NEWS LESSON

Would You Judge a Job Candidate by Their Coffee?



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. Would carrying a coffee into an interview change your first impression of someone?
2. What tiny detail makes someone seem confident?
3. Which interview rule do you find hardest to explain?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**convey**	☐	A	two things that cannot both be true or fit together
2	**contradiction**	☐	B	fair and reasonable, with a good reason behind it
3	**conventions**	☐	C	behaving in the same way as everyone else
4	**legitimate**	☐	D	to communicate an idea or feeling
5	**subsequently**	☐	E	accepted ways of behaving that most people follow
6	**conformity**	☐	F	after something else has happened
7	**instinct**	☐	G	a natural feeling about what to do, without clear reasons
8	**explicit**	☐	H	clearly stated, with nothing hidden

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

A recruiter's warning about takeaway coffee at interviews exposed an awkward truth: the unwritten rules of hiring may say more about employers than about candidates.

1 You have prepared your answers, checked the route and arrived for the interview. Then someone notices the iced coffee in your hand. In September 2026, a Florida recruiter's warning against bringing takeaway drinks sparked an argument: was this sensible advice, or one more unexplained rule for nervous jobseekers?

2 Caitlin Wehniainen, a recruitment specialist with 16 years' experience, suggested that carrying an iced coffee into a formal corporate interview could convey the wrong impression. Rather than appearing focused on an important opportunity, a candidate might look as though the meeting were another stop between errands. Her comments prompted a spirited backlash, with critics asking why an ordinary drink should overshadow somebody's ability to perform a job. Wehniainen subsequently played down her comments, emphasising that her advice was contextual, not a blanket prohibition. What counts as appropriate varies enormously between industries, organisations and individual roles.

3 The controversy was amusing, but it exposed an awkward contradiction in recruitment. Employers insist they want independent thinkers with confidence and initiative, yet applicants are often encouraged to demonstrate their suitability by sticking to unwritten conventions. These may include how to dress, when to speak, whether to send a follow-up email and apparently how to consume caffeine. Such expectations can act as cultural filters, favouring candidates already familiar with particular professional environments. A small detail becomes a proxy for seriousness, even where there is little evidence that it predicts performance.

4 There are legitimate reasons to pay attention to interview conduct. Arriving punctually, treating staff respectfully and listening carefully to questions can reveal something about reliability and interpersonal skills. But professional norms are not fixed. Visible tattoos, informal clothing and remote working were once viewed far more suspiciously than they are now. A practice considered disrespectful by one manager may barely register with another. As younger workers enter the labour market, debates about manners often conceal deeper disagreements over authority, conformity and who gets to define an acceptable professional identity.

5 Recruitment research adds a cautionary note. Studies suggest that first impressions formed during the opening moments of interviews can influence subsequent assessments, even when later questions are highly structured. The CIPD consequently advocates consistent, job-related questions and explicit scoring criteria to reduce bias. None of this means social behaviour is irrelevant. It means employers should be able to explain why a particular behaviour matters, rather than relying entirely on instinct or nostalgia for an imagined golden age of workplace etiquette.

6 Candidates would still be wise to read the room. Bringing a drink to an informal conversation at a creative studio is different from juggling a cup during a tightly scheduled corporate panel interview. Avoiding an unnecessary distraction is sensible, not a surrender to outdated authority. Yet the burden of good judgement belongs to interviewers too. If a recruitment decision turns on the presence of an iced coffee rather than the candidate's experience, preparation and judgement, the person being assessed may not be the only one who should feel uncomfortable.

Sources: BBC World Service. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The article suggests that employers who claim to want independent thinkers may still reward conformity. T F NG
2. The text claims that structured questions completely remove the effect of first impressions. T F NG
3. Wehniainen's video was viewed more than a million times. T F NG
4. The writer thinks arriving on time is a more reasonable thing to judge than carrying a drink. T F NG
5. The writer believes that only candidates are responsible for showing good judgement. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

bias	cautionary	contextual	nostalgia	overshadow	prohibition	proxy	spirited

1. The committee held a _____ debate, with both sides refusing to concede a single point.
2. The council imposed a total _____ on smoking in all public buildings.
3. With only test scores to go on, they used them as a _____ for intelligence, although the link is weak.
4. His speech was heavy with _____ for a time when neighbours knew each other.
5. The failed merger serves as a _____ tale for any firm that expands too quickly.
6. Early results were so dramatic that they threatened to _____ the rest of the study.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. The rule struck many viewers as _____ , since it had no link to ability. (REASON)
2. Informal clothing was once viewed with far greater _____ than it is now. (SUSPICIOUS)
3. A habit of arriving late may reveal a lack of _____ . (RELY)
4. Younger employees often resent what they see as the _____ of older managers. (CONSERVATIVE)
5. Rejecting someone over a drink is simply _____ . (DEFEND)

7 Language focus: linking words

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Notwithstanding and albeit are formal. Hence follows a semicolon or full stop, whereas contrasts two clauses, and provided needs a full clause.

albeit	hence	lest	notwithstanding	provided	thereby	whereas

1. _____ the backlash, the recruiter stood by the broader point of her advice.
2. The advice was well meant, _____ poorly explained.
3. Norms vary between industries; _____ no single rule can cover every interview.
4. Some firms hire for personality, _____ others place more weight on formal qualifications.
5. Employers can ask about dress _____ they can show that it relates to the job.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. What should an interviewer notice before judging someone's manners?
2. Could a relaxed candidate make a better colleague than a polished one?
3. What would you change about a typical job interview?

9 Role-play: the iced coffee at the interview

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the recruiter

A candidate has arrived for a formal interview with an iced coffee. You think it looks too relaxed. Explain your worry, ask two questions, then decide what happens.

Student B · the candidate

You've brought an iced coffee because you're nervous and thirsty. You think it's unfair to judge you for a drink. Explain why, and suggest a solution.

Useful phrases

I'm afraid it might give the wrong impression.
I didn't think it would be a problem.
Would you mind leaving it outside?
I'd rather keep it, if that's all right.
That's hardly fair, is it?
Shall we start the interview and forget about it?

Afterwards, tell the class: who won the argument, and was that fair?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 D · 2 A · 3 E · 4 B · 5 F · 6 C · 7 G · 8 H

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 NG · 4 T · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 spirited · 2 prohibition · 3 proxy · 4 nostalgia · 5 cautionary · 6 overshadow

6 Word forms

1 unreasonable · 2 suspicion · 3 reliability · 4 conservatism · 5 indefensible

7 Language focus

1 Notwithstanding · 2 albeit · 3 hence · 4 whereas · 5 provided

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