

Wanted: Good Speaking Skills

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL DECEMBER 3, 2010, 5:17 PM ET

It's no secret that employers like job candidates to show initiative. But even more important, according to new findings from the National Association of Colleges and Employers, is that they express that go-getter attitude with strong speaking skills.

The data, part of NACE's annual job outlook report, show that spoken communication is employers' most sought after "soft skill" when looking to fill open slots. The ability to speak well comes in above a strong work ethic, teamwork, analytical skills and, yes, initiative.

The survey suggests hiring managers aren't getting what they want. The NACE report found that employers were between "somewhat satisfied" and "very satisfied" with candidates' oral-communication skills—the top ranking is "extremely satisfied."

How can you boost those results? Remember that the first time you get to show off your way with words out loud is in your interview. And practice makes perfect.

A number of career-services offices provide video recordings of mock interviews so you can sharpen your answers before the real thing.

Amy McPherson, associate director for student and alumni services at Virginia Tech, says watching a playback of your interview helps you weed out "filler words" like "um," and "uh," as well as "unprofessional" words such as "like."

Virginia Tech and many other schools also subscribe to the online service InterviewStream, which offers webcam-based practice interviews that time your answers, forcing succinctness.

Alternatively, practice with a friend. Next time you're preparing a research paper, see if you can pitch the idea to a classmate out loud, in no more than a few sentences. Have the partner do the same, then critique each other's ability to crystallize the complex thesis in layman's terms. You can even offer up constructive tips on the research topic itself.

Aside from oral-communications skills, The NACE found that hiring managers were dissatisfied with job candidates' work ethic, another opportunity to demonstrate your worth.

Nancy Burkett, director of career services at Swarthmore College, says just because graduates these days seek more work-life balance than their parents, that doesn't mean they're lazy. She suggests tailoring your cover letter and inquiries accordingly to emphasize the work side of that equation.

For example, talk about how you've juggled a rigorous course load with a part-time job and an appointment as club president. And ask the interviewer about how the company recognizes performance or what opportunities there are for cross-training to build your skill-set.

"The first question isn't, 'How many weeks of vacation do I get?' and 'What's your sick-leave policy?'" Ms. Burkett says.



Speak well. And ask not about the sick-leave policy.