

Are you an interviewer's nightmare?

It's not always the interviewer's fault when interviews go off course. Sometimes it's the candidate who is to blame. Take for example, candidates who:

take over interviews and go off on long rambles, especially when they're presented with any opportunity to talk about themselves

don't listen to the questions they're asked or the information they've been given

can't answer questions concisely

answer a different question to the one they've been asked.

Sooner or later, even the most professional interviewers will start to lose patience and, sadly, from the candidates' point of view:

most of them are unaware of what they're doing

time runs out before they have had a chance to put across their most important messages.

So, time to confess. Are you an interviewer's nightmare? Tick the boxes below if you think you could be guilty of any of the following:

Asking questions when the information has already been given to you

Having to be asked questions more than once

Adding irrelevant information to the answers you give

Talking when you should be listening

Go to your interviews

A lot of life is about basics and what could be more basic about interviews than going to them?

Unless you've worked in recruitment, you would probably be surprised to learn just how many people fail to turn up for the interviews they've been invited to attend. Sometimes there's a phone call to say something unexpected came up, but for the most part these no-shows and the reasons for them are shrouded in mystery. All that can be said for them with any certainty is that, from an employer's point of view, they're annoying.

So what, you may ask, is going on here? Why do seemingly intelligent people put a lot of time and effort into applying for jobs, only to give up when they're given the chance to take it further? Why do they fail to take the next step when they've done the hardest part by getting the interview?

In one of our previous lives we ran a recruitment business for a while, where it was our job to source suitable candidates for employers and then get them to an interview. Most of the time this went without any hitch but, on the occasions when candidates didn't go along when they were supposed to, we were usually the first to find out – in the shape of an irate phone call from the client who'd been let down. We therefore had a vested interest in getting to the bottom of these situations. What we found out was that the no-show sector came in two categories:

People who are disorganized and unsatisfactory: these are people who change their mind but don't have the common courtesy to let anyone know.

People who write themselves off before they start: their interview experience so far may have been bad; they may see no point; or they think all the other applicants are going to be better than them.

Lessons

So what are the lessons here?

Unless you're lucky, applying for jobs is always going to bring in bad experiences.

Don't carry the bad experiences forward. Leave them in the past, where they belong.

See every job application as a fresh challenge.

Go to your interviews. Don't leave the way free for others.

Think to yourself: 'Someone is going to get this job. This time, it could be me.'

Remember, too, that if you're going to engage with and overcome the competition, you need first to be there to do it.

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Not getting on to shortlists

If you are consistently not getting on to shortlists, this can mean one of a number of things, so you need to answer these questions:

Are you getting your important messages across?

If you are, then the next question is 'Are these messages as important as you think?'

Are they relevant to the job for which you are applying? A good clue to look for here is to see whether you're plugging the same messages at every interview – a sure sign that you are getting it wrong.

Are you applying for jobs you can't do?

In theory, you shouldn't have been at the interview in the first place but, because employers' procedures aren't perfect, no-hopers can slip through.

Are you making a poor early impression?

Is something happening in the first few minutes of your interviews which is putting interviewers off – something you don't know about? If your interviews are short, if you sense interviewers are 'going through the motions', if they don't make notes – these are all signs that you are making poor early impressions. Don't rack your brains over this: the reasons for poor early impressions are usually pretty basic.

Could your end impressions be at fault?

For example, are you guilty of going off on long rambles when you are asked if there is anything you want to add?

Are there discrepancies between your CV and you?

Are you shooting your credibility in the foot with discrepancies between what you are saying at interviews and what appears on your CV or on your application forms?

Is there a problem with your social media?

Could employers access information about you on social networking sites that is not consistent with the image you present at interviews?

Without meaning to, are you coming across as a 'know-all, done it all, seen it all'?

The corollary of knowing it all is not being the kind of person who is prepared to learn or to adapt to new circumstances.

Are you using your interviews as a form of therapy?

If you are using them to have a moan about your present job and/or your boss, you may think that the interviewer is giving you a sympathetic ear. While the experienced interviewer will give the appearance of being a sympathetic listener, really what they are doing is silently writing you off.

Are you taking over interviews?

You may be cutting across the interviewer's efforts to keep the interview on track.

Are your interviews failing because they don't run the course?

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Ten tips on how to get more interviews

Target your applications. Apply greater selectivity to the jobs you go after. Don't measure your success by the number of CVs you send off.

Don't put employers off. If you could be seen as overpaid or overqualified or anything else that could be seen as a mismatch, make it clear why you're applying for the job

Are too many of your applications long shots? While there is nothing wrong with applying for jobs where you don't fit all the requirements, make sure you a) realize what you're doing and b) introduce some balance by applying for jobs that are within your reach.

Check your emails, missed calls and voicemail messages regularly. Without you knowing it, employers could be trying to get hold of you. The problem could be you.

Give your CV a check-over. Is it a quick and easy read? Does it bring out your best points? Do you customize it every time you apply for a job? Do you do the same with your cover letters?

Put more effort into attacking the invisible market. You stand far more chance of getting an interview if the job hasn't been advertised and there are fewer applicants.

Always fill in application forms properly. Forms that come back with 'See CV' written in some of the spaces project an image of someone who is lazy. Similarly, forms with some questions not answered project an image of someone who is being evasive and/or trying to cover something up.

Move quickly. Don't delay when it comes to getting off an application. If you do, you could find that the interview list has already been decided when it arrives.

Watch your English. CVs, cover letters and application forms containing spelling mistakes and other blunders don't impress anyone. Some employers put them on the reject pile straight away.

Get your strong points across. What makes you a red-hot candidate for the job? See where the matches are between what employers want and what you've got to offer. Give these matches prominence in your CV, cover letter and any forms you are asked to complete. Bear in mind that your strong points for one job won't be the same as your strong points for another.

Not getting on to shortlists

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Skeletons in the cupboard!

In the context of interviews, a question we get asked a lot is what to do when there is something in your track record that doesn't look good. For example, if you lost your last-but-one job because you had the sack, is it best to be upfront and honest about it or is this simply being naïve? Is it better instead to be a little economical with the truth and say you left because you were made redundant? And, seriously, is anyone ever going to check up and, if they do, will it really matter that much if you're found out? What's more, isn't glossing over any bad bits in your history all part of the game?

What do we think? Let's start out with the premise that everyone makes mistakes, it's all part of life's experience, and people who own up to their mistakes are, on the whole, people you can do business with. Conversely, people who never see fault in themselves are the opposite. So, when everything else about you is credible, admitting to something you got wrong in the past can work in your favour. Here, you need to appreciate that employers place a high value on personal integrity. While they may not expect people to be perfect, they do at least expect them to be honest. Consider, also, that employers have been inundated with spurious claims of various sorts in recent years, so people who are prepared to bend the truth a little to further their own ends are not the kind of people they want working for them. And a final word of warning: interviewers who've done the rounds get good at spotting people who're trying to pull the wool over their eyes. Remember, too, the golden rule with job applicants: when an employer has any areas of doubt, they find that it's always best to play safe and say no.

Typical interview questions

This online resource is provided to enable you to practise your answers to a typical range of interview questions (see also Chapter 5).

What do you know about us?

Why are you applying for this job?

Why do you want to leave your current job?

Where do you see yourself in five years' time?

What are your strengths and weaknesses?

How would you make the journey to work every day?

Would the journey give you any problems?

Tell us about your home life.

What does your partner do for a living?

Who looks after the children?

What did your father/mother do for a living?

Why did you decide to do a degree/follow a course of study in [...]?

What do you do in your leisure time?

What do you see as your key skills?

Can you give examples of how you use them?

In your current job, what's a typical day?

With the job you've applied for, what do you see as the important qualities?

What have you done to prepare for today's interview?

What can you contribute?

Why did you choose a career in [...]?

Who is your role model?

What are you doing to find the right job?

Have you applied for any other jobs?

What do you do to keep up to date?

Why have you had so many jobs?

Have you lost any time from work during the last 12 months?

Is there anything you want to say about your interview today?

Are you still interested in the job?

What do you think you're worth?

Who wrote your CV?

Is there any reason why you didn't write your own CV?

Less frequently asked questions

Some interview questions don't come up quite so often but, to make sure you're as prepared as you can be, it's worth considering a few of them and having the answers up your sleeve just in case.

Can you give an example?

You say that you have experience of using a certain skill or technique and the interviewer asks you to provide an example. These are the key points to remember:

The example you choose needs to be relevant to the job for which you're applying.

Anything you say needs to be concise.

What's a typical day?

The interviewer asks you to take him or her through a typical day in your current or last job. It helps the interviewer to get a better understanding of what you do – or did – and might serve as a platform for further, more detailed questions. Again, keep your answer concise and focus on areas of your job that would form part of the brief in the job for which you're applying. At the same time, try to pick out any areas where you feel your strengths lie – which is another way of steering the interview in the direction you want it to go in (taking control).

What do you see as the important qualities in the job?

The interviewer invites your opinion on the key selection criteria for the job – which is a way of testing whether or not your thinking is on the same wavelength as theirs.

Pick out therefore any criteria that the employer has already highlighted – for example, in the ad or in the job specification. It's so much the better if the criteria happen to be among your strong points. Be ready to back up your answer by explaining why you feel the criteria you have chosen are important.

What have you done to prepare for today's interview?

To understand why interviewers ask this question, you have to appreciate that many candidates do nothing when it comes to preparing for interviews. The question therefore catches them out, so they're left offering lame excuses, like, 'Sorry, I didn't have a lot of time,' which translates to an interviewer as 'I couldn't be bothered to make the effort.' However, if you've followed the advice in this book, you won't find yourself in this position and you'll be able to tell the interviewer about all the research you've done.

Can you think of a reason why we should offer you the job?

This is a golden opportunity to plug your strong points. Go for it!

What can you contribute?

Typically, candidates answer this question with generalities like ‘commitment’ and ‘loyalty’. While there is nothing wrong with answers such as these, try to be a bit more inventive by picking out one of your key skills and saying how you think it would benefit the organization – for example, how your experience in credit control would have a positive impact on reducing debtor days.

Why did you choose to go into [...]?

Questions about career choices are more likely to be put to younger candidates as a way of gauging their commitment and motivation. Try to avoid giving stereotyped answers, such as saying you went into sales because you enjoy meeting people. Tell interviewers about your formative experiences. The chances are that they will find it interesting, providing you don’t talk on for too long.

Who is your role model?

It may well be your Dad or your favourite teacher but, given that this is an interview for a job, see if you can think of someone who has had a major influence on how you approach your work (a current or an ex-boss would be a good choice). A natural follow-up to the question would be to ask you in what ways your role model has influenced you, so have your answer ready.

If you could choose to do anything differently, what would it be?

Don’t answer this question by dwelling on past mistakes. Instead, see what you can do to think of a reply that doesn’t make it sound as if you got to where you are today by accident. One candidate came up with ‘Learn to play the piano sooner.’

Current affairs questions

Some interviewers ask candidates for their opinions on stories in the news – for example, how they see some crisis being resolved. What’s behind questions about current affairs? Getting candidates to talk about something other than their work is a way of drawing them out of their comfort zones. Interviewers will be able to see whether there’s more to them and this could have a bearing on how suitable they are for jobs where interaction with people outside their immediate circle is an important requirement.

The book has placed great emphasis on using every opportunity you can to practise your conversational skills and, if you've followed this advice, you will find yourself in a much better position to deal with interview questions that go off in unexpected directions. When you're active on the job market, always make a special point of keeping abreast of current affairs because you never know when a question is going to be put to you about what's going on in the news.

What have you done about finding a job?

This question is usually directed at people who have:

just come out of education.

been out of work for a period of time.

been doing a stop-gap job or a job they don't like.

Clearly, what interviewers are fishing for is to see what effort these people have made to resolve their situations (a clue to their motivation). If you fit into one of these categories, be prepared therefore to answer the question by telling the interviewer how many applications you've made and what else you've been doing to improve your prospects of finding a job.

Have you applied for any other jobs?

Interviewers may want to know what other irons you've got in the fire. Why? Like the last question, your reply tells them what efforts you're making and gives clues to your motivation. At the same time, they might learn whether you have other applications in the pipeline that are on the point of coming to fruition – information that is relevant to them if they're interested in you.

What do you do to keep your skills up to date?

Unless you're applying for a basic job, interviewers will want to see evidence that you make an effort to keep your skills up to date. Tell them, therefore:

what reading you do

whether you participate in any online communities

what professional bodies you belong to

how proactive you are in making sure you attend courses and seminars.

Why have you had so many jobs?

People who move around a lot naturally attract attention, particularly when it has been their choice to spend only a short time in each job. If you fall into this category,

be ready to explain why you felt it necessary to make so many moves. Without having to prompt you, interviewers will be looking for you to reassure them that you are capable of putting down roots and that any money spent on giving you training won't be wasted.

Have you lost any time from work in the last 12 months?

People who can't be relied on to attend work regularly are a recruiter's worst nightmare. Be ready to explain any periods of absence in a way that will make an interviewer feel happy to offer you the job. Be mindful that small firms, where there are fewer pairs of hands, are particularly on their guard against taking on people who throw sickies at the drop of a hat.

Are there any questions we haven't asked you?

This is an opportunity to bring in any points that haven't been covered (points favourable to you).

Is there anything you want to say about your interview today?

Interviewers sometimes ask for feedback, so don't be surprised by this question. Reply by saying how much you have enjoyed the interview and the opportunity to talk face to face. Thank the interviewer for his or her time, if you haven't done so already.

Are you still interested in the job?

Unless the interview has exposed a serious shortfall between what you are seeking and what the employer has to offer, always answer this question by saying 'yes'. Even if you're not sure it's still best to keep your options open.

What do you think you're worth?

With some jobs, the salary is left open to negotiation, so don't go into an interview without clear ideas about what you think you should be paid. A common mistake candidates make is to put too low a value on themselves, either because the question catches them out or because they feel that naming a higher figure could make them look greedy. Remember the following:

It is easier to come down when you're negotiating salary with an employer than it is to go the other way.

Understating your pay expectations can seem to show a lack of ambition and this is particularly the case with top jobs.

Did you design your CV?

A well-designed CV is evidence of a tidy and organized mind, but not if it's been written by someone else – hence the reason for the question.

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