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## **The 12 Most Common Mistakes Made at Job Interviews**

There are twelve key mistakes that can be made on an interview. Eliminating them will not guarantee a job offer, but will keep you in the running for the position and allow you to highlight your abilities and potential to the fullest.

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Professionals, make a dozen common mistakes when looking for new jobs—and most are very easy to correct or avoid.

My “dozen don’ts” come from personal experience as a CPA, auditor, senior consultant and personnel manager of a major CPA firm, and from interviewing hundreds of executives for key positions, including chief financial officer, controller, internal auditor, and many others. By reviewing these “don’ts” objectively, you can better present yourself the next time you’re seeking a new position.

We have found that too often the professional considering a new job:

### **NUMBER ONE DOES NOT EXPLOIT PERSONAL CONTACTS**

A lot of talent evidently believes that good work rewards itself; somehow someone will recommend him or her for a job that happens to be open.

It simply doesn’t work that way. Your best source for getting a new job is from your personal contacts: friends, past professors, former business associates, association members, and others.

Many people either have too much pride in letting anyone know that they are seeking a new position, or they tell friends the wrong thing, such as, “If you ever hear of a good marketing manager’s spot opening up, let me know because I know someone who might be interested.” Coy, cute, and confidential, but nine out of ten people won’t give this remark a second thought. It is too vague and concerns someone they don’t know...so why should they recommend an opening to a mystery person?

A better approach to key contacts is to inform them that you have done very well in your present position but, for the right situation, you would move in order to achieve your goals more quickly. Outline your present responsibilities, state the type of position you would like, and indicate the salary range that would lure you to a new employer.

Other people keep their heads in the sand while they are employed, thinking they will never have a need for contacts or individuals to recommend them for a new position. When that day arrives, as it does for almost everyone in today's business world, such a person has no reservoir of good contacts to draw upon. They have become too company inbred, often restricted their contact within the company, and failed to join or be active in professional organizations.

But let's say you do obtain an interview for a second position. Avoid the next eleven mistakes during the interviewing process and your success rate will increase appreciably.

### **NUMBER TWO DOES NOT PREPARE**

We have seen professionals who would no more set foot into a departmental or board meeting without days of preparation.... knowing most of the information will never be asked for. Yet, when it comes to an interview for a position, they simply do not prepare themselves.

Some believe they have an infinite amount of time to make the proper impression, when, in fact, they may have only twenty minutes to communicate their potential. Opinions by the interviewer begin forming the minute the candidate walks through the door. If the applicant stumbles through the interview, is not an articulate spokesman, and does not appear confident, most interviewers will draw the interview to a close. Corporate matters are too vital to be left to the tongue-tied in our current economy.

A job interview is like selling a product, with you as the product. You should thoroughly prepare and rehearse basic points you want to cover in the interview. It is essential to learn as much as possible about the company, its industry, its products or services, and its organization. This information is available from reference books, annual reports, friends, and other sources. If you can also develop some knowledge about the interviewer ahead of time, so much the better.

### **NUMBER THREE ASSUMES THE INTERVIEWER KNOWS TECHNICAL JARGON**

Every profession has its own language. It is shorthand for rapidly reaching an understanding of a point; use it selectively. With a peer from the same background, professional language can be fine. With anyone else, use plain English. Today, corporations seek executives who can communicate information in understandable English.

One of the nation's top financial officers turned down an exceptionally well-qualified candidate after screening scores of individuals. The reason?

"The man may have been good, but all he could talk was accounting mumbo jumbo," this officer told me. "I understood him, but my management wouldn't. Time after time I asked him to tell me how he explained key financial problems to his present management. He simply couldn't speak plain English."

#### **NUMBER FOUR DOES NOT SELL SELF AND WORTH ENTHUSIASTICALLY**

This is difficult to realize and takes work to improve. For instance, the stereotype of a financial person is a low-key individual who will explain something if he is asked. Regrettably, this trait appears time and time again during interviews. Organize your presentation; rehearse how you will describe your accomplishments. Practice interviewing with a friend who is not afraid to give you constructive criticism. Let him tell you how well you sell yourself.

If you're not enthusiastic about yourself, why should anyone else be? This doesn't mean bragging, but it does suggest a zest for your work and accomplishments. The interviewer wants to find out what turns you on, so show him.

#### **NUMBER FIVE BELIEVES HIS CREDENTIALS CARRY THE INTERVIEW**

Recently a man in his early thirties walked into an interview with resume in hand. He shoved it across the desk, gave the interviewer a few minutes to read it, and then asked, "Are there any questions?"

The interviewer read about the candidate's BS in accounting and MBA (both from very good schools), CPA (first time through the exam), and other data. He paused and finally said, "What's this Elijah Watt Sales Award?"

The applicant stared and remarked, with a little smirk on his face, "It is THE award."

"Award for what?" asked the interviewer.

At this point, the interview was streaking downhill at an accelerating pace. The candidate, who had been on a very fast track, just derailed himself.

Don't assume the interviewer knows your credentials. Talk them out, explain them, and emphasize their strong points. Unless you explain your credentials in a straightforward manner, you may be talking down to the interviewer. In that case, the interviewer will be talking to someone else about the job.

#### **NUMBER SIX DOES NOT RELATE ACHIEVEMENTS TO POTENTIAL PROBLEMS**

The good interviewee listens, asks questions, and then translates his or her abilities into the problem-solving framework of the potential employer. What really perks up the interest of the interviewer are statements like these:

“My present employer has an operations problem very similar to that and here’s how I went about solving it...”

“I believe the savings I achieved for my current employer could be duplicated in this situation you have here...”

“I carry my problem-solving model with me.”

### **NUMBER SEVEN DOES NOT DIFFERENTIATE HIMSELF**

Too many job candidates don’t give any thought as to how they will differentiate themselves from all the other people that have been interviewed. A financial officer once told me, “All financial types think alike ... they even look alike.”

Don’t fit the mold. Conduct role playing with a good friend who knows you and your abilities, and listen to suggestions for how you can communicate your uniqueness to someone that doesn’t know you and has only a short time to determine if you’re worth talking to again.

One professional went into an interview and soon told the interviewer, “You should know that I simply don’t accept procedures or methods in a company because they have always been done in a prescribed manner. I question them to see if they should be continued, and if so, how they could be improved. For example, I revised our cash collection procedures through the use of lock box accounts throughout the country and significantly improved our cash flow. I also initiated a redesign of our customer billing system, which resulted in earlier mailing of invoices. This generated faster payment by customers. In addition, I insisted on a systematic review of all data used in our cost estimating procedures to more effectively reflect our inflated costs. This gave the company a more realistic pricing of our products.”

He got the job.

### **NUMBER EIGHT TALKS ACCOUNTING, NOT RESULTS**

Another common error is to talk in technical terms without reflecting any awareness of operations. The new employer wants to know how you can help solve a lot of problems that may be lodged in sales, production, inventory, distribution, or other areas.

Here are some of my favorite “cringe interviewee comments,” ones that immediately turn off an interviewer:

“Our sales are among the best in industry...”

“I never set foot in the factory; the real action is in the office...”

“I snap out actual versus budget comparisons so deviations are immediately noticed...”

### **NUMBER NINE UNDERSTATE ACHIEVEMENTS**

While marketing, advertising, sales, public relations, personnel, and other executives often overstate achievements, financial and technical executives very often understate their accomplishments. During interviews they will respond to questions in this critical area with comments like, “Well, that was expected of me; I was just doing my job,” or “I only saved five percent of total purchases by recommending changes in purchasing procedures.”

Before going into an interview, list major accomplishments in your present job. As a target, select at least ten. Include not only those that achieved significant dollar or percentage improvements, but also procedural changes that created better internal and external communication, and new or improved procedures.

### **NUMBER TEN FAILS TO INFORM REFERENCES**

It is essential that you properly prepare your references for calls from the potential employer or recruiter. Otherwise the prospective employer may get such reactions as:

“Well, give me an hour to think about some of her achievements, and I’ll call you back.”

“He is applying for what job?”

“I am not sure he can do that job, but on the other hand, I’m not familiar with his responsibilities in the past three years.”

Call your references before an interview, and ask if you can use them. Bring them up to date on your achievements. And be sure to thank them after, a courtesy that too often is ignored.

If, after replaying an interview in your head, you detect some area of questioning that you perceive could be viewed as a weak point, get back to your references to support your strong points. For example, if the interviewer suggests during the interview that the position requires an extrovert – and you objectively view yourself as an introvert – you might talk to your references in this manner:

“I think the interview went well, although Mr. Jones made several references to wanting an extrovert. Frankly, I am low-keyed, as you know, but have always felt that my honest, thorough homework and abilities have generated significant accomplishments. In dealing with the supervisors, I’ve gotten a lot of compliments on being straightforward and responding without a lot of double-talk. Perhaps you could mention some of these attributes when you’re contacted by Mr. Jones.”

Chances are the questions will come up, and your references can turn a potential negative into a plus for you.

### **NUMBER ELEVEN FAILS TO COMMUNICATE HIS LEVEL OF COMPENSATION IS WARRANTED**

Today, there seems to be a feeling that professionals are overpaid. Some interviewers may wonder why their company should have to pay you so much. When compensation comes up, talk in terms of what you have earned. This is even more important if you receive an annual bonus or some other form of additional compensation. Stress that your work merited the compensation you received and some of the reasons for your salary increases. If you have periodic compensation reviews, play back those attributes that were discussed with you in such meetings.

### **NUMBER TWELVE FAILS TO ASK KEY QUESTIONS**

An interview is not a one-sided question and answer session. You are entitled to get some information about the potential position and responsibilities. Good, thoughtful questions turn on an interviewer. It suggests you have contemplated the opportunity and will consider it if it meets certain criteria you have established for yourself before making any move. Among the facts you should know are the job's responsibilities, to whom would you report, who does your boss report to, what are the opportunities, and where could the job lead to?

Be sure to ask about the advantages of this job and its challenges. It indicates that you are not merely looking for a change, or any job at better pay, but seriously want to step into a situation where your career can grow.

These "dozen don'ts" will not guarantee a job offer from your next interview. But they will certainly eliminate errors that almost automatically would remove you from further consideration. Chances are, they will place you in contention for the new position if your background and experience meet the specifications of the job. And by avoiding these pitfalls, you should gain greater confidence in projecting your abilities and potential to a new employer.