

Client: Hamilton Bradshaw
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Career advice from James Caan

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"Too many people think their first idea is their best and it very rarely is," says James Caan, clad in a black pinstripe suit as pristine as his Hamilton Bradshaw office in London's Mayfair. "The guy who launched McDonald's was 63 - imagine how many times he failed." Best known as the most approachable of the Dragons, Caan left school aged 16 and built up his Alexander Mann recruitment empire from a broom cupboard to a company with an annual turnover of £130m. Here he talks to GQ about his bespoke fetish, the question almost everyone slips up on in interviews and the best time to ask for a raise...

What's a good outfit for a job interview?

What you should wear to work reflects what business you're in. The concept of the workplace is changing. I went to the Google office to give a speech and when I turned up at reception, everybody was in baggy T-shirts, jeans and even flip-flops. Now, if I told you "When you go to an interview, you need to wear a dark blue suit, white shirt, red tie etc," you'd look like a muppet when you walked in there. The first thing I'd do before going to an interview is look on your prospective employer's website because most companies reflect their culture through the visuals on it. In some industries it's not about wearing a Gieves & Hawkes suit.

What are the best shoes to wear to an interview?

Clean ones. But it's not the shoes that I'm looking at. Someone once told me if you're the type of person who cleans your shoes every day, it says more about your character in work and life generally: those who have a strong attention to detail are better candidates. Black Church's are my favourite shoes. Unfortunately we men have a huge range of black, black and black. I'm definitely quite partial to patent but it can look a little bit too trendy for the office. I've been known to turn up a few times wearing them but then I get comments like "Here comes Fred Astaire..."

Has reality TV changed the way candidates apply for jobs?

The Apprentice and Dragon's Den are good viewing but I wouldn't take them literally. That's not the real job environment and the interview process is not like that. You rarely meet somebody for 20 minutes and get offered £1,000 - it doesn't happen in the real world. I don't think it's right for someone to think, "I have a bright idea: now all I need to do is meet someone tomorrow, have a 20-minute chat and walk away with a cheque."

What question do candidates tend to slip up on in interviews?

Typically what I say to people in an interview is "I have a shortlist of six candidates: what is it about you that is going to outshine those other candidates and make me make you an offer right now?" And they just freeze. [laughs] If somebody said to me something that was that compelling, I would just say, "Fantastic, the job is yours". The problem is that the ability to think that quickly and to be that confident isn't something you see that often.

What's your own wardrobe like?

I'm almost embarrassed to tell you how many bespoke suits I own. It's probably too many. I have a fetish for



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suits. My favourite tailor at the moment is Terence Trout. I probably buy one a month and have done for the last 20 years. In my business, suits are my uniform so if I have to wear a suit every day, I may as well get bespoke. My biggest challenge in life is that I don't have enough wardrobe space. I'm also quite into accessories now. I've got a Paul Smith crocodile briefcase and I love my Montblanc pens. I also have a fetish for watches. Audemars Piguet is my favourite brand - I have a whole collection of those. You've got to spend money on something...

What's your best advice on starting up a business?

Don't compete with larger firms because you can't. There's a segment of the market that loves dealing with boutique businesses because of their individuality so recognise what you have and find merchandise that reflects that and is niche.

Would you have gone for Angry Birds if someone had pitched it to you in Dragon's Den?

Easy to say now, but absolutely! I think the business world needs to recognise that today innovation and creativity play a big part in business. For example, the film industry considered putting Slumdog Millionaire straight to DVD. What does that tell me? It tells me that some of the smartest people in the industry couldn't work out that the movie would be a hit. Entrepreneurship is the same. You really don't know whether it's going to work. What makes a business successful isn't the idea - it's your passion and drive.

What does failure teach you?

I've probably had more failures than most people realise. I make more mistakes than most because I make more decisions than most. You can't just be successful.

How do you impress on an internship?

The problem with work experience is that you've got a very short window to make an impression. Most interns are quite shy and introverted because they're young and daunted by the environment but you've got to stand out from the crowd. We had a guy who came here as an intern and integrated himself into the company by participating in lunches and going out with the guys for a beer and everyone on my team told me that I had to hire him. Your biggest advocates are the people around you.

What are the worst mistakes people make on their CVs?

Do not create a bog-standard CV that you send to everybody. Make it relevant to the job and the company by looking at the job spec you're applying for and only put what is relevant to that job. It needs to be accurate and precise.

How should you ask for a raise?

If you're going to ask for a raise, you need to know before you ask what it is that you have done that justifies the increase. Organisations need to measure your output to justify what they pay you so the best time to ask for a raise is when you're on the way up and are adding value.



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How do you impress with a pitch?

I always ask a person who comes for an investment what it is about them that makes them different to the 100 other people who think they've got the next innovation that's going to change the world. One woman said, "I will resign from my job this afternoon at my own cost and I don't want your money unless I can demonstrate to you that this will work. I'll find a team who fit the spec and brief you describe to me and I'll demonstrate the commercial viability of my idea - without knowing you're going to give me an investment. Is that compelling enough?" I said, "You know what? You've got yourself a deal."

James Caan Business Secrets, free. itunes.apple.com/gb

Meet James Caan at the Apple store in Covent Garden, 6.30pm on Thursday 16 June.

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