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MONEY AND WORK

## **The Headhunters Assess the Candidates for the Country's Biggest Job**

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Imagine interviewing to lead a corporation with \$2 trillion in annual revenue, nearly 3 million employees and 507 million acres of land under management. Even Bill Gates would be nervous.

Well, that's just what President Bush and Sen. John Kerry are doing every time they give a campaign speech or appear on television.

Since the two men are pretty busy these days, we've done them the favor of gathering feedback and advice from executive coaches and headhunters who regularly evaluate wannabe chief executive officers. The business people say the same qualities that make a CEO candidate shine should be sought in the next president: confidence, courage and communication skill.

"The person who gets the job is not necessarily the one who has everything nailed down on their resume, it's the one who has the most passion," said Gail Blanke, a New York-based executive coach and registered independent. "This just happens to be the biggest job in the country, if not the world."

The first rule of good communication is that it's not about the speaker, it's about the audience, Blanke said. Successful job candidates refrain from reciting all their good qualities, and instead listen carefully to the interviewer and build rapport.

Rather than demonstrate his command of vast amounts of information, Kerry should create intimacy with his listeners, something at which Bush excels, advised Blanke, author of "Between Trapezes: Flying Into a New Life With the Greatest of Ease."

Geoff Smart, CEO of ghSMART, a management assessment and coaching firm based in Chicago, agreed.

"Knowledge does not count for much unless you persuade people, whether running a business or a government," said Smart, a Republican.

On the other hand, Bush's malapropisms make it harder for him to articulate a message.

"I have never interviewed a CEO candidate who tangles his words up like Bush," said Susan G. Grant, a Democrat and president of Winguth, Grant & Company, an executive search firm in San Francisco. "Usually they get weeded out."

Kerry is too polished, in Smart's view, lacking authentic passion and a clear vision, key traits of successful CEOs.

His aloofness also raises alarm. In the corporate world, Smart observed, an overly formal CEO candidate either doesn't believe he deserves the job or is trying to hide something.

"You want to be really careful not to always hire the guy who interviews best, because he probably changes jobs often,"

warned Elliot Clark, chief operating officer of Kenexa, a human resource service company in Wayne, Pa.

Bush, at the other extreme, can become worked up, displaying his feelings -- whether irritation, anger or amusement -- on his face. "It makes him seem too emotional and therefore scary as a commander in chief," Smart said. "His area for improvement is to move from being emphatic to being empathetic."

Clark, who is an undecided Republican, recommended that Bush improve his public speaking skills and move beyond scripted sound bites when he's talking at length. "It's important for the candidate for any CEO job to be able to speak in full sentences," he said.

Both candidates should focus on body language and presentation, aiming to straddle the thin line between confidence and arrogance, the experts said.

"I tell every job hunter that you need to be thinking about how you are -- it's as important as what you say," said Andrea Kay, a Cincinnati-based career coach and author of "Interview Strategies That Will Get You the Job You Want."

"People decide what they feel about you within seven seconds of meeting you," said Kay, an independent.

Naturally, in any search an employer checks references and looks over the candidate's resume.

In politics, background investigations are largely conducted by the news media and opposition researchers working for the campaigns. This is why you've encountered stories and advertising concerning Kerry's actions in and after Vietnam and Bush's whereabouts during his National Guard service.

"In today's political as well as business world, it's really incumbent upon all of us to not take things at face value," said Dave Stein of Mahopac, N.Y., author of "How Winners Sell." He declined to give his political affiliation for publication.

Managers evaluate job candidates using questions that weigh key competencies, said Paul Storfer, co-founder of InScope Corp., based in Purchase, N.Y.

"That kind of analysis has proven to be very predictive of how people will react in their jobs in the future, whether it's CEO of a firm or president of the United States," said Storfer, a Democrat who is undecided. "Knowledge can be developed. ... Behaviors aren't very easy to change. As a result, those are the things that really should be most critical in making a decision for president."

Human resources executives surveyed by InScope said the most important quality for a president was judgment -- defined as whether someone employs a variety of cognitive skills to arrive at well-founded decisions, tempered by common sense. On this, they rated Kerry slightly higher than Bush.

One of the trickiest qualities to evaluate dispassionately is honesty, since it closely tracks your overall impression of someone. To highlight integrity, job candidates often are asked what they would do if they were asked to intentionally misstate some information to make the company look good.

"You could say Bush, even though he wasn't sure there were weapons of mass destruction (in Iraq), presented the information to make it look the best," Storfer said.

Along the same lines, Kerry's critics question his convictions, saying he has changed positions on the Iraq war based on the political winds. "I think of him more as a very well-dressed weathervane," Clark said.

Incumbent Bush has a leg up, just as an internal candidate does on an outside applicant, said Tony Lee, editor in chief of CareerJournal.com in Princeton, N.J. All candidates must show they could do the job from day one, something Bush can claim since he already is president, said Lee, who declined to give his political affiliation.

And whatever their flaws, both Bush and Kerry have a strong advantage over most candidates for a top CEO job: Theirs is largely a two-way race.

Annie Gray, an executive search consultant based in St. Louis, finds Kerry wooden and Bush too aggressive.

"If I were the search consultant and these were the two candidates, I would say, 'Let's open the search again,'" said Gray, a Democrat.

Voters don't have that luxury.

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