

Getting the Job

Employment candidates can avoid common interviewing pitfalls.

John K. Borchardt

Even if the U.S. business recovery continues and hiring picks up, many job candidates who lost their jobs or never found suitable employment after graduation are in the job market, and the market remains extremely competitive. The key step in job hunting is the employment interview. A winning résumé and cover letter do not get job offers; they get an invitation to an on-site interview. It is your interview performance that will earn you job offers.

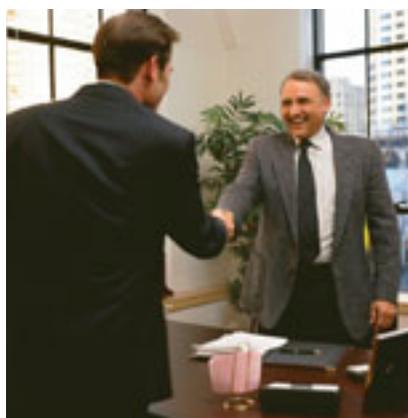
Because of the importance of the employment interview, job candidates need to avoid the most common interviewing pitfalls. According to a survey sponsored by temporary staffing firm Accountemps (Menlo Park, CA), the most common mistakes employment candidates make during job interviews are having little or no knowledge of the company (44%), being unprepared to discuss their career plans (23%), exhibiting limited enthusiasm (10%), having poor eye contact with interviewers (5%), and being unprepared to discuss their skills and experience (3%).

By avoiding these common mistakes, you can improve the image you present to the hiring manager and enhance your chances of landing a job offer. Let's look at each pitfall, the damage it can do to your employment chances, and how to avoid making these mistakes.

Little Company Knowledge

Being unfamiliar with the company is the most common mistake candidates make in employment interviews. So do your homework and become familiar with the employer's businesses and prospects and the career paths it offers. Ignorance quickly becomes apparent when the interviewer asks such questions as, "Why are you interested in working for our company?" A clear answer showing your general knowledge of the employ-

er indicates you are interested in working for the company and have the ability and initiative to plan ahead to acquire needed information.



Consult trade magazines that cover the employer's industry and the business sections of local newspapers. If the firm is a large organization, consult major business publications such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *Fortune*, and *Business Week*. Reading articles about the company, its recent financial results, and its growth prospects will help you go into your interview well prepared and to make an informed decision should you receive a job offer.

This research is well worth your time and effort. "Conducting effective research can give job seekers a decided edge over the competition when applying for a position," says Max Messmer. (See box, "Know That Company.")

Being Unprepared

Job candidates must be able to present short, well-organized oral summaries of their skills and experience. Not being able to do so suggests that the candidate did not prepare very well for the interview. This can suggest a lack of interest in the job opening and/or inability to plan ahead.

The ability to present your skills and experience in a clear, focused way indicates you have carefully determined your career interests and goals.

Prepare a short statement presenting your interests and goals in a concise, well-organized way. A two-minute statement should be sufficient. If the interviewer asks you, "Tell me about yourself," your response should be your two-minute commercial summarizing your skills and experience that will appeal to a particular hiring manager. Just as you tailor your résumé to a particular industry or a particular company, do the same with your personal commercial. After briefly reviewing your education, explain how your skills, education, and experience can help the hiring company improve its results and increase profits. This means understanding the company, the business it is in, and its needs. Practice; you'll be surprised how much information you can pack into a well-organized two-minute statement.

Unclear Career Plans

Being unprepared to discuss your own career plans leaves the interviewer uncertain about your motivation and interest in the job opening. So be prepared to discuss your career plans in the context of the employer's business and what you know about the job opening. A common interview question is, "What do you expect to be doing five years from now?" You need to be able to answer this sort of question by outlining both a short-term and a long-term career plan. These should be plans that you could follow if you went to work for the company.

By asking how new employees in similar positions progressed in their careers and what career paths they followed, you can learn about midterm and long-term career paths at the company. Hearing the answers

to your questions can prepare you to respond to later questions about your own career plans with an answer tailored to the opportunities the interviewing firm offers. Many firms' websites have career sections that provide brief biographies of younger employees and the career paths they are following. Reviewing this information will help you decide if career paths at the firm are compatible with your abilities and interests and help you target your responses to questions about your career plans.

Being familiar with the company and the career paths it offers will help you avoid presenting an incompatible career plan that could doom your chances of employment with this firm.

Limited Enthusiasm

Job candidates should present an energetic and enthusiastic image during employment interviews. This suggests that you are excited about the opportunity to work for this employer. On the job, these characteristics are both valuable and infec-

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tious; employers value them highly. Demonstrate your energy and enthusiasm by alert, attentive posture and attitude and an interested tone of voice. Slouching in a chair and leaning against a wall or on other objects when standing can suggest low energy and a lack of enthusiasm to interviewers.

Failing to exhibit these qualities implies that you are not a high-energy person or are not interested in the job opening. Remember that your goal is to get a job

Know That Company

Max Messmer, author of *Managing Your Career for Dummies* (John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken, NJ), advises job candidates to be able to answer the following questions during employment interviews:

- (1) What business is the company in?
- (2) What products and services does it sell?
- (3) Who are its primary competitors?
- (4) What current industry issues or events are of interest to the firm?
- (5) What are the company's mission, vision, and values?

The Internet offers a convenient way to learn the answers to these questions, how well the firm is doing financially, and the career opportunities it offers. Remember that the employer's website offers the company's view of itself and may be one-sided. So going beyond the employer's website is useful. Hoover's Online (www.hoovers.com) is a particularly helpful website, because it provides free short information capsules about many companies. It also lists a firm's competitors and provides hotlinks to their websites. Checking out a prospective employer's competitors is useful in two ways. First, you get an indication of whether the quality of management at the interviewing company is better or worse than that of its competitors. Second, since a firm is interested enough to interview you, its competitors may also be interested in a job candidate with your skills.

offer. Sometimes, as an on-site interview day proceeds, it becomes apparent that the job opening doesn't interest you. Should this happen, do not let your declining interest become apparent through a visible loss of enthusiasm. Your goal is to get a job offer. Doing so can increase your self-confidence in subsequent employment interviews. Another benefit is that leaving a strongly favorable impression could be useful if a more suitable position becomes available in another part of that company.

Poor Eye Contact

No or minimal eye contact can also suggest low energy and lack of interest. Western cultures generally equate frequent eye contact with persons to whom you are talking with honesty, directness, and interest in the conversation. Hence, good eye contact with interviewers without staring at them is important.

If this is a problem for you, you may want to practice by role-playing interviews with friends or someone from a placement office. If you can, videotape your role-playing in mock employment interviews. For example, at American Chemical Society national meetings you can sign up for videotaped mock employment interviews with experienced interviewers at the Chemjobs Career Center. Reviewing the videotape with interviewers can reveal poor eye contact and other detrimental verbal and physical habits. For example, I once interviewed a chemist in a mock interview in which his nervousness led him to frequently jingle the coins in his pocket. Despite the noise, he was totally unaware of what he was doing until we reviewed his videotape.

Preparation Is the Key

Solid preparation is the key to avoiding these common pitfalls and increasing your chances of receiving a job offer as a result of your interview performance. Remember to get plenty of rest before your interview, dress appropriately, and arrive early. When your interviewer is ready for you, take a deep breath, remind yourself how well you have prepared, and go in geared up to convince the interviewer that you really deserve the job—because you do!

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