



## Not quite obsolete: Handshakes still hold substantial influence in professional relations

BY Linda CHENG

In early folklore, if two strangers were to bump into one another on the street, two choices preceded the situation: duel to the death, or shake hands in a unanimous treaty of goodwill. Even in ancestral times, the handshake was the universal symbol of compromise and unity. The very action of joining fingers and pressing palms was a silent expression of the amiable dignity polite society had to offer.

Mankind, the salutation boasted, has finally advanced beyond their primitive practice of bumping skulls in barbaric greeting. But in the eyes of the new generation, shaking hands has become an old man's sport. The dynamism behind a strong handshake has been tediously watered down throughout the generations. Treading amongst a new flood of colloquial greetings, the traditional handshake has been cast aside as a stiff, impersonal salutation reserved for crusty old suits in business menageries.

Students would do well to learn the mechanics behind a proper handshake.

The National Association of Colleges and Employers surveyed handfuls of employers, who said they were more likely to overlook obvious body piercings than a weak handshake. Similarly, results show that 33 percent of employers claim

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Syndi Seid, who is a professional speaker, trainer and founder of San Francisco-based Advanced Etiquette, opposes the idea that the handshake has become obsolete; "In fact it is quite the opposite." She believes that the use of the handshake manifests itself at a global level, "Where historically, there were many ways to greet a person, depending on their historical culture, but in today's

global economy, most cultures have found that a handshake is a reasonable and acceptable form of a mutual greeting." The ubiquitous tool of greeting is used to evaluate the "level of professionalism and confidence" in a stranger, from the moment the first salutation is uttered.

Melissa Leonard, etiquette and protocol consultant, breaks down the fundamental elements of a good handshake as the "web to web contact (that fleshy part between your thumb and index finger), eye contact... a firm squeeze, no more than two or three pumps of the hand, keeping your hand perpendicular when you come in for the shake, a nice greeting to accompany the handshake and [shaking] from the elbow (not the shoulder or wrist)."

She advises interviewees to avoid what she calls the Texan handshake, "...a handshake that is overpowering and leaves the other person rubbing their poor little hand," as well as the politician handshake, "where you put your other hand over the hands that are being shaken...this should be reserved for wakes or funerals. It is considered way too intimate for business and can come across as insincere."

But a firm handshake is only one component to being a strong interviewee. Taking into account a clean appearance, Seid looks for appropriate behavior. "Does the candidate extend their hand for a

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*the epic explores the history and modern implications of the practice of handshaking.*





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handshake first? Is it a proper and firm handshake with good eye contact? From there I look for good posture throughout the interview. I also look for how the candidate behaves in terms of using too many hand gestures, fidgets in their chair, or speaks in a style of using lots of slang, jargon or abbreviations. Most of all I look for how genuinely eager the candidate appears in wanting this specific job.”

Leonard emphasizes the importance of making a positive first impression, “If you make a bad first impression, statistics show that it takes 8 subsequent positive encounters to reverse that first bad

impression.” Outside of a weak handshake, common *faux pas* students make include “use of slang, chewing gum, arriving late, mumbling and not making eye contact” in addition to, “popping into a chair before the interviewer offers you one, using first names unless asked to, chattering on and on, jiggling your knee, playing with your hair and fidgeting in general.” Preparation is vital, and interviewees should be ready to answer questions including but not limited to why they are qualified for the job, what their strengths are, why they want a new job and why with that particular company. “Don’t talk about how you dislike your boss, how

your talents are not appreciated or anything negative,” Leonard recommends, “Say you’ve gained enough experience in your current job to make you ready to tackle new challenges and you believe this new position could give you a chance.”

Ancient Egyptians believed that the power to rule was literally handed to their Pharaoh by the Gods through the joining of fingers. But in the world of competitive job snatching, power is measured by first impressions, and one civil protocol involving a firm squeeze with two shakes from the elbow.