

How to Blow a Job Interview

By Sharon Voros

The candidate's background, experience and education were exactly what the company wanted in a new executive vice president. "On paper, there was no better match," says Don Clark, a recruiter in Fort Worth, Texas. "But after interviewing him in person, we knew we'd have to keep looking." Wearing a rumpled suit and dirty shoes, the candidate's appearance was the first strike against him, Mr. Clark says. His poor posture and big mouth were the final nails in the coffin. "The candidate didn't look or act like an executive," the recruiter says. "What's worse, he lectured me for 45 minutes on what my client was doing wrong and why he was just the man to fix the problem."

Though unemployment may be rising, many companies are still hungry for talented managers. But even the best candidates won't get offers if they bungle their interviews with prospective employers or recruiters.

No longer a perfunctory chitchat session, the interview is the ultimate test of a candidate's suitability. This is where a candidate's appearance, manners, charisma, communication skills, strategic thinking and fit with the company's culture are scrutinized and evaluated.

A strong personal interview often can compensate for a weak resume. While conducting a search for an executive vice president, Todd Noebel, president of the Noebel Search Group in Dallas, interviewed a candidate with a conventional resume and lukewarm reputation. "Contrary to my expectations, he was distinguished and composed," he says. "He asked probing questions that showed he had researched the client's strategic situation. Most important, he seemed genuinely interested in my client." Mr. Noebel strongly recommended the candidate, who was hired and is performing successfully.

Candidates with superior credentials sometimes mistakenly believe that showing up and answering questions is all that's required to secure an offer. Even if you've been solicited for the position, you easily can take yourself out of the running.

Do Not!

1. Act disinterested. Headhunter Jack Clarey of Clarey & Andrews, a Chicago search firm, was seeking a CFO for a publicly held technology company headquartered in a rural community. During an interview, Mr. Clarey's strongest candidate questioned him repeatedly about the difficulties of uprooting himself and his family from a large city and whether he would be happy in a rural location. "Needless to say, we rejected him," says Mr. Clarey.

Don't bother to interview unless you have some interest in the position. The recruiter or company may have called you first, but you're expected to demonstrate curiosity and enthusiasm when you interview.

2. Go unprepared. You can't ask intelligent questions if you're in the dark about the employer's industry, operations and performance. Reviewing the company's annual report and web site is the absolute minimum amount of research you should do before the interview. Don't ask questions that are answered plainly by these resources.

3. Talk too much. An internal candidate for a \$200,000-a-year position at a major investment bank ideally matched the position's specifications, according to recruiter Jac Andre, a partner with Ray & Berndtson. But he was disqualified automatically when he talked for more than an hour without making a single point. "He rambled on and on without answering my questions," says Mr. Andre.

When responding to a question or making a comment, get to the point. Nothing demonstrates your insecurity more than endless commentary that goes nowhere.

4. Talk too little. You're expected to be an active participant in the interview, not simply a head nodder. One-word answers brand you as uninterested, scared or uppity.

5. Display bad manners. Ann Peckenpaugh, a recruiter with Schweichler Associates Inc. in Corte Madera, Calif., was convinced a candidate was a perfect fit for her client, a high-tech company in Silicon Valley. "He was ideal on paper, and unlike many 'techies,' he was a good communicator on the phone," she says. But when she met him in person over dinner, he horrified her by picking up his roast chicken dinner with two hands and eating it off the bone. "We were waiting for him to growl," says Ms. Peckenpaugh.

6. Knock your current (or past) employer. Badmouthing a boss is perhaps the ultimate interview offense. Recruiters and employers know that if you air dirty laundry about your firm, you're likely to be a malcontent in your next position as well. Even if you're convinced your boss is a felon, stick to your own accomplishments and the resulting performance when discussing your situation.

Additionally, don't assume interviewers aren't listening if they stop taking notes. Some recruiters pride themselves on generating confidential, personal information through "stealth" meetings over meals, where candidates tend to lower their guard. "When I put my notepad away, candidates say amazing things," says Bob Clarke, principal with Furst Group/MPI, a recruiter based in Rockford, Ill. "That's when they're likely to run down their current employer, drop names inappropriately or even use foul language."

7. Take credit for things you didn't do. While it's important to explain your role in accomplishing results, don't overstate your authority or responsibility. Your claims are likely to be checked with current or former colleagues, customers or bosses. Avoid saying "I" as much as possible: no one in a corporate environment does things single-handedly.

8. Hide holes in your resumes. Don't follow the example of the candidate who advised Chip McCreary, chief executive officer of Austin-McGregor International, a Dallas recruiter, to avoid calling him at work because the voice-mail system was being changed. "Naturally, I called right away," says Mr. McCreary. "The receptionist told me he was no longer with the company."

Periods of unemployment and falsified dates and degrees also are simple to detect. Address resume gaps or other potential concerns directly and have an explanation about why they made sense and what you learned from them.

9. Show lack of confidence in the prospective employer. Steven Darter, president of People Management Northeast, a recruiter in Avon, Conn., once interviewed a candidate who spent an hour itemizing the potential employer's problems. "He told me he could get it all turned around, but couldn't give me any specifics," says Mr. Darter. "We crossed him off the list the minute he left the room."

You can express concerns about some aspect of the potential employer's strategy, product line or operations -- particularly if you can suggest a better approach. But don't let the interview deteriorate into a critique session. Employers want managers who are excited by opportunities, not dismissive of past mistakes.

10. Negotiate too early. If you raise the issue of compensation, it's clear to recruiters and employers that your primary interest is money, not opportunity. Wait until they bring up the topic, and don't negotiate during the interview--take a day to formulate your response.