

# Better interviewing could save small businesses millions

October 29 2015, by James Hakner

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A new conversation-based screening method is being tested in job interview situations by researchers at the University of Sussex to help businesses identify the best candidates for a job.

The psychologists behind the [new model](#) believe it could help to eradicate a common recruitment pitfall that costs the UK's small and medium-sized enterprises around £70 million every year, with one in five new hires leaving within six months.

Controlled Cognitive Engagement (CCE) provides a model for interviewers rather than relying on first impressions. These 'gut reactions' are nearly always unreliable, according to the psychologist behind the model, Professor Tom Ormerod, Head of the School of Psychology at the University of Sussex.

Professor Ormerod said: "Anyone who says that they can make a good first-impression judgement is a bad interviewer. First impressions very often turn out to be wrong.

"We show people how judgements based on behaviour, disposition and appearance are much more misleading than they are useful. So it's very important for interviewers to have a technique that gets them beyond their first impression."

Professor Ormerod believes that the prevalence of poor interview practice across the UK creates "a huge amount of scope" for his model

to have an impact.

He said: "It is amazing how many interviews are conducted without the interviewers having any training whatsoever. There are plenty of companies who will offer you training but what constitutes a high-quality interview is not clear. It's seen as an art but I'm trying to put some science into it."

The research was announced to coincide with the official opening of Sussex Innovation – Croydon, the latest hub to be opened as part of the University's expanding business incubation network. The site will be launched today (Thursday 29 October) by the Minister of State for Small Business, Anna Soubry MP, and the MP for Croydon Central, Gavin Barwell.

Sussex Innovation helps entrepreneurs, academics, start-ups and growing businesses to scale up their operations, by providing strategic advice and access to a wide network of advisers, investors and potential customers. Sussex Innovation – Croydon is the institution's first off-campus site.

The original Sussex Innovation Centre has been based on the University's campus outside of Brighton for almost 20 years and has supported more than 300 small businesses. From start-up, 85% of its members have become profitable businesses, and one in six have grown to achieve multi-million pound turnover.

It is hoped that Sussex Innovation's member businesses could be among the first to benefit from Professor Ormerod's model, thanks to close working relationships with University researchers.

Professor Ormerod will be working with Sussex Innovation to take the research forward. He said: "We can see a huge amount of scope for it and, through Sussex Innovation, we'll be able to help small businesses

ensure that they get the workforce they need."

Mike Herd, Executive Director of Sussex Innovation, said: "For growing businesses, hiring the right people is critical. Recruitment is a vital aspect of scaling up a business – and hiring the wrong people at such a delicate stage in a business's lifecycle can be catastrophic – yet many entrepreneurs do not have experience or deep skills in interviewing.

"When you make your first few hires as a start-up, you're really starting to establish a company culture and a brand. Most businesses start life very closely linked to the personality and qualities of their founder, but in order to scale you need to bring in complimentary skills, and build for a future where not every decision has to go through you.

"One way in which we can often support our entrepreneurs is by helping to build that management team around them. Part of the package for these kinds of hires might take the form of equity in the company, so it's even more important to get the decision right. It's easy to relate to people with a similar background to you, but this can often lead to hiring people with a very one-dimensional set of skills. It's much better for businesses to build a diverse team, thus 'filling the gaps' around the founder's experience and knowledge."

Professor Ormerod's CCE model, developed at Sussex in collaboration with Professor Coral Dando from the University of Wolverhampton, has made headlines worldwide in the past year after it was shown to catch 20 times as many liars at airport terminals as existing screening techniques. During an eight-month study, security agents using the CCE method at international airports in Europe, including London's Heathrow, detected dishonesty in 66 percent of the "mock" passengers. This compared to a three-percent detection rate for agents who were looking for body language signs thought to be associated with deception, including lack of eye contact, fidgeting and nervousness.

The model takes interviewers through three phases, which are repeated in two or three cycles:

- The first phase – rapport building. Non-challenging questions are used to 'baseline' what interviewees are like when they are not under pressure
- The second phase – information gathering. Interviewers assess the level of description that an individual gives about their skills, attributes and so forth. In this phase, interviewees commit themselves to an account of the truth
- The third phase – veracity testing. Interviewees are asked questions that they ought to know the answers to based on their previous responses. Interviewers use the baselines from the first phase to spot changes in behaviour that might indicate deception or discomfort.

Professor Ormerod has these top tips for interviewers:

1. Doubt your own judgement. If you allow your decisions to appoint to be guided by first impressions, you will make bad appointments. Your gut instinct may be strong, but it is probably wrong.
2. Do NOT judge a book by its cover. Appearances and disposition are very misleading and detract from true evaluation of a candidate's attributes and skills.
3. Plan before you interview. This is more than just deciding who will ask what. You need to work out what each member of an interview panel needs to achieve by the end of the interview, and how to get to that point. This means working out how the qualities that the candidate expresses in their CV and cover letter will be evaluated through questioning.
4. Put the interviewee at their ease. The nervous wreck sitting in front of you may actually be the star you are looking for, but you

won't find out until they have calmed down. So, think of things to ask at the beginning of an interview that anyone can answer easily and without feeling under pressure. Be nice.

5. Ask open questions. All too often, interviews consist of a stream of closed questions or even leading questions. It is important to get the candidate to do most of the talking: what they say provides the information you need to assess them, and also commits them to an account that you can test. To get the most information, ask open questions that begin "Tell", "Explain", or "Describe".
6. Challenge the candidate's answers. Don't just let the candidate repeat their CV – test it! One way of doing this is by combining two techniques: unanticipated questions and tests of expected knowledge. For example, if an interviewee tells you they have 20 years' experience of effective team management, you might ask "Tell me about the job promotions received by members of your team over the past five years".
7. Get some training. If you have had no interview training but still believe that the years of experience you have had make you good at interviewing, you are probably not a good interviewer. Interviewing is not a natural talent or skill, and just because you are a good conversationalist or you think you are a good judge of people, until you have received training you are probably underperforming as an interviewer.

Provided by University of Sussex

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