The interview experience is the single most influential factor in the hiring process, making or breaking an applicant's impression of the company.

That's according to 44 percent of the 5,013 respondents to CareerBuilder's 2015 Candidate Behavior study.

In-person interviews and preliminary telephone interviews are the points in the process where a negative experience can derail the entire effort, according to 59 percent and 55 percent of employed adults, respectively. Thirty-three percent of respondents said a bad interview is the interaction most likely to leave a negative impression of the company. Other interactions likely to leave bad impressions are a poorly written job posting (14 percent), negative information obtained from an online search (11 percent) and bad reviews on Glassdoor (5 percent).

“The interview experience is crucial to the hiring process, as it can not only influence a candidate’s decision to accept a job offer, but candidates today are very vocal about their experience,” said Rosemary Haefner, chief human resources officer at CareerBuilder.

“Earlier versions of this study also show that candidates who have a poor interview experience are less likely to accept job offers with the company [and] apply to jobs with the company again, and are more likely to tell others about their negative experience, both in person and on social media, making it harder to recruit candidates moving forward.”

Candidates Expect Communication

Forty percent of candidates feel the application process has become more difficult in the last five years. Of those, 57 percent complain the process is too automated and lacks personalization, 51 percent are frustrated with the lack of communication from the company, and 50 percent say the process has too many steps. Sixty percent of candidates say they won’t complete the application process if they feel it is too long.
“There’s a common misperception that the role of HR is simply to screen candidates and make employment offers,” said Heidi Parsont, president of TorchLight Hire, a Washington, D.C.-based recruiting and staffing firm. “But savvy HR professionals know that they also play a key role in representing the company and upholding its brand and reputation as a great place to work. That’s why the importance of communication with job candidates during all phases of the hiring process cannot be understated.”

Sixty-eight percent of respondents acknowledged that a company’s hiring process can positively or negatively impact their decision to accept a job offer from the company. A majority (55 percent) said companies they’ve most recently applied to have not been responsive during the application process.

One of the most frustrating hurdles candidates face during a job search is lack of communication from the hiring company, Parsont said. The communication points during the process which candidates consider absolutely essential are right after submitting the application (49 percent), if not selected for an interview (39 percent), and after the interview if not selected for the job (43 percent).

During respondents’ most recent application experience, half said they did not receive any communication from companies for at least half the applications they submitted. Almost three-fourths of candidates said they received no communication when they interviewed but were not selected for the position.

“This makes job seekers anxious and frustrated,” Parsont said. “They also start to question the practices and culture of a company that can’t—or won’t—even adhere to the basics of business etiquette. Often, a simple note following up with the candidates on their status can go a long way to help ease anxieties and build trust.”

Then there’s the money companies can save by providing a good experience. “Three-fourths of candidates are willing to accept a salary that is 5 percent lower than their expected offer if the employer created a great impression through the hiring process,” Haefner said.

She advised HR to ensure they follow up with every candidate they interview, even if only to deliver bad news. “As disappointed as they will be, candidates would rather hear bad news than be strung along in hopes they will hear back.”

She also recommended setting candidates’ expectations by providing a timeline of when the company plans to make a decision and offering feedback after interviews. “Feedback will not only leave candidates with a positive impression of the company, but it can help them better determine if they are a fit for future positions at your company,” Haefner said. “After all, just because a candidate isn’t the best fit for one position, it doesn’t mean he or she won’t be an excellent fit for another position, and you don’t want to let great future candidates slip through the cracks because of a poor interview experience.”
One of the most important times to communicate regularly with job candidates is during the “danger zone” period after the offer has been extended and accepted, but the candidate hasn’t started the new job yet, Parsont cautioned. “So many things can go wrong during this period: the candidate can change his or her mind or solicit a competing offer from the current employer, forcing the company to start a brand new search,” she said.

**Acknowledgement Goes a Long Way**

An automated message acknowledging receipt of an application is the most important action a company can take to leave a positive impression during the hiring process, according to a fourth of respondents. Slightly more than two-thirds of candidates expect to receive at least an automated acknowledgement e-mail, but a personalized e-mail will leave a better impression, according to 59 percent of respondents. Just over half of applicants expect to receive an automated e-mail notification when the position has been filled.

Other interactions affecting candidates’ perceptions positively include interviewing with multiple people at the company (18 percent), a phone call from the hiring manager or HR acknowledging receipt of a resume or application (10 percent), and someone from the company e-mailing this acknowledgement (9 percent).

The respondents reported that after their most recent application experience, 46 percent of companies sent an automated e-mail acknowledging receipt of the application. In 19 percent of cases, the hiring manager or someone from HR e-mailed acknowledgement. A representative from the company called to acknowledge receipt in 18 percent of cases, a notification was sent to the applicant when the position had been closed in 17 percent of cases and the company otherwise communicated with the applicant during the hiring process in 15 percent of cases.

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