



16 Ways to Botch a Job Interview

You made round one and now you are scheduled to spend some time with the clients. You made a good impression with the search partner and he has endorsed you strongly. The face-to-face interview is like Olympic diving; your scores in the preliminary rounds don't count. You are starting from zero. It doesn't matter how big a lead you might have created over other candidates in the earlier rounds. From the client's point of view, you are all starting off the same. One bad belly flop ends the competition for you.

Over the years, I have witnessed many ways to botch an interview. I list sixteen.

1. Act disinterested.

Remember, there are four phases to this process and being coy during the first three is counterproductive. In the client's eyes, you are still an applicant. Even if it is true that the search consultant might have dragged you to the interview kicking and screaming, if you act disinterested, the client's reaction will be the same. They will wonder why you came at all. Remember you have the magic "no" card in your back pocket. You can play it anytime. But if you play it too early, you will never get a chance to understand enough about the circumstances to see if there is a basis on which a "yes" would make sense.

2. Don't do your homework.

Saying, "I really haven't had time to learn much about the company," will get you a quick trip back out the door. If you are going to go on an interview, do your homework. Show that you have invested some time in them. What you are really being judged on is how you approach important situations. If you rely on someone else to give you the facts, you are not the kind of person people want as part of the team.

3. Assume that the interviewer will ask all the questions you want answered.

Let's face it; unless you are considering a position within the Staffing / Placement industry most of the people you will meet with are not trained interviewers. You may be playing modest, you may just be too shy, or you may not want to appear too cocky, so you allow the interviewer to take the lead. When you do that, you convey the wrong attitude. Someone who constantly handles an interview by saying, "Well, what else can I tell you?" and lets the interviewer ask the questions shows a disturbing lack of curiosity and understanding. Even though it is you who are being interviewed, the best approach is to ask questions about the company and the job. Show by the kind of questions you ask that you bring the right perspective. Answer open-ended questions in a way that brings out the points of your own history to demonstrate results, strategic thinking, and key technical or professional skills.

4. Forget that each interview starts from zero.

You may have been through several interviews or telephone conversations already today. It is easy to assume that somehow all of your charm and charisma gets transmitted from interviewer two to interviewer four. Trust me when I say, it will NOT! Don't "power down," or truncate your responses. Even worse, don't show irritation by referencing repetitive questions with "Well, when I visited with Joe, I gave him much of that background." If you see six people during an interview, and the vote is five to one because you ran out of gas or showed irritation in having to do it all over again, you may as well have botched all six.

5. Show disregard for less senior people who may interview you.

This is a sure way to shoot yourself in the foot. How you react if you don't think certain people necessarily deserve to be on your schedule or deserve to be evaluating you is important. If the employer put them there, there is a reason.

You can use the opportunity with junior people to learn about the company. Ask them about their own careers and the things they have worked on. They will be complimented by your interest and you will learn something about the company. They will feel like you have treated them like an equal. If they like you, they can push your candidacy. Employers know that character is judged by how you behave when you think no one important is watching.

6. Start to negotiate too early.

The company will signal when it is time to negotiate. You have to be sensitive to it. There are many false invitations you might jump on inappropriately. For example, someone could say, "What are things about this job that would attract you or concern you?" You might feel that is an opportunity for questions about salary, the benefits, title or structure. Not so. What they are interested in is your sense of enthusiasm, whether this is the kind of challenge you are looking for, and your sense of mastery over comparable subjects. They want to know if you think you can do the job. At some point they will make a specific offer. That's when they'll ask you to consider this job and offer the particulars. That is when you can negotiate. You know they have to get there ultimately, so you can afford to wait.

7. Show lack of confidence in the client.

In response to open-ended questions about concerns, don't start talking about what happens two years out to your career. Don't question whether they will provide the resources to help this position be successful. Both kinds of discussions communicate a lack of confidence that they know how to run their business. Wait until they offer the job to get these assurances where you need them.

8. Betray a confidence.

You are still a guest, and still work for someone else. You have obligations to your current employer, employees and customers. You have no obligations to the people you are interviewing, and they understand that. There is nothing awkward about telling them you can't share things they don't need to know. Talk about your successes and skills, not your employer's weaknesses or foibles. Don't talk about problems that make you want to leave. Do not bring along items that are clearly the property of your current employer. That doesn't mean that you are not going to get those types of questions. But no one wants to hire an executive who doesn't understand where his or her obligations are until an agreement to move to another company has been signed, sealed, and delivered.

9. Show hostility toward a current or former employer.

Resist any temptation for revenge, to vent or portray yourself as a victim of evil people. You get no sympathy for portraying yourself as a victim. You do get people questioning your judgment for getting into those circumstances in the first place. It is not because they don't understand those things can happen to everyone. The key is how you responded. If you focus on what you were leaving as opposed to what you were going toward, it is easy to conclude that you are a person who works on regrets and "could have been's." When you left employers, stress that it was to do bigger, better, and more challenging jobs. Do not stress the problems or persecutions you left behind.

10. Do anything to suggest that the interview isn't the most important thing you are doing at that moment.

In your mind, this may have been an exploratory visit. But in your client's eyes, you are someone who is applying for the job. They need to be convinced of your interest and suitability. Don't point out that you need to cut the visit short to do something else. Don't take or make phone calls. Don't make it hard to schedule follow up meetings.

11. Forget that they have heard everything that you have told the search consultant.

So introduce new data or new perspectives very carefully. If the search consultant is likely to describe you as quite interested and positive, don't switch to indifference for the interview. If most of your focus during the conversation with the search consultant was about your experience in the most recent job, don't assume that the whole subject has been covered and you can spend all of your time talking about other parts of your career. Remember, you are there because the search consultant recommended you. The client is trying to confirm that that is the right judgment. Any big differences between what the search consultant said and what goes on during the next interview raises questions.

12. Take credit for things you didn't do.

This comes up repeatedly. Never imply any degree of involvement that wasn't really there, or claim a link to results that may not be totally yours. As the process moves ahead, many people will be asked about you. They'll be asked specifically about your role in key results. Since one of the hardest things to do is establish the linkage between your actions and certain achievements, those are the ones tested on the outside. People make their own judgments about your likeability, communication skills, and your ability to think strategically. But when they go outside for references, it is to prove that what you said about what you did is straight up. Let them always be positively surprised.

13. Hide holes in your resume.

Everyone can smell a situation that didn't work out, a downsizing or a period of plateau. Today there is no shame in being the victim of a merger. If in fact you were fired, be direct and non-defensive if you are asked. If you made a bad decision and bailed out after six months, or a year, deal with it and move on. Someone attempting to hide things is not the kind of person I trust with major parts of my organization.

14. Pretend to be something that you are not.

In the best of interviews people display good self-awareness. They understand who they are and what they are like. They know where they fit on the scales for aggressiveness, extroversion, risk taking and need for collaboration. It doesn't mean you have to match perfectly, but someone with high self-awareness can relate in a broad variety of environments. Those who don't understand themselves attempt to be chameleons.

15. Talk too much.

The best way to sell yourself is to be interested, ask good questions, be a good listener. They are trying to get to know you and you are trying to understand more about them. Take good advantage of their time and willingness to share information. That means answering concisely; make your key points but don't over elaborate. Assume that they will ask for detail where they want it.

16. Say bad things about anyone.

You never know who is connected to whom. Remember that everyone in the world is connected to everybody else by no more than three or four linkages. Your mother was right, "If you haven't got something nice to say, don't say it." You can probably throw the entire interview away if you take a pot-shot at some public figure who turns out to be the best friend of your interviewer.