

## Overcoming the Challenge of a Visible Facial Difference at Interview:

Pre-Familiarisation can be Effective.

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### **Abstract**

Previous studies have shown that a candidate with a visible facial difference (VFD) may experience discrimination during recruitment. This study investigated whether a VFD imposes a disadvantage in a simulated job interview and whether pre-familiarisation to the candidate's appearance can reduce the disadvantage. Participants (n = 128) observed a video of a job interview in one of three conditions: a short audio pre-familiarisation and no VFD at interview (Control); audio pre-familiarisation and VFD at interview (Unexpected); and video pre-familiarisation then VFD at interview (Familiarised). Participants subsequently evaluated the candidate on personal and professional traits. Results revealed higher evaluations in the Unexpected compared to Control condition for Professional Skills, Emotional Stability, and especially strongly for Warmth, attributed to positive discrimination. In the Familiarised condition, the evaluations lay between Control and Unexpected, the only significant difference being lower Warmth in Familiarised than Unexpected. Of particular interest, different traits were associated with the key variable of Role Suitability in the three conditions: in Control, Role Suitability correlated with the job-relevant traits of Emotional Stability and Professional Skills; in Unexpected, the association with Professional Skills was weaker, and there was a significant association with Warmth; in Familiarised, there were no significant associations. In the Familiarised condition, compared to Unexpected, participants found the candidate's appearance less distracting, and believed the pre-familiarisation would help the interviewer. These results were interpreted as suggesting that a VFD may harm the candidate's chances of being evaluated fairly on their merits, but this disadvantage may be partially overcome by pre-familiarisation. (250 words)

Keywords: visible facial difference, face, employment, discrimination, familiarisation

**Clinical Impact Statement:**

People with a visible facial difference may be disadvantaged in an employment interview. This study asked participants to look at a recorded interview in which the candidate had a large port wine stain birthmark (nevus flammeus), which was visible to some participants and not to others. Participants then evaluated the candidate on a range of relevant factors. The results suggested that the candidate might not be evaluated entirely on their merits when the birthmark was visible.

Participants believed that a brief pre-familiarisation video, enabling the interviewer to become accustomed to the appearance of the candidate, would facilitate a fair interview.

## Introduction

A visible facial difference, for example, skin discolouration, scarring, or asymmetry, may be seen in one in every 111 people in the UK (Julian & Partridge, 2007). Those whose facial appearance differs greatly from the norm may experience discrimination in the recruitment process (e.g., Madera, 2016; Madera & Hebl, 2012; Stevenage & Mackay, 1999; Stone & Wright, 2013) and may be perceived as less employable (Rankin & Borah, 2003). The present experiment aimed to investigate the disadvantage in a job interview arising from a visible facial difference (VFD) and, importantly, whether this disadvantage can be reduced by pre-familiarisation with the candidates' appearance.

The common belief that someone with a VFD should limit their professional ambitions (e.g., Clarke, 1999) is supported by personal accounts, including lowering expectations of career success and opting for roles with a lower profile (Lansdown, Rumsey, Bradbury, Carr & Partridge, 1997). Changing Faces (2017) reported that around 80% of its 800 respondents had decided not to apply for a particular job because of concerns that their appearance would be a disadvantage in an employment interview, while over half thought their VFD had hampered their career.

One potential cause of disadvantage in an interview is the tendency to form negative evaluations of someone with unusual appearance (e.g., Bull & David, 1986; Stevenage & McKay, 1999; Stone & Wright, 2012; Zebrowitz & Montepare, 2008). There are implicit assumptions that someone with a VFD will be lacking in social skills and confidence and may be needy and prone to negative emotions. These assumptions may be exacerbated by the social premium placed on attractiveness (Andreoni & Petrie, 2008; Dijker & Koomen, 2001; Judge, Hurst, & Simon, 2009; Solnick & Schweitzer, 1999). Negative assumptions can create a self-fulfilling prophecy; for example, an interviewer who expects a candidate with a VFD to be awkward and socially uncomfortable, may behave in a way that results in the expected outcome (e.g., Hebl, Tickle & Heatherton, 2000).

Another potential cause of disadvantage is the novelty of the visual appearance which may distract the interviewer, leading to poorer recall of the candidate's responses, and hence to lower

evaluation of their suitability (Madera & Hebl, 2012; Stevenage & Furness, 2008). There is a general tendency for human attention to be diverted when faced with something unexpected (e.g., Langer, Fiske, Taylor & Chanowitz, 1976). This may result in the interviewers focusing their attention on the disfigurement rather than on the responses of the candidate and their suitability for the role (Direct Gov UK, 2021). Other studies have also found that attention is captured by a VFD (e.g., Ackerman, Becker, Mortensen & Sasaki, 2009; Madera & Hebl, 2012; Stone & Potton, 2017).

A third possible cause of disadvantage in an interview arises from the negative emotional reactions of perceivers to an individual with a VFD. Negative emotions, including disgust, have been reported by several researchers (Houston & Bull, 1994; Kleck & Strenta, 1985; Madera, 2016; Rumsey, Bull, & Gahagan, 1982; Shanmugarajah, Gaiind, & Clarke, 2012; Stone & Potton, 2014).

Several studies offer the suggestion that pre-familiarisation to an individual with a VFD may reduce the disadvantage in an employment interview. Stone and Fisher (2020) reported that negative trait evaluations of a person with a VFD were reduced when observers first watched a brief (90 second) video in which the individual introduced themselves and talked about their life. Along similar lines, Dasgupta and Greenwald (2001) exposed participants to positive examples of members of a disadvantaged social group and observed reduced implicit prejudice. Reinke, Corrigan, Leonhard, Lundin, and Kubiak (2004) reported that the desired social distance to a stigmatised individual was reduced by watching a video message recorded by the individual. Finally, Madera and Hebl (2019) observed a decrease over time in the focus of visual attention towards a VFD, which suggests that interviewers would be able to pay greater attention to the content of the interview as they become more familiar with the appearance of the candidate. These studies are all consistent with the Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) meta-analysis finding of broad and consistent support for the Contact Hypothesis of Allport (1955) proposing that contact reduces intergroup prejudice.

The pre-familiarisation approach is advocated by Changing Faces (2023) though there is, so far, a lack of empirical evidence for the efficacy of this approach. Face Equality International suggest

that a brief video may reduce the prospect of awkwardness and increase the comfort of the interview panel. The UK Government directly addresses this point by advising applicants to disclose their VFD before the interview, so that the interviewers are not surprised or startled and can focus on conducting an effective interview (Direct Gov UK, 2021). A caveat was suggested by Stone and Wright (2013) who found that disclosing a VFD in an application resulted in fewer positive responses, hence it is advised that a disclosure could occur after shortlisting but before the interview itself. It is worth noting that the UK Equality Act (2010) classes a severe disfigurement as a form of disability so pre-familiarisation could constitute a reasonable adjustment.

The Competence-Warmth model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick & Xu, 2002) was influential in creating the hypotheses for the present study. The model proposes that people are generally evaluated against the two high-level dimensions of Competence and Warmth. Individuals who are stigmatised in some way, by having a disability, or a visible difference, or by being elderly, or having a health condition, are usually considered relatively high in warmth but lower in competence. Partial support was offered by Stone and Wright (2012) who reported higher evaluations of Warmth for target individuals presented with a VFD than those with typical faces, though no difference was observed in Competence traits. This was attributed to the “norm to be kind” (described by Bell & Klein, 2001; Colella, DeNisi, & Varma, 1998) in which stigmatised individuals are given positive evaluations on traits not implying any particular competence or skill.

The present study investigated whether pre-familiarisation to the appearance of a person with a VFD would reduce any disadvantage that might arise in an employment interview. The candidate had a simulated large port-wine stain birthmark (*nevus flammeus*) on one cheek, which allowed the birthmark to be visible or hidden during the interview, depending on the camera angle. A port-wine stain is a relatively common form of birthmark, present in 0.3% of the population, and often seen on the face (Great Ormond Street Hospital, 2018). The pre-familiarisation consisted of a short introduction to the candidate, either in video or audio only. The Control condition consisted of

audio pre-familiarisation followed by candidate with no VFD, the Unexpected condition had audio-pre-familiarisation followed by candidate with VFD, and the Familiarised condition had video pre-familiarisation followed by candidate with VFD.

The contrast between the Unexpected and Control conditions was designed to test the effect of the VFD at interview, and the contrast between the Familiarised and Unexpected conditions was designed to test the effect of pre-familiarisation. The dependent variables were a set of scores measuring the traits of Sociability, Emotional Stability, Professional Skills, Warmth, Role Suitability, and Memory for content. The key outcome variable was Role Suitability, indicating the likelihood of the candidate being offered the job.

The hypotheses were as follows and are summarised in Supplemental Materials. H1: Memory performance was predicted to be worse in the Unexpected condition compared to the Control condition, based on previous observations that the distraction caused by a VFD leads to poorer recall of the interview content (Madera & Hebl, 2012; Stevenage & Furness, 2008), and to be higher in the Familiarised condition than the Unexpected condition, based on observation of a decrease over time in the attention paid to a VFD (Madera and Hebl (2019)). H2a: Candidate assessment was predicted to be lower in the Unexpected condition than the Control condition, based on the likelihood of negative evaluations of the candidate with a VFD (e.g., Stevenage & McKay, 1999; Stone & Potton, 2017) and then to be higher in the Familiarised condition than the Unexpected condition, based on observations of the beneficial effect of familiarisation (Stone & Fisher, 2020). H2b: the opposite pattern would be observed for the trait of Warmth, based on the Competence-Warmth model of Fiske et al (2002), i.e., this was predicted to be higher in the Unexpected condition compared to Control, and to be lower in the Familiarised condition compared to Unexpected. H3a: In the Control condition, Role Suitability would be correlated with attributes essential to the role, that is, Sociability, Emotional Stability, and Professional Skills, but these correlations would be smaller in the Unexpected condition. H3b: the correlation of Role Suitability

with Warmth would be higher in Unexpected than in the Control or Familiarised condition. H4: participants would have a more positive and comfortable experience in the Familiarised compared to the Unexpected condition, from the beneficial effect of familiarisation (Stone & Fisher, 2020).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

148 adults volunteered for the experiment, of whom 20 were excluded: these comprised 7 whose responses were incomplete, 12 whose responses were unrealistically fast, and one who used the same response option throughout. The remaining 128 participants were aged between 21 and 74 (mean age 42.8, SD 13.9). Of the sample, 94 participants identified as women, 33 as men, and 1 as non-binary. Participants' ethnicity was as follows: 110 White, 6 Mixed or Multiple Ethnic groups, 4 Asian, 3 Black, 2 Other, and 3 unspecified. Data were collected during January and February 2021 using opportunity sampling among various groups including HR professionals, undergraduate and postgraduate students at the University of East London, and the social media platforms Facebook, LinkedIn, and Next Door. It is acknowledged that the participant sample lacks diversity compared to the population of the UK, partly due to the recruitment method that focused on HR professionals.

Participants were asked about their level of recruitment experience: only 19% reported a low level of experience (no decision-making role or no involvement at all) while 81% reported a high level of recruitment experience (recruitment decision maker or playing a lead role in the recruitment process). In addition, 84% of participants had experience of managing another person. Participants were asked to state their occupation. Finally, participants also reported whether they knew anyone with a VFD: 2% reported having a VFD themselves, 1% had a family member, 6% a close friend or acquaintance, 35% an association with someone; and the remaining 53% had no acquaintance.

### **Design**

Participants were randomly allocated to one of the three conditions (Control, Unexpected, and Familiarised) with an approximately even distribution of participants. Participants were invited to complete a follow-up study one week later, but there were too few to permit a reliable analysis.

Six dependent variables were calculated: four traits (Sociability, Emotional Stability, Professional Skills, and Warmth), Role Suitability, and Memory score. The four traits were calculated as follows: Sociability was the mean of friendly, sociable, and outgoing; Emotional Stability was the mean of confident, independent (reverse of needy), and resilient; Professional Skills was the mean of decisive, strong interpersonal skills, strong leadership qualities, takes initiative, efficient, and good communicator; and Warmth was the mean of trustworthy, good-natured (reverse of ill-natured), and works well with others (reverse of prefers to work alone). The four traits and their component items were selected with reference to the literature and scales adopted in previous studies (e.g., Stevenage & McKay, 1999; Stone & Wright, 2012; Stone & Fisher, 2020). Sociability and Emotional Stability are often given low evaluations for individuals with VFD (e.g., Stevenage & McKay, 1999; Stone & Wright, 2012; Stone & Fisher, 2020). Warmth was included because the warmth-competence theory (Fiske et al, 2002) predicts that individuals with VFD might be rated relatively high in this trait. The Professional Skills variable represented the competence aspect of the warmth-competence model. The individual items were defined on a scale of 1 (low) to 7 (high) with some items reverse-scored.

The main outcome variable, Role Suitability, was the mean of candidate suitability (1 = very unsuitable to 5 = very suitable), skill alignment (1 = no skill alignment to 5 = full skill alignment), professional conduct (1 = poor conduct to 5 = excellent conduct), and likelihood of job offer (1 = very unlikely to 5 = very likely). These items were designed by the second author who had extensive experience in human resources. The sixth variable, Memory, was the number of correct responses to eight questions about the interview content (Appendix 3). These questions were designed to probe memory for different parts of the interview.

The individual items on which the candidate was assessed were framed in such a way that participants were asked to consider how the interviewer might assess the candidate, rather than asked for their personal judgement. Research suggests that this might overcome the social



desirability bias and allow the participants to express more honest opinions (e.g., Fisher, 1993; Sherwood, 1981) though the method of indirect questioning does not completely eliminate socially desirable responding (e.g., Bernardi & Nash, 2023).

Level of recruitment experience ranged from 1 = “no experience” to 4 = “I have led an end-to-end recruitment process”. Managerial experience was a yes/no answer to the question “have you ever managed another person / people”. Occupation was coded into Human Resources professional and Other. Participants degree of acquaintance with someone with a facial disfigurement was coded as simply Yes or No as there were too few responses in some of the categories to analyse separately.

Finally, participants assigned to either the Unexpected or Familiarised condition were asked questions about their experience in the experiment. These were: I felt uncomfortable seeing this person; I found the person’s disfigurement distracting; I felt sorry for the person; if something like this happened to me, I would not be able to cope well. They were also asked direct questions about the pre-familiarisation technique: how likely do you think it is that this person’s appearance would be a disadvantage in a job interview? and to what extent do you feel that pre-disclosure would help the interviewer to conduct a positive interview focusing on the relevant candidate qualities?

## **Materials**

Participants were asked to watch a video recording of a mock job interview between an applicant, a white British woman in her late twenties interviewing for the post of HR officer, and one interviewer, a white British man in his early forties acting as an HR Director for a retail company. Both the actors were volunteers. The script for both parties (appendix 2) was written by the second researcher and was reviewed for accuracy and realism with three Human Resources professionals known to the researcher. Care was taken to make the job interview materials feel as realistic as possible, so the interview was filmed in a genuine office location, and a professional make-up artist created the VFD, having been provided with images taken from the internet of real port wine stains (see Figure 1).

The interviewer was a woman, as research suggests that a facial disfigurement may have a greater impact on how we perceive women's faces compared to men's faces (Alley & Hildebrandt, 1988). The candidate was below the age of 30 which was fitting for the level of role, a junior HR officer, and the job she was interviewing for was perceived to be a logical next step in her career. The choice to use a port-wine stain was based on three factors: one, it has no associated physical dysfunction, so any differences between experimental conditions would be due to the appearance and not to concerns about, for example, speech clarity or facial expression; two, a port-wine stain is recognised to be a birthmark and consequently is generally considered not to be due to any culpable action of the individual, reducing any issues of preconceptions of character; and three, the port-wine stain is readily simulated with make-up.

Multiple-choice questions were created to capture participants' memory recognition of the interview content (Appendix 3). A rehearsal video under control conditions (i.e., no VFD) was recorded the month prior to the experiment and was piloted amongst 10 volunteers to check whether the memory recognition questions were at an appropriate level of difficulty. The questions were revised to arrive at an average score amongst a further 5 participants of 70% accuracy, which was deemed acceptable.

The pre-interview familiarisation recording was presented in either audio or video format and lasted 70 seconds. The candidate introduced herself, described her previous employment, explained why she was interested in this role, and described her relevant skills and competencies (Appendix 1). The video was recorded with the candidate facing directly to the camera at a distance of 0.5 metres, so the simulated birthmark was clearly visible. The audio version was simultaneously recorded on a second smart phone. The candidate made no reference to her VFD.

The video recording of the mock job interview had a duration of approximately seven and a half minutes. Two smart phones on tripods were used to record the videos at approx. 1.5 metres from the actors. The actors faced each other across a table and were filmed from opposite sides so

that the facial difference was hidden in one video (Figure 1 left) but visible in the other (Figure 1, right). This eliminates the potential confounding factors that could have arisen if the interview had been recorded twice. For example, the actor playing the role of the candidate might have expected a particular reaction from her interviewer in the birthmark condition, and this might have influenced her to behave differently, in a negative feedback loop (Partridge, 1998).

### **Figure 1 about here**

It was necessary to edit the hidden difference video (using iMovie software) to pan away from the candidate towards the interviewer when the candidate turned her head in such a way that the birthmark was visible. This occurred around half a dozen times for only a second or two. Two volunteers were asked to watch the video, and both were unaware of any facial birthmark.

### **Procedure**

The experiment was entirely online, hosted in Qualtrics. Participants who volunteered for the study were given a link to the experiment. They read an invitation letter which explained the purpose of the study was to investigate the effect of a pre-familiarisation video on recruitment outcomes. There was no mention of a VFD. Those who gave consent were asked for their month of birth which was used to assign them to one of the Control, Unexpected, and Familiarised conditions.

In phase 1, participants either watched or listened to the recording of the pre-familiarisation. In phase 2, they supplied basic demographic data: age, gender, and ethnicity, their occupation, their experience of recruitment and of people management. As a filler task to separate the pre-familiarisation from the interview participants rated themselves on various personality traits; these data were not analysed. In phase 3, participants viewed the recording of the job interview and then evaluated the candidate on a range of traits and completed the memory test for the content of the interview. Participants described their level of acquaintance with any individual with a VFD, and those in the Unexpected and Familiarised conditions described their personal experience in the experiment.

Participants were invited to supply contact details if they were prepared to participate in a second part of the study the following week, but numbers were too low for a reliable analysis. Finally, participants received a debrief sheet and were thanked for their participation. The approximate duration of participation from start to finish was between 20-30 minutes.

The present research received ethical approval from the University of East London Research Ethics Committee and was conducted in line with the guidelines of the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Ethics and Code of Human Research Ethics (2018, 2014).

Data will be made available in the institutional repository at University of East London.

## **Results**

Six dependent variables were calculated: the four trait variables of Sociability, Emotional Stability, Professional Skills, and Warmth; the key variable of Role Suitability; and the total Memory score. These were calculated as defined in the Method section and there were no missing data. Reliability was acceptable for all variables: Cronbach's alpha was 0.76 for Sociability, 0.71 for Emotional Stability, 0.68 for Warmth, 0.77 for Professional Skills, and 0.76 for Role Suitability. The item 'works well under pressure' was designed to be part of the Emotional Stability trait, but Cronbach's alpha was below 0.6, so this item was omitted from the trait calculation. Each variable demonstrated good approximation to a normal distribution and no outliers were detected. Role Suitability showed skewness value of -1.15, and kurtosis value of 2.0, both acceptable according to George and Mallery (2010).

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 comprised a comparison among the three experimental conditions of each of the six dependent variables. Comparison of the Unexpected condition with the Control condition would reveal the impact of an unexpected facial disfigurement, and comparison of the Familiarised with the Unexpected conditions would indicate the impact of pre-familiarisation. Phase 2 comprised the correlation of the key variable Role

Suitability with each of the other variables, separately in each of the three conditions, to determine whether the influence of the trait variables on Role Suitability differed among the experimental conditions.

*Phase 1:*

The mean and standard deviation of scores for each of the six dependent variables in each of the three conditions are shown in Table 1 and Figure 2. The scores were numerically higher in the Unexpected condition than in the Control condition, with the scores in the Familiarised condition lying between Unexpected and Control.

**Table 1 about here**

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with experimental condition as the independent variable and the four trait scores plus role suitability as the dependent variables. The result was significant using Pillai's trace,  $F(10,244) = 2.161$ ,  $p=0.021$ , partial  $\eta^2 = 0.081$ . The effect of experimental condition was statistically significant for the traits of Emotional Stability [ $F(2,125) = 3.71$ ,  $p=0.027$ ], Professional Skills [ $F(2,125) = 3.62$ ,  $p=0.03$ ], and Warmth [ $F(2,15) = 10.41$ ,  $p<0.001$ ]. The observed power, calculated using the software program G-Power version 3.1, was 0.63 for Emotional Stability, 0.55 for Professional Skills, and 0.99 for Warmth (based on the observed effect sizes with  $\alpha = 0.05$ , total sample size = 128, and number of groups = 3). Observed power to find a significant difference on the traits of Sociability and Role Suitability, calculated as 30% and 27%, was clearly inadequate. It should be noted, though, that if the true differences on these variables were small, there would be little potential impact.

Post-hoc tests using Bonferroni correction to guard against inflation of Type I error revealed that Emotional stability, Professional Skills, and Warmth, were all higher in Unexpected than Control condition, the difference being greatest for Warmth. The only difference between the Unexpected condition and the Familiarised condition was that Warmth was higher in the Unexpected condition. The observation of higher evaluations in the Unexpected condition compared to the Control

condition suggests positive discrimination. It is interesting to note that this putative positive discrimination appeared to be numerically weaker in the familiarised condition, though most of the comparisons between Unexpected and Familiarised conditions did not reach statistical significance (apart from Warmth). There was no significant difference among the conditions for the Memory score or Role Suitability.

### **Figure 2 about here**

Other analyses revealed no significant differences on any variable (using Bonferroni correction for multiple tests) between male and female participants, between HR professionals and others, between participants with and without personal acquaintance with a VFD, or according to self-rated degree of experience in the recruitment process. Please refer to Supplemental Materials.

Participants' responses to the six questions about their experience in the experiment were compared between the Unexpected and Familiarised conditions (participants in the Control condition were not asked these questions). In the Familiarised condition participants had lower scores on "I found the person's disfigurement distracting",  $t(83) = 2.63$ ,  $p=0.01$ , effect size (Cohen's  $D$ ) = 0.57, lower scores on "If something like this happened to me, I would not be able to cope well",  $t(83) = 2.09$ ,  $p=0.02$ , effect size = 0.33, and higher scores on "To what extent do you feel that pre-disclosure would help the interviewer to conduct a positive interview focusing on the relevant candidate qualities?",  $t(83) = 2.00$ ,  $p=0.025$ , effect size = 0.43. No other questions generated different responses in the Unexpected and Familiarised conditions.

#### *Phase 2:*

The correlation of Role Suitability with each of the trait variables and the Memory score was calculated in each of the three conditions (Table 2 and Figure 3). This indicates the relative importance of each of the traits to the key outcome variable Role Suitability.

### **Table 2 about here**

In the Control condition, both Emotional Stability and Professional Skills were strongly correlated with Role Suitability while Warmth was not correlated. In the Unexpected condition, compared to Control, Warmth had a near-significantly stronger correlation with Role Suitability [ $z=1.63$ ,  $p<0.06$ , for the comparison of correlation coefficients], while Professional Skills had a weaker correlation with Role Suitability [ $z=1.95$ ,  $p<0.05$ ]. In the Familiarised condition, the correlation coefficients generally lay between the values of the Control and Unexpected conditions but were not statistically different to either. The exception to this picture was Sociability, which had nonsignificant correlation with Role Suitability in Control and Unexpected conditions and was moderately correlated in the Familiarised condition.

**Figure 3 about here**

## **Discussion**

The impact of an unexpected VFD was revealed by the comparison of the Unexpected and Control conditions. In line with prediction, the evaluation of the Warmth trait was higher in the Unexpected condition, but contrary to prediction, the evaluations of Emotional Stability and Professional Skills were also higher in the Unexpected condition, though the difference was smaller than for Warmth. The correlations also showed an interesting pattern: in the Control condition, the key variable of Role Suitability (indicating overall likelihood of a job offer) was strongly correlated with Emotional Stability and Professional Skills and uncorrelated with Warmth, but in the Unexpected condition, the correlation of Role Suitability with Professional Skills was weaker, and with Warmth was marginally stronger. Memory performance did not differ among the conditions.

The impact of pre-familiarisation would be shown in the comparison of the Familiarised and Unexpected conditions. In Familiarised, evaluations of all traits were numerically between Unexpected and Control but not significantly different from either. Similarly, the correlations with Role Suitability lay numerically in between Unexpected and Control but not significantly different from either. Regarding participants' experience in the experiment, those in Familiarised, compared

to those in Unexpected, found the candidates VFD less distracting, thought they would be able to cope better if they acquired a similar VFD, and thought the pre-familiarisation would help the interviewer to conduct a positive interview focusing on the relevant candidate qualities.

This pattern of results is capable of interpretation though with only partial support for the hypotheses. H1 predicted that memory performance would be worse in the conditions in which the participant saw a candidate with a VFD, but the results indicated that memory performance did not vary significantly among the conditions. This differs from previous results (e.g., Madera & Hebl, 2012) and does not support the proposition that the presence of a VFD would distract the attention of the interviewer and hamper their recall of the content of the interview. It may be premature to draw a firm conclusion, though, as memory recall was assessed by a multi-choice quiz, and a difference among experimental conditions may have been apparent in a more realistic test of free recall. It is also possible that the PWS was simply not sufficiently distracting to affect memory recall.

The pattern of results compared to hypotheses 2 and 3 was more complex. The effects of an unanticipated VFD (Unexpected vs. Control), and pre-familiarisation (Familiarised vs. Unexpected), will be considered separately.

Looking first at the comparison of Unexpected and Control conditions, Hypothesis 2a predicted that most evaluations would be less positive in Unexpected than in Control while Hypothesis 2b predicted that Warmth would be an exception and would be rated higher in Unexpected. The actual pattern was somewhat different, showing higher evaluations of Emotional Stability and Professional Skills, as well as Warmth, in Unexpected than in Control, though consistent with prediction, the difference was greatest for Warmth. This pattern of data was attributed to positive discrimination motivated by social desirability considerations. Social desirability refers to the pressure to conform to perceived acceptable or expected behaviour, in this instance, avoiding discrimination against a candidate with a VFD. Participants influenced by social desirability considerations may adjust their behaviour in an experimental setting (Madera, Hebl & King, 2008),



even when anonymity is assured and even when indirect questioning is used, as was the case in this study. The recent work by Bernardi and Nash (2023) suggests that the method of indirect questioning may reduce, but does not eliminate, social desirability bias. Participants in the Unexpected condition may have guessed that they were being measured on their reactions to the candidate with the VFD, since this is an uncommon characteristic, and been alerted to the need to appear non-prejudiced, even though they were not told this was the purpose of the experiment. The evaluations given in the present study were, of course, explicit evaluations, and thus subject to control by the participants for a variety of motives (e.g., Fazio, 1990). Measures of implicit evaluations may yield a different result.

It is important to observe that the impact of positive discrimination appears to have been limited. Although evaluations of Emotional Stability and Professional Skills were higher in the Unexpected condition, the evaluation of Role Suitability did not differ between Unexpected and Control, and was numerically very similar. A lack of statistical power cannot, on its own, explain why Role Suitability did not differ between Unexpected and Control conditions given the significant difference on other traits. Perhaps participants felt able to give higher trait evaluations, following their values of inclusivity and diversity, but experienced reservations when effectively making an employment recommendation. Participants may not have explored all their complex reactions until faced with the prospect of recommending the candidate for the role.

The pattern of correlations was broadly consistent with hypotheses 3a and 3b. The strong correlation in the Control condition of Role Suitability with Emotional Stability and Professional Skills is plausible, as these are important vocational attributes and skills for the role of an HR officer in a large organisation, so it is reasonable that participants who thought the candidate showed high levels of these traits also thought she would be suitable for the role. This highlights the contrast with the Unexpected condition; Professional Skills had a weaker correlation with Role Suitability (and there was a similar but non-significant trend for Emotional Stability), and Warmth had a near-significantly stronger correlation with Role Suitability. It appears that participant evaluations of

Professional Skills (and a trend for Emotional Stability) had less influence on their judgment of Role Suitability, while there was a tendency for evaluations of Warmth to have more influence, in the Unexpected condition compared to the Control condition. This is consistent with Hypothesis 3b and supports the importance of the trait of Warmth. Participants in the Unexpected condition may have applied a stereotypical perception of the candidate with a VFD, that made the trait of Warmth more salient, and the traits of Emotional Stability and Professional Skills less salient, to Role Suitability.

The focus on Warmth, when applied in real employment settings, might work to limit the type of role offered to visibly different individuals. For example, a lower profile role requiring warmth but less professional competence, such as a supporting or caring role, might be considered more suitable. It is also possible that an individual who feels themselves to be stigmatised may internalise this view and limit the focus of their career aspirations accordingly.

Turning to the contrast between the Familiarised and Unexpected conditions there was a consistent picture that most of the trait evaluations, and the correlation of trait evaluations with Role Suitability, lay between the values observed in Control and Unexpected conditions, though the differences failed to reach statistical significance. It is possible that the pre-familiarisation had the intended effect of encouraging participants to view the candidate with and without a VFD similarly, but that cannot be concluded from the present results. A study with more statistical power might clarify this question. The explanation that participants may simply not have been biased (e.g., Robert, Neate, & Gierasch, 2017) does not fit with the observation of differences between Control and Unexpected conditions. The participants in Robert et al were young and well-educated, a group for whom implicit attitudes are often less negative, but that does not apply to the present study.

The main exception was the evaluation of Warmth, that was significantly lower in the Familiarised than the Unexpected condition, and similar in Familiarised and Control conditions. The suggested interpretation is that the 'norm to be kind', that resulted in higher Warmth evaluations in

the Unexpected condition, was weaker or non-existent in the Familiarised condition. In this sense, the pre-familiarisation may have reduced biased reactions to the candidate with a VFD.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that participants would have a more positive and comfortable experience in the Familiarised condition compared to the Unexpected condition, and this was supported by their responses to the questions probing their experience during the experiment. The candidate's VFD was experienced as less distracting in the Familiarised condition, and participants agreed that the pre-familiarisation would help the interviewer to conduct an interview focusing on the relevant candidate qualities, two key benefits of the pre-familiarisation approach. Even here, though, there was a suggestion of social desirability, seen in the low values given in response to the question "I felt uncomfortable seeing this person" in both Familiarised and Unexpected conditions. Perhaps it was incompatible with the desire to appear accepting and unprejudiced for the participants to declare they were made uncomfortable by the appearance of the candidate. To declare an effect of distraction, rather than discomfort, may have felt more socially acceptable.

In more general terms, participants in the Familiarised condition thought they would be able to cope better if they acquired a similar facial difference, suggesting they recognised that facial difference does not have to impact on all areas of one's life. This resembles the findings of Stone and Fisher (2020) who reported that a short video introduction to an individual with a VFD resulted in more positive evaluations on a range of traits and expectations. This suggests a realisation that the impact of a VFD might be less than naively supposed.

It is perhaps inevitable that participants in the Familiarised condition assessed the value of the pre-familiarisation more highly than those in the Unexpected condition. Obviously, the Unexpected participants were only able to guess what effect the pre-familiarisation might have had. This raises the possibility that employers and recruitment consultants may underestimate the value of a pre-familiarisation which could mitigate against their acceptance of this approach.

The comparison of the participants' experiences in the Unexpected and Familiarised conditions is consistent with the literature suggesting that familiarity with exemplars of a social group, via recorded messages, helps to reduce anxiety as the prospect of interacting with members of that group. For example, Stone and Fisher (2020) reported less anticipatory anxiety at the prospect of a social interaction after watching a short (90 second) video introduction to an individual with a VFD. Reinke et al (2004) also noted that a recorded video message reduced the desired social distance to a stigmatised person. This is all consistent with the finding from the Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) meta-analysis that contact can reduce intergroup anxiety.

Previous studies (e.g., Stone & Fisher, 2020) have observed higher evaluations from participants who have an acquaintance with a VFD than those without, consistent with the Contact Hypothesis of Allport (1955) supported by a wide body of evidence (e.g., the meta-analysis by Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The numerical pattern of the results supported this hypothesis though none of the contrasts on individual variables reached statistical significance. It is possible that an influence of social desirability, which would be plausible in a sample containing so many HR professionals and those with recruitment experience, could have artificially elevated the evaluations in participants with no acquaintance with a visible facial difference.

### **Impact**

This research could have a strong impact in the area of employment and recruitment. The key questions are these: in the real world, would a candidate with a VFD be fairly assessed on their interview, and would they be equally likely to be offered a job as an identical candidate with no VFD? The experimental evidence to date, including the present experiment, is mainly based on laboratory studies but it suggests there is scope for a practical intervention to offer more equal prospects for candidates with VFD. The finding that participants who had seen a pre-familiarisation video were less distracted during the interview and thought that the pre-familiarisation video would help the interviewer to give a fair interview, suggests this would be a useful step.

The results of the present study suggest that a candidate with a VFD could benefit from sending a pre-familiarisation video to a prospective employer before interview. The best timing might be after an interview has been secured, to avoid rejection at an earlier stage (e.g., Stone & Wright, 2013). This could be expressed as a reasonable adjustment under the UK Equality Act (2010) which classes “severe facial disfigurement” as a form of disability. Both Changing Faces (2023) and the UK government (Direct Gov, 2021) offer guidance that pre-disclosure is beneficial as it gives the interviewer time to control their reactions and to focus on a fair and thorough evaluation of the candidate. This is supported by Madera (2016) who found that direct acknowledgment of a VFD can habituate the observer to the appearance of the candidate.

An update of the guidance issued by the UK Department for Work and Pensions, and by campaigning organisations including Changing Faces, could bring the possibility of sending a pre-familiarisation video to a potential employer to the attention of people with visible facial difference.

### **Limitations**

This was a laboratory study and not a field study, so even though most of the participants had recruitment experience, they were not faced with the actual prospect of employing the candidate. The ethnic diversity of the participant sample was limited by the intentional recruitment of HR professionals and people with recruitment experience. Little is known about ethnic variations in responses to people with VFD, so the impact of this lack of diversity is hard to judge. Participants spanned a good range of ages and were not restricted to young adults. Statistical power was weak, and this is likely to have restricted the possibility of finding statistically significant results.

### **Ideas for future research**

A field study experiment, as advocated by Riach and Rich (2002), in which the participants (employers) are not aware of being in a research study, would involve consideration of the real-world consequences of employing the candidate. This might reveal different attitudes towards a candidate with a VFD (e.g., Stone & Wright, 2013) than are typically found in a research study with

volunteer participants. Other researchers, e.g., Wilgosh and Skaret (1987), have observed that hiring practice may not be consistent with stated willingness to employ.

Initial recruitment is only one stage of the career journey. It is also important to examine what happens later; is the individual offered training, opportunities to expand their experience, promotions, secondments, etc. The present study had only a short incubation period between the pre-familiarisation and the interview, and a longer period might allow for more processing leading to a stronger effect or might allow the effect of the pre-familiarisation to dissipate.

The present study used a port-wine stain birthmark, similar to previous research, a form of VFD that can be applied by a make-up artist. The availability of image-manipulation software might enable research based on different types of VFD, for example, a difference that could be interpreted to imply a physical illness, or some personal culpability, might provoke different responses.

A similar study in which the candidate was someone with a real VFD might allow a greater degree of validity, in the sense that someone with a VFD might behave differently to an actress. This could be relevant, given evidence that behaviour can predict outcome more than appearance (Clarke, 1999). A candidate with a VFD might offer more genuine behaviour and so represent more effectively how someone with a VFD reacts in a high-stakes conversation with a stranger.

### **Conclusion**

A candidate with a port-wine stain (nevus flammeus) on one cheek was evaluated differently from the same candidate with no visible facial difference, in a recorded employment interview. There was some support for social desirability motivations in the participants. Asking participants to view a pre-familiarisation video improved their experience of the interview and general positivity concerning the impact of having a visible facial difference.

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## Tables

*Table 1: Mean and (Standard Deviation) of scores across experimental conditions.*

Condition	Socia- bility	Emot Stability	Profess Skills	Warmth	Role Suitab'y	Memory Score	Q1	Q2	Q3
Control	5.11 (0.76)	5.16 <sup>a</sup> (0.93)	5.28 <sup>a</sup> (0.70)	4.72 <sup>a</sup> (1.11)	4.22 (0.56)	4.93 (1.42)			
Unexpected	5.45 (0.93)	5.59 <sup>b</sup> (0.81)	5.67 <sup>b</sup> (0.66)	5.76 <sup>b</sup> (0.75)	4.39 (0.56)	5.29 (1.37)	2.93 <sup>a</sup> (1.67)	3.36 <sup>a</sup> (1.56)	2.93 <sup>a</sup> (1.55)
Familiar- ised	5.36 (1.13)	5.43 (0.86)	5.49 (0.83)	5.19 <sup>a</sup> (1.29)	4.25 (0.65)	5.47 (1.30)	2.05 <sup>b</sup> (1.41)	2.65 <sup>b</sup> (1.56)	3.58 <sup>b</sup> (1.47)

*Note:* superscripts denote significantly different means.

*Note:* A higher mean score indicates a more favourable rating or better memory recognition.

Maximum score was 7 for Sociability, Emotional Stability, Professional Skills, and Warmth; 5 for Role Suitability; and 8 for Memory score. Q1 = "I found the person's disfigurement distracting". Q2 = "If something like this happened to me, I would not be able to cope well". Q3 = "To what extent do you feel that pre-disclosure would help the interviewer to give a fair interview?"

*Table 2: Correlations of Role Suitability with the other trait variables and Memory score, in each of the experimental conditions.*

	Sociability	Emot Stability	Prof Skills	Warmth	Memory
Control (n=43)	0.22	0.63 ***	0.71 <sup>a</sup> ***	0.18 <sup>a</sup>	0.28
Unexpected (n=42)	0.22	0.42 **	0.42 <sup>b</sup> **	0.50 <sup>b</sup> ***	-0.17
Familiarised (n=43)	0.47 **	0.53 ***	0.69 ***	0.29	-0.04

\* p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001. Difference in correlations for Warmth was marginally significant.

## Figures

Figure 1. Still images taken from the job interview videos. The video on the left shows the hidden condition and the video on the right shows the visible condition.



Figure 2: scores on the variables of Sociability, Emotional Stability, Professional Skills, Warmth, Role Suitability, and Memory, between the experimental conditions.

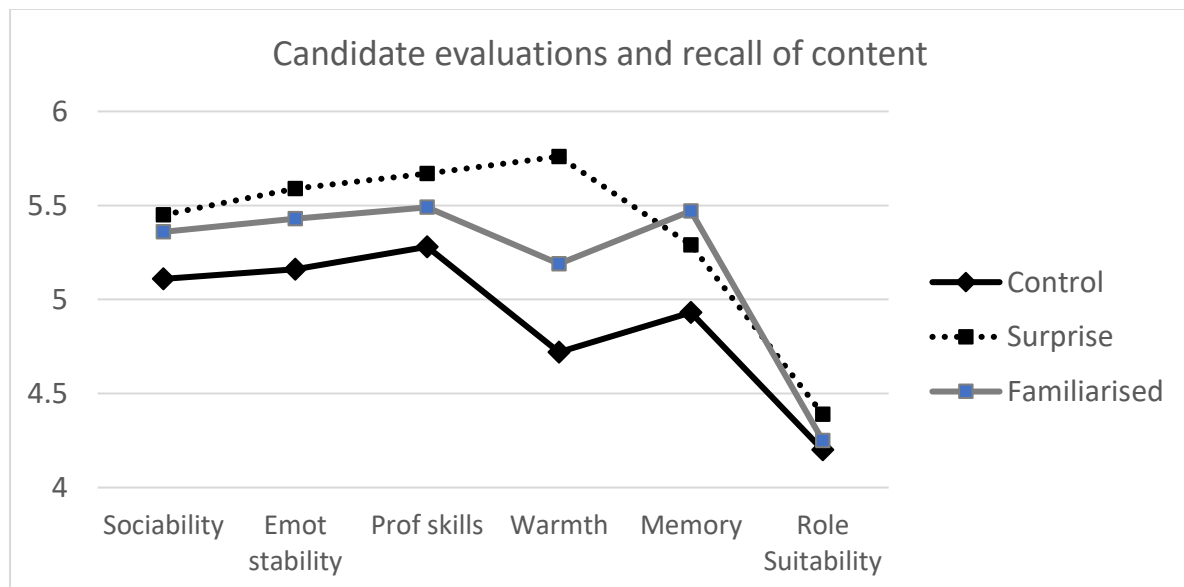
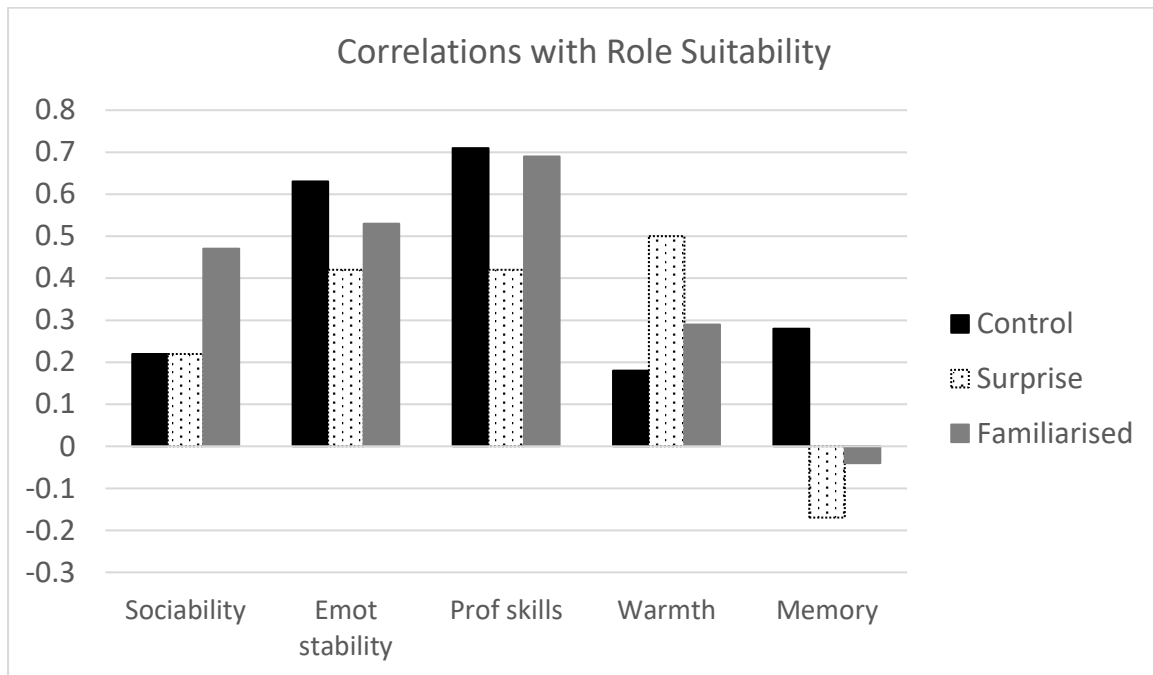


Figure 3. Correlations of Role Suitability with Sociability, Emotional Stability, Professional Skills, Warmth, and Memory, in the three experimental conditions.



## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Pre-Familiarisation script

Hi,

My name is Sophie and I'm applying for the role of HR officer at Freedom. I've got 2 and a half years' experience as an HR assistant in a small luxury goods business and I'm looking for a new challenge within a bigger business where I might be able to access more opportunities for development; I'm very interested in the position at Freedom because I really admire the company's rapid success since it began and I'd like to be part of the continued success of a fast-growing company. In terms of what I think I can offer to the company, I consider myself to have a strong work ethic, excellent interpersonal skills and the ability to work well under pressure. I enjoy a challenge and like working as part of a team to overcome obstacles. My experience to date within an administrative role should stand me well for this position and I've also recently qualified with my level 3 CIPD certificate which I am able to put into practice daily in the workplace.

Thank you for your time today and I really hope to see you for an interview soon!

## Appendix 2: Interview script

I: Good morning, nice to see you. I'm John.

A: Hi, I'm Sophie

I: Hi Sophie. Firstly, thank you for coming along today to interview for the position of HR officer here at Freedom. I'm the Head of HR and I'll be conducting today's interview.

A: (Smiles) Nice to meet you.

I: As you know, we already asked you to submit a short recording with some information about you prior to today's meeting which I reviewed earlier today so many thanks for sending that through in advance. Today's discussion is quite informal, it's going to be an elaboration on the information you've already provided in the recording and will involve a brief chat about your skills and experience.

A: That sounds good.

I: Great. Are you happy to begin?

A: Yes, absolutely.

I: Great, firstly I'd like to ask you why you are interested in working for Freedom and in this position in particular?

A: I've been at my current company Seven Retail for two and a half years now and the team there is quite small which hasn't left a lot of room for development. I really feel that I've reached the point whereby I've achieved a lot and am ready for my next move. I'd like to develop my skills further and move from an HR assistant role into an HR officer role where I'll have a bit more autonomy. I love the Freedom brand and products and it's a company that really appeals for that reason. I feel ready to work as a part of a larger organisation where there could be more opportunity for me to develop.

I: That's great, thank you. Next I'd like to ask about your CV which I have here in front of me; can you bring it to life for me and talk me through how your last role is going to position you well for this job?

A: In my current role I'm responsible for a lot of HR administration. I work closely with the HR officer, supporting her with preparing employee letters and arranging all the paperwork for new starters and leavers. I've become very well familiarised with the processes and as a result I often challenge the internal ways of working and bring ideas for new processes. I know that Freedom are



looking for someone who can really take control of the end to end administrative HR cycle and consider areas that need development in order to make things run more efficiently so I feel that I can transfer a lot of my experience in this regard. I also have a lot of audit experience which I know is something Freedom require for this role – I do monthly audits in my current company and have excellent accuracy feedback on those.

I: I see here that you had some time out a few years ago, can you tell me what the gap in employment was? I think it was between your stint at Trident and your current company?

A: That's no problem, I did take 8 months out because an opportunity arose to be an au pair for a family friend in Canada and I'd been looking for an opportunity to live abroad and improve my A Level French. It felt like the right time to take the time to do that and it's given me invaluable cross cultural exposure which I think is really useful when working in multi-national firms like this one.

I: Yes, it's a good point actually. I'd like to ask what do you think are the main skills you'd bring to this role?

A: I'm a strong communicator with good interpersonal skills, so working with the entire HR team in a role like this I should be able to build effective working relationships. Secondly, I'm very focused on process improvement and finding new and better ways of working which can really help to drive efficiencies and save time to focus on new areas. Finally, I have strong attention to detail and accuracy in my work meaning that things get done right first time with low error margin.

I: What do you think your weakness is?

A: I suppose that sometimes I can have a tendency to not ask others for help, I take on too much occasionally. But it's something I've been given feedback about and I've got some tools to help me address that.

I: Can you tell me one misconception your peers have about you?

A: Pauses.... Um..... I think it would be that I'm a very confident person. I do demonstrate confidence at work but sometimes I'm worried underneath.

I: Can you tell me something about you, outside of work?

A: I'm a huge tennis fan and play a few times a week. I'm part of a cycling club which is a weekend hobby. I also spend a lot of time travelling and exploring new places.

I: And where do you see yourself in 5 years' time?

A: I'd like to complete my level 5 qualification over the next few years and get a few promotions under my belt. I think that ultimately I'd be happy if 5 years from now I had some experience of leading a team as that experience would help me with my longer term goal further down the line of being a head of department.

I: I also have a couple of practical questions if that's ok. Do you drive and have a car?

A: I do drive and have access to my partner's car so that shouldn't be a problem.

I: And what's your current notice period? When could you start if you were to be successful in securing the role?

A: I have a 6-week notice period, so I'd be able to start in the New Year.

I: That's useful to know, thanks. I think I've got a lot of the information I need here – do you have any questions for me?

A: Yes, I'd like to ask about how the pension works?

I: It's a matched contribution scheme so you contribute anything up to 6% and we'll match whatever you decide. There are some other benefits here too: We've got discounted gym membership, private healthcare and a really popular favourite is our in-house masseuse.

A: Oh wow that sounds amazing!

I: Yes, you have to book her fast as she gets booked up! Don't worry, that's not because people here are really stressed out or anything, she's just really good at massages.

A: *Laughs*. Well that does sound good. I never find the time to do that kind of thing normally so it's great to have the possibility to fit it in on a lunch break at work.

I: Yes, it's good for the soul! Well, unless you have any more questions, I'd just like to thank you for your time today and we'll be in touch.

A: Thank you!

## Appendix 3: Memory Recognition questions

### Part 1

1. What is the name of the candidate?
  - a) Sarah
  - b) Samantha
  - c) Sophie
  - d) Suzie
2. What is the name of her previous employer?
  - a) Luxe Retail
  - b) Ignite Retail
  - c) Seven Retail
  - d) React Retail
3. Why does the candidate wish to leave her current role / company?
  - a) There is a lack of opportunity for training
  - b) There is a lack of opportunity to travel
  - c) There is a lack of opportunity to develop
  - d) There is a lack of opportunity to earn well
4. What does the candidate believe the role at Freedom will offer her?
  - a) More autonomy
  - b) More money
  - c) More work-life balance
  - d) More exposure to projects
5. What are the three main skills the candidate claims to have that will stand her well for this position?
  - a) Good communicator, improvement mindset, goal-orientated
  - b) Attention to detail, good communicator, project leadership
  - c) Taking initiative, improvement mindset, goal-oriented
  - d) Attention to detail, improvement mindset, good communicator
6. How often does the candidate say she completes audits on the company finance records?
  - a) Once a week
  - b) Once a month
  - c) Twice a month
  - d) Once a quarter
7. What does the candidate say is a common misconception her peers have of her?
  - a) People think she's shy but actually she's quite confident
  - b) People think she's confident but actually she's quite nervous
  - c) People think she's overly confident
8. What does the candidate state are 3 things about her outside of work?
  - a) Cycling, travel, tennis
  - b) Tennis, yoga, hiking
  - c) Yoga, tennis, cycling
  - d) Tennis, yoga and travel