By Mark Keith

Failing the dreaded job interview

Do you inspire faith or fear among potential staff?

SITTING in the business-class window seat, the view over the South China Sea is breathtaking. The candidate has been invited to fly to Hong Kong for an interview, and the business-class tickets for two and the promise of three nights in one of Hong Kong's finest hotels put both him and his wife in a receptive mood.

The extra US$8,000 spent on the two business-class tickets compared to the single economy ticket are seen as a prudent investment, commensurate with the company's brand image as an employer of choice.

The welcome letter in the room from the MD and the carefully planned meeting schedule [along with an itinerary for the spouse, including school visits] are designed to maximise the value of the visit.

After a day of interviews, a psychometric test and a tour of the hotel, the candidate enters the fine-dining restaurant for the final hurdle – lunch with the MD and chairman.

During the last meeting of the previous day, the MD had confirmed the candidate's continued interest following a review of a hypothetical compensation package.

If successful, the candidate will earn more than US$100,000 and command a multi-million dollar budget – and his day-to-day decisions and activities could influence the net income of the hotel by as much as 30%.

His wife has already given the thumbs up – the schools are more than satisfactory, and the estate agent has shown her a selection of homes within the prospective budget.

As the wine waiter withdraws, the candidate glances at the glass of fine-vintage wine but, fearing there may yet be more tests to perform in the afternoon, he only takes small sips. With a flourish, the chairman raises his glass and announces: "Your test results were quite outstanding and I understand you have impressed my very demanding colleagues.

"We obviously understand you will need to discuss the opportunity with your spouse, but as far as we are concerned you have got the job so, at the risk of a premature celebration, congratulations!"

This is the way it's supposed to happen but – unfortunately for most people reading this article – this scenario is nothing more than a fairy tale. For most hotel professionals, experiences like this are merely dreams.

The job interview carries significant historical baggage, and holds a special place in the human psyche.

Most candidates admit to nervousness prior to an interview, which can stimulate behaviours of humility and acquiescence as they anticipate the interrogatory nature of the interview.

On the employer's side, only newly appointed executives would admit to being nervous prior to interviewing a candidate. Most prepare well, are relaxed and know in advance the questions they will be asking and the areas of competence they will be exploring and attempting to verify.

And that's just the problem.

In most cultures, the history of industrialisation [and, therefore, employment history] has placed the employer in an advantageous position vis-a-vis the employee – and this background continues to shape our behaviour towards prospective employees.

Self worth

It's easy for employers to assume that "they should want to join us". Indeed, the perception that we are working for a company that others aspire to join reinforces our own self worth and endorses our own employment choices.

Naturally, the ideal candidate should be excited by the prospect of a job with the company, and this positive starting point can be consolidated by the "fairy-tale" interview experience described earlier.

Equally, this positive outlook can be negated by inappropriate behaviour. Whether the available position is for a senior executive or an entry-level service job, people like to feel that they are being courted and respected.

Failing to flatter and encourage candidates will immediately discourage them – not a good idea if they are good and you, as an employer, are competing for them in the open job market.

For entry-level candidates, the usual experience is an invitation directing them to report to the back-of-house entrance. Most hotels have a security guard at the staff entrance, and they're usually not the most welcoming individuals as it is their job to suspect everyone.

This first impression reinforces the feelings of intimidation and interrogation in the candidates' minds. The corridors leading to the HR office can also be confusing and intimidating for a newcomer – and the quest is often rewarded with a waiting room and a form-filling experience which can further stir up feelings of feudalism.

Whether they realise it or not, HR departments are part of hotels' marketing functions, and intelligent operations direct candidates to the front desk and alert staff that they are expected, just as if they had reservations.

Warmly welcomed and directed to have a seat in the lobby, candidates sit in the splendid surroundings while awaiting their escort. They soak up the atmosphere, see the hotel in its best light and form in their own minds the expectations that the property will have of them and their behaviour.

They might even come away from the whole experience feeling privileged, flattered and eager to be part of this wondrous working experience – instead of dejected, embarrassed and resentful.

Arguments against this kind of approach include fears that the candidate will be given a non-realistic impression.

But, as we are always saying that "our people are our greatest assets", wouldn't a prudent company value, nurture and respect its greatest assets – not just when recruiting, but throughout their whole tenure with the company? ☒

This first impression reinforces the feelings of intimidation and interrogation in the candidates' minds

Failing to flatter and encourage candidates will immediately discourage them – not a good idea if they are good and you, as an employer, are competing for them in the open job market

• Mark Keith is MD of HVS Executive Search, based in Hong Kong, overseeing hotel search assignments throughout Asia Pacific. Email: mkeith@hvsinternational.com