NEWS LESSON

# The Unwritten Rules of the Interview Room



## 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 | **rehearsed** | ☐ | A | standards used to judge or decide something |
| 2 | **controversy** | ☐ | B | the ability to do a job well |
| 3 | **universal** | ☐ | C | to judge how good or bad something is |
| 4 | **competence** | ☐ | D | a short trip to do a small job, such as buying something |
| 5 | **disguised** | ☐ | E | made to look like something else |
| 6 | **errand** | ☐ | F | practised something many times before doing it for real |
| 7 | **evaluate** | ☐ | G | true or used in every place or situation |
| 8 | **criteria** | ☐ | H | a public argument that many people have strong opinions about |

## 3 Read

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

**Caitlin Wehniainen has recruited for 16 years. Her TikTok advice split viewers, and research suggests first impressions really can shape how later answers are judged.**

1 By the time you reach a job interview, you have probably spent hours preparing. You have researched the company, checked the journey and rehearsed how to sum up your strengths without sounding unbearable. Then you walk through the door carrying an iced latte. In September 2026, a Florida recruiter, Caitlin Wehniainen, said in a TikTok video that this small detail could work against you. Her advice became an unlikely internet controversy: is a takeaway coffee a harmless drink, or a sign that someone doesn't take an interview seriously?

2 Wehniainen, who has spent 16 years recruiting staff, said that candidates arriving with iced coffee can appear too casual, particularly when applying to formal corporate employers. Her concern was less about caffeine than the impression it creates. She argued that an interview should not look like one more errand squeezed into a crowded morning. After the backlash, she clarified that her advice was not a universal rule. What seems inappropriate in a traditional office might be perfectly normal at a warehouse, a technology company or a creative business.

3 The response revealed a familiar clash of expectations between generations. Some viewers accused employers of inventing arbitrary rules while overlooking qualities that actually matter. Others defended the importance of courtesy and preparation. A candidate might argue that drinking coffee says nothing about their competence, yet employers may still notice how applicants behave towards receptionists, whether they listen carefully and how confidently they introduce themselves. The difficulty is separating genuinely useful signals from personal preferences disguised as professional standards.

4 Workplace etiquette has changed considerably. Tattoos, trainers and informal emails are no longer automatically seen as unacceptable in many industries. Remote interviews have brought their own awkward questions about backgrounds, cameras and what counts as suitable clothing. Young applicants are expected to adapt, but the rules are rarely written down. It is hardly surprising that a 30-minute interview can feel like a complicated test of social behaviour rather than an opportunity to demonstrate skills.

5 There is evidence that initial impressions can influence how interviewers evaluate later answers. This matters because those impressions are not always related to performance. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development recommends structured interviews, with consistent questions and agreed scoring criteria, as a way to improve fairness. An employer who judges a candidate largely on their drink could overlook someone excellent, while rewarding another person for knowing the unspoken rules of the room. Interviewers should look past superficial details and focus on what candidates can actually do.

6 There is practical advice for applicants nevertheless. Research the company, prepare thoughtful examples of your work and avoid anything that might distract you during the conversation. Leaving the iced coffee outside a particularly formal interview is an easy way to play it safe. But the controversy also asks something of employers. If finding talent is the purpose of recruitment, perhaps they should be more interested in what candidates know than what they are carrying.

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. Wehniainen's concern was mainly about the impression the coffee creates, not the caffeine. (T) (F) (NG)
2. Wehniainen said her advice should be followed by every employer. (T) (F) (NG)
3. Wehniainen has been criticised by her own employer. (T) (F) (NG)
4. Employers may notice how an applicant treats a receptionist. (T) (F) (NG)
5. Interviews are judged more fairly when each interviewer asks different questions. (T) (F) (NG)

## 5 Vocabulary

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

**awkward** **backlash** **casual** **consistent** **courtesy** **etiquette** **superficial** **tactful**

1. The recruiter's advice caused an angry _____ online.
2. It is a small _____ to turn off your phone before the interview begins.
3. Judging people by their appearance alone is _____ and ignores their real skills.
4. It felt _____ when she realised that everyone else in the room was wearing a suit.
5. A _____ approach, where every applicant gets the same questions, is fairer than improvising.
6. Knowing the right _____ for each type of meeting can take years of practice.

## 6 Verb forms

Write the correct form of the verb in brackets.

1. By the time she arrived, the other candidates _____ . (LEAVE)
2. Last year the company _____ forty graduates, and most of them still work there. (HIRE)
3. A new set of scoring criteria _____ last month. (INTRODUCE)
4. Her video _____ by thousands of people before she explained what she meant. (WATCH)
5. If employers _____ on skills, they would find better people. (FOCUS)

## 7 Language focus: linking words

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Whereas contrasts two things in one sentence. Otherwise means 'if not', and unless means 'except if'. Despite is followed by a noun.

| despite | moreover | nevertheless | otherwise | therefore | unless | whereas |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

1. _____ her years of experience, many viewers disagreed with her.
2. Some employers prefer formal dress, _____ others are happy with trainers.
3. You should leave plenty of time to travel. _____ , you may arrive late and stressed.
4. Interviews can feel stressful. _____ , good preparation can make them easier.
5. You should leave your coffee outside _____ the employer tells you it is fine.

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

**4 True, false or not given**

1 T · 2 F · 3 NG · 4 T · 5 F

**5 Vocabulary**

1 backlash · 2 courtesy · 3 superficial · 4 awkward · 5 consistent · 6 etiquette

**6 Verb forms**

1 had left · 2 hired · 3 was introduced · 4 had been watched · 5 focused

**7 Language focus**

1 Despite · 2 whereas · 3 Otherwise · 4 Nevertheless · 5 unless

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