

Ace a Job Interview with Body Language

*A conversation with
Vanessa Van Edwards*

By Mac Prichard
Founder of Mac's List



The following conversation is transcribed from the podcast, [*Find Your Dream Job, Episode 48: Ace Your Job Interview with Body Language*](#), featuring Mac Prichard and Vanessa Van Edwards. The transcript has been edited for length and style.

Topics covered in this conversation include:

- Why nonverbal communication is important in an interview
- How to practice open body language
- How to send “confidence cues” to the interviewer
- The secret to a perfect handshake

For more information on *Find Your Dream Job*, visit macslist.org/podcast.

About Vanessa Van Edwards



Vanessa Van Edwards is a published author, behavioral investigator and Huffington Post columnist. Her specialty is science-based people skills. Vanessa runs the [*Science of People*](#), a human behavior research lab, and her unique approach has been featured on CNN, Forbes, NPR, Business Week and in The Wall Street Journal.

Vanessa’s newest book is [*Captivate: The Science of Succeeding with People*](#).



Mac Prichard:

Let's start with the basics, Vanessa. Why does body language matter in a job search?

Vanessa Van Edwards:

When we're preparing for interviews, we think about what we want to say. We bullet out these amazing answers. We practice interview questions with our friends, but we very rarely think about how we want to say something. We're putting all of our eggs in the verbal basket. But first impressions are primarily nonverbal.

Research shows that, at a minimum, 60% of our communication is nonverbal and that's the lowest study we could find. That's like leaving the house with 40% of your ability.



**At least 60% of
all communication
is nonverbal.**

Mac Prichard:

What do people need to pay attention to when they get into the car and they're ready to walk into that interview?



Vanessa Van Edwards:

A lot of us like to believe that our first impression happens when we start talking. But, in reality, our first impression happens the moment someone first sees us. So you need to practice not just what you'll say when you introduce yourself, but also how you'll be positioned at that first encounter.

Before an interview, many of us are anxious. So what do we do? We pull out our phone! When the interviewer comes to meet you in the waiting room, the first thing they see is you, hunched over your phone. That's the first impression they get and it isn't a good one.

To make a better first impression, you want to be more connected with the environment around you. Walk around the waiting room. Look at the office artwork and page through the literature the employer has on display. Maybe chat up the receptionist. When the interviewer opens the door, you'll look more more engaged and active. You're showing expansive body language by standing up and having your shoulders rolled down.

Most importantly—and this is kind of a secret—your hands are visible.

Think about it Mac... when you first meet someone, where's the first place you look?

Mac Prichard:

I generally look people in the eye.





Vanessa Van Edwards:

Okay. That is the most common answer. But what eye tracking research shows is that we actually look at someone's hands first.

This is a survival mechanism. Imagine back in our caveman days. If we were approached by a stranger, the first place we looked at was their hands to see if they were carrying a rock or a spear. We continue to do this subconsciously.

When you have your hands in your pockets, behind your back, or digging around in your purse, subconsciously the other person wonders, "friend or foe?"

So the best thing you can do is have your hands visible and ready for that first handshake. That not only makes it a smoother transition, but you also trigger their brain to say, "You're not hiding anything. You're a friend."



Mac Prichard:

Let's take a step back. Why is being hunched over your smartphone a bad thing?

Vanessa Van Edwards:

Harvard Business School did a study that looked at subjects's confidence levels when using different devices. They studied people using iPhones, iPads, small Macbooks, and large desktop computers. The researchers found that the larger the device, the higher the user's confidence level.

What's happening, they think, is that when your body is hunched over and taking up a small amount of space, it triggers what's called defeat body language.

Athletes across cultures, races, and genders, they all make the same body language when they win and lose a race. Losing athletes hunch over into a standing or seated fetal position. They roll their shoulders in, they tilt their chin and their forehead towards their chest. It's like they're protecting their vital organs.

Winning athletes make expansive body language. They roll their shoulders back. They angle their chest, chin and forehead up towards the sky. They'll usually even pump their arms.

When you're in a winning or defeated body position, it affects brain chemistry, Our body is literally triggering the brain to say, "You're a winner," or "You're a loser."

Before an interview, you want to feel like a winner. You also want to signal to someone else that "I'm a winner." That hunched versus expansive body language is all you need.



Mac Prichard:

So the interviewer comes in to meet us. We stand up. We shake hands. How should we do that?

Vanessa Van Edwards:

Let me explain why the handshake is so important. The moment we touch someone, we release a small hormone called oxytocin.

You know when you're with someone you have that kind of warm and fuzzy feeling? That's actually oxytocin. It's nicknamed the cuddle hormone. When we're cuddling with someone, oxytocin makes us feel safe and secure.

Our body knows that if we're close enough to shake hands, we should actually produce the exact chemical we need to trust them. When you start on a handshake, your body immediately begins to produce oxytocin and so does theirs.



Oxytocin also triggers the brain chemical dopamine, which is associated with pleasure.





One of the biggest questions I get is, “How do you do the perfect handshake?” Here are my three rules of thumb.

First, dry your hands. No one likes a clammy handshake. If you have clammy hands, make sure that you always have a tissue in your purse or in your pockets. You can just very quickly reach in, dry it off.

Second, firmness. This is the hard part. You want to be firm but not squeeze too tight.

Think about how you squeeze a peach. Have you ever been to a grocery store and you pick up a peach and you try to see if it’s ripe? The moment you feel firmness, you stop squeezing. It’s the same thing with a handshake. You want to squeeze just until you feel that tension. That means the other person has matched you, grip for grip. That’s how firm you should squeeze a hand.



Mac Prichard:

Firm but not too weak and certainly not too strong.

Vanessa Van Edwards:

It's all about matching. Squeeze just enough until we both feel, "Oh, she's got me." That's the acknowledgement of we feel each other. Now we're both producing oxytocin.

Mac Prichard:

Okay. What's next?

Vanessa Van Edwards:

I always like to pair a handshake with a smile. It's hard in an interview situation to smile organically, especially if you're talking about really serious things. If you smile inauthentically, it comes across as fake.

The best opportunity for a genuine smile is to truly be happy to be there. You're happy for the interview. You're happy for the opportunity. It's the best moment for authentic happiness.

“Pair a good handshake with an authentic smile and you set the tone for a nice, warm interview.”



Mac Prichard:

Now you're ready to sit down and talk. What are your tips about how to sit in that chair and how to present yourself during the course of that conversation?

Vanessa Van Edwards:

During the interview, we want to show competence cues. We want to say, "I'm a good team player. I'm happy to be here. I have skills."



Competence cues are subtle clusters of behaviors that communicate your strengths to others.

There's a couple things you can do to show competence cues. The very first one is vocal charisma. This is important whether you're doing a phone interview, a video interview, or an in-person interview.

Most people don't think about their body language for phone interviews but a lot of nonverbal communication comes across through the phone.

For example, we're doing a study right now where we had people record different versions of the word "hello." We found that if you're doing these competence cues when you say "hello," people rate you as more trustworthy.



Mac Prichard:

What are some other confidence cues you need to use?

Vanessa Van Edwards:

Another one is fronting. Fronting is when you align your body so that your toes and your body are angled towards the person you're speaking with. Whether you're in a group interview or a one-on-one setting, you always want to nonverbally align yourself.

I also recommend nodding. Nodding is a wonderful cue that shows you are listening to the interviewer. It's also a very highly agreeable trait. As the interviewer is talking, nod along with their words to show, "Yeah, I hear you. I agree."

Here's one thing that works against confidence cues: overly scripted responses. If you've memorized your answers or if you've answered a question so many times that it sounds scripted, it saps authenticity.

Think about presenting your answers just a little bit differently each time, to show that are not memorized.

“Nodding is a wonderful cue that shows you are listening to the interviewer.”





Mac Prichard:

What about note-taking? Is that

okay?**Vanessa Van Edwards:**

It's great to show note-taking, if you actually are going to take notes. Don't bring a notepad and only use it to doodle or play tic-tac-toe.

Mac Prichard:

Tic-tac-toe during a job interview, maybe not such a good idea.

Vanessa Van Edwards:

Exactly. I think that note-taking is great if you are authentically going to use it. It shows a very important aspect of your personality which is conscientiousness.



Mac Prichard:

If you bring in materials, say work samples or a portfolio, are there things you should or shouldn't do when you share that written content?

Vanessa Van Edwards:

It's actually great to have a leave behind of some kind. In addition to showing off your skills, a leave behind can help you engage the interviewer.

If your interviewer is sitting with crossed arms or with their notebook in front of their chest, it indicates that they're a bit closed off and losing interest. You can use your leave behind to get the interviewer out of this body language.

If things start feeling stale, or you're getting nervous, now is the time to bring out your portfolio. Say, "Oh, I brought this for you as well." It's a nice reset button for the interview, especially if you've had a hard question.



**Be strategic when sharing
your leave behinds.
Use them to re-engage
the interviewer.**



Mac Prichard:

So what should we do when the interview starts wrapping up?

Vanessa Van Edwards:

You actually want to signal the exit with your body language. I've talked a lot about the art of the first impression, but the art of the last impression is just as important.

When the interviewer indicates that the interview is coming to a close, follow their cue. Wrap up the meeting by leaning in and giving a final handshake. Show them that you're coming in for that chemical seal the deal and that lean is also a nice way of saying, "I'm with you. I'm engaged."

As you're making that final handshake, you want to give each individual person nice eye contact and an authentic smile. Thank everyone involved and then end the meeting on that nice clean note.



Seal the deal chemically on both ends of the interview with a solid handshake.





Mac Prichard:

Often, when you're leaving the interview, the interviewer will walk you back to the reception area. What are your tips about this?

Vanessa Van Edwards:

That's a great question. I'd suggest you walk side by side with the interviewer. This is one of the easiest ways to build rapport with the other person.

Interestingly, this works best with male interviewers. Males generally prefer to walk side-by-side. If you look at how people sit in a bar, you'll notice that men tend to sit at the bar next to each other, while women tend to sit at tables facing each other. It's an interesting gender difference.

When you're walking with someone, you don't want to walk slightly ahead or behind them. This is unnerving to the other person. So, walk side by side. Make eye contact as you're walking. That's a really congenial nonverbal cue of saying, "We're equal. We're partners. This is really enjoyable."



Mac Prichard:

Then a fond farewell to the receptionist?

Vanessa Van Edwards:

Absolutely. A fond farewell to the receptionist. If you can give a handshake, that's great too. Also thank everyone you met. Everyone!

Mac Prichard:

I'm curious... what are some of the biggest body language mistakes you've seen people make in a job interview?

Vanessa Van Edwards:

One of the biggest body language mistakes is movement distraction. Our eyes are drawn to things in motion. That's just the way that our brain works.

The biggest motion distractor is probably clicking your pen. Even if you're just doing it at the beginning or end of notes, it's distracting to many people.

We also know that people with high amounts of movement are typically more nervous. Hand gestures are great, but pen clicking, foot jiggling, knee jiggling, tapping, knuckle cracking, those are all movement distractions.

The only movements you should be having really in an interview are three things: nodding, leaning in and hand gestures. Those are three beautifully charismatic body language cues.





Mac Prichard:

Great. Anything else you'd like to add, Vanessa?

Vanessa Van Edwards:

Everything I've talked about today is congruency. I think you're a great candidate for a job and so you want to show as well as tell that.

If you are nervous about something or you don't think you're a good candidate for the job, that will come across. You need to do whatever you can beforehand to make sure that you know that you are happy about this opportunity and you're a good candidate because that comes through in your body language.

Simply put, authenticity is one of those things you can't fake.



About Mac Prichard

Mac Prichard, founder and publisher of [Mac's List](#), has been connecting people to rewarding work for decades. As a transplant to Portland, Oregon in the early 1990s, Mac learned the secrets to finding work in a competitive market. He has since become a recognized expert on job hunting and career management. Mac writes for the [Mac's List blog](#), hosts a weekly podcast, [Find Your Dream Job](#), and is the author of [Land Your Dream Job in Portland \(and Beyond\)](#) and [Land Your Dream Job Anywhere](#).

About Mac's List

Since 2001, Mac's List has been Oregon's premier job search resource, an online community connecting thousands of passionate and talented people to meaningful work opportunities in the Pacific Northwest. A registered B Corp, Mac's List is an organization with a social mission: to give people the tools and knowledge they need to conduct effective job searches. We do this through our [job board](#), a [blog](#), a [podcast](#), and [online courses](#) all dedicated to the nuts and bolts of job hunting and career management. More than 80,000 people a month connect with Mac's List.

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