

# Why Is This Even a Debate?

The iced-coffee debate exposes how easily personal preferences become hiring standards. A closer look at the bias behind “professionalism” and what employers should do better.

By Lara Blackert

The debate about candidates bringing iced coffee to interviews raises a more consequential issue for employers: how easily personal preference can influence a hiring decision.

Candidates are expected to demonstrate expertise, business judgement, adaptability, and increasingly, proficiency with AI. That list alone makes me need an iced coffee. Yet after investing in sophisticated assessments and multiple interviews, an organization can still allow a beverage to become evidence of whether someone belongs.

From a CHRO’s perspective, that deserves scrutiny. Hiring decisions determine which capabilities enter the business, whose potential is recognized, and whether the workforce can evolve with the strategy. The standards behind those decisions should be deliberate and defensible.

## The business cost of an undefined standard

Most leaders would agree that hiring should be based on a candidate’s ability to succeed in the role. The difficulty comes in translating that principle into an actual decision.

Terms such as “professionalism,” “executive presence,” and “fit” often carry considerable weight in candidate discussions. Used precisely, they can identify relevant expectations. Left undefined, they give interviewers broad discretion to favor the styles, backgrounds, and behaviors they find familiar.

A leadership team may want new thinking while remaining most comfortable with candidates who resemble its existing members. An organization pursuing transformation may reject someone whose approach challenges established conventions. The selection process can preserve the very characteristics the business needs to change.

That is a talent risk. A company’s ability to recognize capability should extend beyond its familiarity with how that capability is presented.

An interviewer who questions a candidate’s professionalism should be able to identify the behavior, explain its relevance to the role, and distinguish it from personal preference. The same scrutiny should apply regardless of the interviewer’s seniority.

## Generational assumptions weaken the assessment

Framing the coffee debate around Gen Z introduces another source of bias. An individual's behavior becomes evidence for a broader belief about work ethic, entitlement, or seriousness.

Somewhere along the way, we have turned generational differences into a socially acceptable way to express age bias. Research often shows that people across age groups have more in common than popular narratives suggest. The differences may lie less in what people want and more in the social norms that shape what they feel comfortable expressing. Younger and older workers may both value autonomy and flexibility; the difference may be who feels able to speak up about those preferences.

Those assumptions can influence how employers interpret the same qualities in different candidates. Confidence may be welcomed as leadership potential in one person and dismissed as arrogance in another. Questions about flexibility may be treated as thoughtful consideration or a lack of commitment. Age can also shape assumptions about someone's willingness to learn or ability to adapt to new ways of working.

Every candidate deserves to be evaluated on the evidence they bring, without being made to answer for the assumptions attached to their generation.

For employers, the consequence extends beyond a single unfair assessment. Repeated judgements of this kind influence who gains experience, who advances, and who eventually becomes eligible for leadership. The cumulative effect belongs in discussions about talent quality and succession.

## Professionalism should have a clear connection to performance

Employers have legitimate expectations for how people conduct themselves. Preparation, reliability, respectful communication, and sound judgement matter because they affect the work and the people relying on it.

Some roles also require specific standards of presentation or conduct. Those expectations should be explicit, applied consistently, and proportionate to the responsibilities involved. A client-facing executive may need to demonstrate judgement in a sensitive conversation. A safety-critical role may carry requirements that leave little room for individual discretion.

Leaders should be able to explain what the standard protects or enables. That explanation becomes much harder when the concern rests on a beverage, a stylistic preference, or a vague sense that someone did not "look the part."

An interview provides limited time to assess consequential capabilities. Attention spent interpreting irrelevant signals reduces the attention available for understanding how the candidate would perform.

## The CHRO's responsibility is to improve the quality of the decision

A structured interview process is useful only if the final decision reflects the evidence it was designed to gather. Even a rigorous assessment can be undermined when an influential leader's unsupported impression becomes decisive.

CHROs should establish clear expectations for how hiring recommendations are reached. The requirements of the role should be agreed before candidates are assessed. Interviewers should know what they are evaluating, and their conclusions should be supported by specific observations. When assessments diverge, the discussion should examine the reasons for that difference.

This requires judgement from the CHRO as well. Some concerns will be valid but poorly articulated. Others will reveal a preference that has acquired more authority than it deserves. The work is to help leaders distinguish between them and make a better decision.

CEOs and executive teams reinforce that discipline through their own conduct. When senior leaders explain their reasoning, invite challenge, and reconsider an impression in light of evidence, they establish a standard others can follow. When their preferences go unquestioned, those preferences can become informal hiring policy.

The organization is accountable for the decisions made, including the ones delegated to individual interviewers.

## Better hiring requires greater discipline

The iced-coffee debate is useful because the stakes of the object are so small and the implications of the judgement can be so large. A casual reaction may influence whether someone receives an offer, gains access to a profession, or is considered for a leadership opportunity.

If a concern is significant enough to affect a hiring decision, it should be significant enough to explain in terms of the job requirements. That is a reasonable standard for every interviewer, including the most senior person in the room.