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Lots to Digest at Job Interview Over Lunch

by Mary Duan Guest Writer

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The formal job interview has broken beyond the boundaries of the office walls and reached restaurants -- adding the pressure of dining etiquette. Experts say a successful interview requires a great deal of finesse on the part of the interviewer, as well as knowledge and social skills on the part of the candidate.

It's a test to see how well the candidate performs in different settings and with a variety of people.

"It's not a good place to begin or end an interview process, but it's a nice middle place and a good way to find out what's not on the résumé," says Beryl Israel, a principal of the San Jose advertising and public relations firm Corsi Carter Israel. "I typically only do it with candidates I'm seriously interested in. I want to find out if it's a person I want to be out representing the firm and entertaining clients."

Jorinne Liberatore, personnel director at Redwood City's DPR Construction Inc., says lunch or dinner interviews are her way of finding out about a candidate while helping to maintain that candidate's confidentiality.

Construction, she says, is such a small and insular industry that companies often hire employees away from rivals. With subcontractors and contractors flowing in and out of DPR's offices every day, if they see a colleague wearing interview garb and waiting in the lobby, there will be talk.

"We also want to find out how the candidate interacts socially," Liberatore says. "From a personal perspective, I like to find out if the person knows what he wants, how picky she is when she orders.

"I consider it a good thing if they are. It means they know what they want and they go out and get it. They're not going to settle because they're sitting in front of a boss."

Interviews over food also play a large part in DPR's college-recruiting efforts, which take place for project manager and engineer positions. After a morning of rotation interviews, a large group of candidates goes to lunch with a group of supervisors.

"Lunch is often the turning point and can make or break a decision," Liberatore says. "What was a 'no go' before lunch becomes a 'Yeah, I saw a different side to this person that makes me want to work with them.' "

With the proper setting and an employer ready to put a candidate through the paces of a stressful interview, the onus is on the candidate to perform.

Formal etiquette, once the purview of the very rich, has generated an entire

industry devoted to teaching proper behavior for all occasions, especially business ones.

"When companies take a candidate to dinner, they already know that person can do the job," says Jeanne Comeau, a former software professional and founder of the Etiquette School of Boston. "What they're looking for is personal skills.

"It's not about the food. It's never about the food. It's about the social and business encounter."

"A lot of people might have trouble with this type of interview, but those are the people who treat every first contact as a stress situation," says Kyle Krajewski, former marketing communications manager for Management Solutions Inc., who was interviewed by Israel. "When you're at or approaching the senior level, there is a courtship involved.

"It's like a first date," he says. "You go and learn things about the person and about the culture of the company you may be going to."

Free-lancer Mary Duan originally wrote this piece for the San Jose Business Journal.