

The Best Ways to Blow an Interview

By Laura Morsch, CareerBuilder.com writer

It happens all the time: A candidate looks perfect on paper, but once he opens his mouth in the interview, the hiring manager can't wait to hustle him out the door.

Even the most well-prepared, intelligent job seeker can turn into a bumbling mess once anxiety enters the equation. Nerves can't be avoided -- but some of the most common interview mistakes can.

Timing is everything

Getting to the interview is never as simple as expected. If you need to be there promptly at 8 a.m., you can bet there will be snow, gridlocked traffic or a complete meltdown of your city's public transportation system.

Since you can't precisely predict your commute time, leave as early as you can.

"It may be only five minutes to you, but showing up late for an interview is inappropriate," says Roberta Chinsky Matuson, principal of Northampton, Mass.-based Human Resource Solutions.

"Do what you have to do to get out the door early," she says. "Worst-case scenario: You sit in the parking lot and listen to your iPod until it's time to go in."

Clothes make the (wo)man

If punctuality is important, dressing appropriately is downright crucial. Hiring managers complain that candidates come to interviews dressed in T-shirts, jeans and flip-flops.

"Research the company dress code and dress one level above company policy," suggests Dawn Gill, district director of Spherion Staffing Services in the Southeast.

"If you find the company dress code is business casual, for example, then plan to wear dress slacks or a skirt and blouse," she says. "If the company code is casual, plan to dress at the business-casual level -- which may mean khakis or other comfortable slacks or skirts paired with proper shirts."

If you have any doubt what clothing will be appropriate, wear a suit. And remember: While taking care of your appearance is a good thing, vanity can work against you.

"During the interview process, I've had a few candidates adjust their hair in the reflection in the window behind my desk -- sometimes they check themselves out three, four, five times," laments Greg Wilson, vice president of Levick Strategic Communications in Washington, D.C.

"Vanity does not become anyone in the interview process," he says. "Get it together before you show up. Otherwise I'll think you've never met a mirror you didn't like."

The company does what?

Your preparation shouldn't stop with your wardrobe. Never walk into an interview without at least a working knowledge of the company, its products and its industry.

"An interviewer will often ask, 'What do you know about our business, firm, company, etc.?' " says Ellen Yerman, executive director of career services and cooperative education at Villa Julie College in Stevenson, Md.

"If the candidate stares blankly or gives a very broad answer, they already have an uphill battle to win the enthusiasm and support of their interviewer," she says. "The solution, of course, is research, research, research."

The night before the interview, visit the company's Web site and pore over its financial statements, press releases and corporate mission.

A little too revealing

"What do you know about the company?" isn't the only question throwing job seekers off course. Unfortunately, many nervous job seekers begin rambling when confronted with a tough question, revealing potentially negative information about their skills or character.

"Usually it's the most sensitive questions where people don't know where to stop," says Diane Wilson, a Chicago career and executive coach and author of "Back in Control: How to stay sane, productive and inspired in your career transition."

These tricky questions include: "Why did you leave your last job?", "What are your strengths and weaknesses?", and "Tell me about yourself."

"The best thing to do is to write out your answers and do some inner preparation," Wilson says.

It's not just what you say

The smoothest talkers could still wind up in trouble.

"Even if you say all the right things, your body language can send the wrong message," says Erika Weinstein, president and co-founder of Stephen-Bradford Executive Search.

Tapping your pen and fiddling with papers signal to the employer that you are nervous, she says. Slouching and leaning back indicate disinterest.

"Always remember to smile," Weinstein says. "Friendliness is crucial. Remember, if they have invited you for an interview they already believe you have the right skills, and what they are really trying to decide is if they want to work with you each day."

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