ARTICLE 14 · HIRING & LEADERSHIP

The Iced Coffee Isn’t the Problem. The Interview Is.

BY DAVID AMBROSE · OCTOBER 3, 2026

Apparently, we have solved hiring. It was the iced coffee.

A debate making the rounds online asks whether bringing an iced coffee into a job interview is unprofessional. Recruiters have weighed in. Candidates have weighed in. An impressive amount of analysis is now being devoted to what a plastic cup with a straw reveals about a person's judgment, professionalism and readiness for employment.

I have hired and trained people in hospitality for years. I have seen spectacular interviews followed by terrible employees and awkward interviews followed by exceptional ones. I have plenty of reasons not to hire someone. An iced coffee has never been one of them.

Professionalism matters. Show up on time. Be prepared. Treat people respectfully. Understand that you are asking someone to trust you with a job. But managers have a remarkable ability to turn preferences into principles.

The candidate wore the wrong shoes. The handshake wasn't firm enough. They didn't send a thank-you email. They arrived five minutes early instead of ten. They accepted the water we offered them. They declined the water we offered them.

Now we have apparently reached beverages.

The problem isn't that these observations tell us nothing. The problem is how quickly we convince ourselves they tell us something important.

In hospitality, I need to know what happens when the dining room fills up, three employees call out and somebody at table 14 would like to explain, in considerable detail, why this is the worst Caesar salad of her life. I want to know whether you can make a mistake without spending the next hour explaining why it wasn't really your fault. I want to know whether you notice when the person beside you is drowning and help before somebody asks. I want to know what happens when the manager

disappears, the printer won't stop, the line keeps growing and nobody has given you instructions for what comes next.

Those things are difficult to determine in an interview.

The coffee is right there.

And that may be why these tiny signals are so seductive.

Hiring has always contained unwritten rules, and unwritten rules are wonderfully convenient for the people who already know them. Eventually we start calling them common sense, forgetting that somebody once had to teach them to us. Apparently, common sense also comes with a dress code and, as we now know, beverage restrictions.

But underneath the iced-coffee argument is a larger problem: interviews can easily become tests of familiarity rather than tests of capability.

Some candidates already know the choreography. They know what to wear, how early to arrive, which questions to ask and when to send the thank-you email. Maybe a parent taught them. Maybe a professor, mentor or career coach did. Maybe they've simply interviewed enough times to learn the routine. Other candidates arrive with less familiarity and just as much potential.

When we confuse familiarity with capability, the candidate isn't the only one who loses. We may be screening out the very person we keep saying we want to find.

The trouble is that familiarity is easy to see. Capability isn't. I cannot look across a desk and know how someone will respond six weeks later when the shift falls apart, the customer is furious and the person who was supposed to know what to do has gone home.

But I can see the coffee.

Managers say they want judgment, adaptability and independent thinking. Then we sometimes design interviews that reward candidates for correctly guessing a collection of rules nobody bothered to tell them. That isn't an assessment of professionalism. Sometimes it's an assessment of familiarity, which is considerably less impressive, although admittedly easier to evaluate from across a desk.

There is also something magnificently absurd about this particular controversy in hospitality. Imagine rejecting someone for walking into an interview carrying an iced coffee, then hiring someone else for a job that includes making them.

Apparently, the first candidate lacked professionalism.

The second starts Monday.

Context matters. Arriving twenty minutes late while finishing breakfast is different from arriving prepared with a drink in your hand. Putting your cup on someone's paperwork is rude. Interrupting the conversation to take a phone call is rude. Treating the interview like an inconvenience between errands is rude.

But notice what makes those things unprofessional. It isn't the coffee. It's the behavior.

Standards matter. But sometimes we confuse standards with conformity. So when some small detail about a candidate starts bothering us, there is a useful question to ask: Does this behavior actually predict job performance, or does it simply violate my expectation of what a professional should look like?

A candidate who is rude to the receptionist is giving you useful information. Someone who repeatedly interrupts you is giving you useful information. Someone who arrives substantially late without explanation is giving you useful information.

The iced coffee? You may simply dislike the iced coffee.

That distinction matters because hiring managers make consequential decisions with remarkably little information. Sometimes we have an hour. Sometimes 30 minutes. We ask a handful of questions, observe a handful of behaviors and try to predict how another human being will perform three months from now on a Tuesday night when two people have called out, the line is out the door and something expensive has stopped working.

Of course we use shortcuts. The danger comes when we mistake the shortcut for the answer.

A polished candidate may become an extraordinary employee. A nervous candidate may become one too. The person who understands every interview convention may have learned them from a parent, professor, mentor or career coach. The person who doesn't may simply never have been told. And the candidate holding the iced coffee may be thoughtful, dependable, curious and extraordinary under pressure.

You cannot see any of that through the cup.

So ask better questions.

Ask about the hardest shift they ever worked. Ask about a mistake they made when nobody was around to fix it. Ask about the coworker who drove them crazy. Ask what they do when a customer is wrong but absolutely convinced otherwise. Ask what they do when the script runs out.

Then look at the iced coffee.

If, after all of that, the cup still tells you something important about the candidate, ask yourself why.

Because the purpose of an interview shouldn't be to find the person who already knows all the unwritten rules. It should be to find the person worth teaching the ones that actually matter.