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Strategies

Will you ace the interview?

The top 10 mistakes to avoid on the hot seat

Premium content from Birmingham Business Journal by Ben Piper, Staff

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With unemployment still elevated and many companies just now getting back into the hiring mode, competition for job openings remains fierce.

The large field of candidates for every job opening has put more pressure on the applicant and more weight on the all-important interview.

For applicants, that means learning how to avoid the most common mistakes made during interviews. And it emphasizes managers' needs to pay close attention to details during the interview.

[Whit Blakeley](#), president of **OI Partners**-Career Management Resources, said the importance of the interview has been reinforced due to the recession.

"Employers are being inundated with resumes and applicants, and competition for jobs is fierce," he said. "You only get one chance to make a good first impression in a normal job market. But in today's economy, you need to be certain you are doing everything perfectly – from the beginning of your job search to the interview and through to following up."

With those factors making interviews critical for applicants and companies alike, OI Partners recently compiled a list of the top 10 mistakes candidates make in interviews:

Mistake 1: Not answering the question, "Why should I hire you?" in enough detail.

[Nancy Covert](#), president of **Dale Carnegie Training**, said candidates should be able to voice their skills, show assertiveness and relax when asked this question.

"An interview is the time to show the interviewer how you can be an asset to their company,"

she said. "In an interview, it is necessary to show the company you are qualified and would like to see if you are a fit to their corporate environment."

Mistake 2: Not going the extra mile to stand out from others. Covert said the work ethic and attitude shown during the hiring process gives employers insight into the future employee's ability to do a job.

Blakeley said candidates should come prepared with suggestions for improving business to show research done prior to the interview.

Mistake 3: Not showing enough excitement for a job and employer.

[Kelly Schuck](#), manager at **TalentQuest**, said this suggestion doesn't mean potential employees should try to overemphasize excitement.

"Not being yourself – trying to be something else – this is always obvious to the person doing the interview," she said. "Lack of transparency or not being real doesn't work anymore in the corporate world. Posturing or arrogance is out and being real is what it takes to be successful on an interview and on the job."

Mistake 4: Not making enough eye contact during interviews.

Covert said body language in the first 10 seconds of an interview or meeting with a new acquaintance offers a laundry list of impressions.

She said smiling, posture, eye contact and the all-important hand shake must be practiced and considered just as important as any verbal communication.

Mistake 5: Underestimating the influence of receptionists, secretaries and interns, as well as prospective coworkers, on the decision-making process.

Blakely said companies want to be sure that new hires fit into their organizations and are increasingly asking everyone who comes into contact with applicants for their impressions.

Mistake 6: Not knowing in advance what your references will say about you, and not updating them on the outcome.

Schuck said applicants must take responsibility for any past failures to offer transparency in the interview. She said job searchers should not exclude jobs from resumes.

"This is a mistake because it seems like they are hiding something," she said. "Truly showing accountability is when a person can talk about a past mistake or bad decision and share what they learned from it and what they have changed as a result of the mistake or failure versus blaming situations or other people for the problem."

Mistake 7: Not memorizing a 90-second "verbal resume."

A verbal resume should briefly outline what you are looking for, your background and experience, two or three major accomplishments, and what you can bring to a job, Blakeley said.

Mistake 8: Not asking enough questions.

Covert said planning one final question for the interview can leave a lasting impression.

She said showing an inquisitive attitude gives those hiring the confidence that communication is a skill a candidate possesses.

Mistake 9: Overreliance on e-mail and the Internet, and not enough face-to-face and telephone contact.

Professional presence online with sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook can also help – or hamper – a candidate's chances for employment, Covert said.

"Companies use these tools to gain greater insight to people's skills and expertise and see if their work may be recommended by others," she said.

"Additionally, the flip side is that we can also see posts that may not be so favorable. Don't write that your job is boring or your boss is a jerk."

Mistake 10: Not following up after a personal or telephone interview or networking meeting. Writing personalized notes on a card rather than e-mail has become a lost art, Covert said. Blakely said candidates can also use this time to reinforce why they are the right person for the job.

[Dallas Teague-Snider](#), Birmingham business etiquette expert through her firm Make Your Best Impression, said there is no real common thread or characteristic that causes these mistakes to occur.

"People often make these mistakes because they are just not aware, but that is no excuse," she said. "We have to take control of our own future. When we are prepared and know that we know what our behavior and professional image is saying, we can enter any situation with a healthy confidence."