told this job candidate to stop by his table.

Why did this young man inspire me to make that connection for him?

First, it was his appearance. I wanted to talk to him because he looked like he was serious about finding employment. Then, when I heard the enthusiasm in his voice, I knew he had the qualities that are highly desired by employers.

Many people came inappropriately dressed that day and also made an impression on me. But it certainly wasn't positive. In fact, the importance of appearance doesn't seem to resonate with some job fair candidates. They don't understand that the first impression can be the last.

Proper dress is not only essential at the job fair; it is crucial in the workplace, as well, because customers and clients notice appearance first. If a person's apparel or accessories are not appropriate for a particular business environment, people feel uncomfortable.

It could be oversized jewelry or wearing a revealing blouse that causes a negative reaction. It might be a nose stud or tattoo. It could be the scuff marks on an employee's shoes or stains on a shirt. Appearance counts.

Lavenia counsels her clients to watch how they dress. She told me about mistakes people make at job fairs, as well as in the workplace.

"It is often little things that employers or customers notice," Lavenia said. "For men, it can be shoes that aren't shined or fingernails that aren't clean. For women, it may be chipped nail polish or having fingernails that are too long."

According to Lavenia, it comes down to being well groomed no matter what job you have.

"You don't want to be excessive in your appearance," she said. "It is important to dress conservatively at first to make a good impression. Once you are hired you can adapt your attire to your particular employment culture."

These are valuable tips for job candidates and employees alike because being attentive to your appearance creates the impression that you are serious about the job you're applying for or already have.

CONNECT!

Businesses and organizations interested in learning more about CONNECT! are invited to attend a kickoff meeting from 5 to 7 p.m. Feb. 26 at the Arundel Lodge, 2600 Solomons Island Road, Edgewater.

The goal of CONNECT! is to draw attention countywide to the essential workplace skills employers expect, such as a positive attitude, responsibility, punctuality, excellent communication skills, honesty and a willingness to learn. The coalition has piloted one program called Career First Steps at Southern High School, and now is looking to expand by involving more businesses and interested agencies.

People attending the meeting will hear about a variety of ways to become involved in CONNECT! Attendees also will learn about plans to develop curriculum and training to provide to a variety of groups, including students and under-served populations such as public-assistance recipients, out-of-school youth, older workers and offenders.

The ultimate goal is to eliminate negative workplace behaviors so that all workers have the positive behavior and customer service skills that employers require.

Marcia Hall, founder of Reputation COUNTS, is a workplace behavior trainer and author of "Jumpstart Your Job: 12 Simple Ways to Shift Your Career into High Gear." She is the initial contact for CONNECT!, the Anne Arundel County coalition dedicated to promoting the importance of essential workplace skills, and can be reached at marcia@reputationcounts.com

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