

Avoid These 10 Interview Bloopers

We've all heard stories of job candidates who looked great on paper but who were absolute disasters in person. With fewer and fewer interview opportunities available in this competitive market, it's essential to make the best possible first impression. You can learn from the mistakes of others and avoid the top 10 worst interview blunders.

Poor handshake: The three-second handshake that starts the interview is your first opportunity to create a great impression. But all too often an interview is blown right from the start by an ineffective handshake. Once you've delivered a poor handshake, it's nearly impossible to recover your efforts to build rapport. Here are some examples:

- The Limp Hand (or "dead fish"): Gives the impression of disinterest or weakness
- The Tips of the Fingers: Shows lack of ability to engage.
- The Arm Pump: Sincerity is questionable, much like an overly aggressive salesman.

Even if you're a seasoned professional, don't assume you have avoided these pitfalls. Your handshake may be telling more about you than you know. Ask for honest critiques from several friends who aren't afraid to tell you the truth.

Talking too much: In my recruiting days, I abhorred over-talkative candidates. So did most of my client employers. Over-talking takes a couple of forms:

- Taking too long to answer direct questions. The impression: This candidate just can't get to the point.
- Nervous talkers. The impression: This candidate is covering up something or is outright lying.

To avoid either of these forms of over-talking, practice answering questions in a direct manner. Avoid nervous talking by preparing for your interview with role-play

Talking negatively about current or past employers/managers: The fastest way to talk yourself out of a new job is to say negative things. Even if your last boss was Attila the Hun, never, never state your ill feelings about him/her. No matter how reasonable your complaints, *you* will come out the loser if you show that you disrespect your boss because the interviewer will assume that you would similarly trash him or her. When faced with the challenge of talking about former employers, make sure you are prepared with a positive spin on your experiences.

Showing up late or too early: One of the first lessons in job-search etiquette is to show up on time for interviews. Many job-seekers don't realize, however, that showing up too early often creates a poor first impression as well. Arriving more than 10 minutes early for an interview is a dead giveaway that the job seeker has too much time on his or her hands, much like the last one picked for the softball team. Don't diminish your candidate desirability by appearing desperate. Act as if your time were as valuable as the interviewer's. Always arrive on time, but never more than 10 minutes early.

Treating the receptionist rudely: Since the first person you meet on an interview is usually a receptionist, this encounter represents the first impression you'll make. Don't mistake low rank for low input. Often that receptionist's job is to usher you into your interview. The receptionist has the power to pave your way positively or negatively before you even set eyes on the interviewer. The interviewer may also solicit the receptionist's opinion of you after you leave.

Asking about benefits, vacation time or salary: What if a car salesman asked to see your credit report before allowing you to test drive the cars? That would be ridiculous, and you'd walk away in disgust. The effect is about the same when a job-seeker asks about benefits or other employee perks during the first interview. Wait until you've won the employer over before beginning that discussion.

Not preparing for the interview: Nothing communicates disinterest like a candidate who hasn't bothered to do pre-interview research. On the flip side, the quickest way to a good impression is to demonstrate your interest with a few well thought out questions that reflect your knowledge of their organization. [Editor's note: To ensure that you are prepared, see our article, [The Ultimate Guide to Job Interview Preparation.](#)]

Verbal ticks: An ill-at-ease candidate seldom makes a good impression. The first signs of nervousness are verbal ticks. We all have them from time to time -- "umm," "like," "you know." Ignore the butterflies in your stomach and put up a front of calm confidence by avoiding verbal ticks. You can also sometimes avoid verbal ticks by pausing for a few seconds to gather your thoughts before each response.

One of the best ways to reduce or eliminate them is through role-play. Practice sharing your best success stories ahead of time, and you'll feel more relaxed during the real interview.

Not enough/too much eye contact: Either situation can create a negative effect. Avoid eye contact and you'll seem shifty, untruthful, or disinterested; offer too much eye contact, and you'll wear the interviewer out. If you sometimes have trouble with eye-contact balance, work this issue out ahead of time in an interview practice session with a friend.

Failure to match communication styles: It's almost impossible to make a good first impression if you can't communicate effectively with an interviewer. But you can easily change that situation by mirroring the way the interviewer treats you. For instance:

- If the interviewer seems all business, don't attempt to loosen him/her up with a joke or story. Be succinct and businesslike
- If the interviewer is personable, try discussing his/her interests. Often the items on display in the office can offer a clue.
- If asked a direct question, answer directly. Then follow up by asking if more information is needed.

Allowing the interviewer to set the tone of conversation can vastly improve your chances of making a favorable impression. You can put the interviewer at ease -- and make yourself seem more like him or her -- by mirroring his or her communication style.

Final Thoughts

Just as a strong resume wins you an opportunity to interview, strong interview skills will win you consideration for the job. You already know that you won't earn an interview unless your resume

sets you apart as a candidate of choice. Similarly, you should know that polishing your interview skills can mean the difference between getting the job offer -- and being a runner-up.

Start your job search with a resume that creates a stellar first impression, then back those facts up with your extraordinary interview skills. You will have made yourself a better candidate by avoiding these ten interview pitfalls. And no one will have to talk about you as the candidate who "almost" got the job.

Questions about some of the terminology used in this article? Get more information (definitions and links) on key college, career, and job-search terms by going to our [Job-Seeker's Glossary of Job-Hunting Terms](#).

Deborah Walker is a Certified Career Management Coach. Her expertise includes resume writing and career coaching. She holds membership in the National Resume Writer's Association. As a former headhunter, her advice comes from an insider's prospective based on years working with HR professionals and corporate hiring managers. [Visit Deb on the Web](#). Or email her for a free resume critique/price quote at deb@alphaadvantage.com.



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What not to do when starting a new job

You've got the job; now you can relax, put your feet up on your new desk and get on with e-mailing your mates from your new account. Actually, your first day is not the time to rest on your laurels. You might have got through the interview and selection processes, but you've still got a lot of proving yourself to do. Learn from these stories from employers whose new recruits didn't make the best of first impressions.

The mummy's boy. “A couple of weeks ago a new recruit turned up to his orientation with his mum,” says Donna Miller, the European HR director of Enterprise Rent-A-Car. “We had to explain that he was the one we had hired, not his mother.” The 22-year-old did manage to let go of the apron strings and Miller says that he's doing well now. She puts the incident down to the “helicopter parents” phenomenon, but the real issue here is understanding what constitutes appropriate behavior in the world of work.

The boy racer. Avoid erratic driving on your way to your first day in a new job - you don't know who you might be cutting up. “A story I heard was of a guy who was driving to work, and someone cut him up and made a rude hand gesture,” says Jonathan Rose, a senior manager at WH Marks Sattin, an accountancy and finance recruiter. Not necessarily an unusual rush-hour occurrence, but it turned out that the inconsiderate motorist was on his way to a new job - working for his road-rage victim. Not the best start.

Mistaken identity. “My funniest story is one that happened in my old job,” says Jacqui Maynard, the HR business partner at Mouchel, a consulting and business services group. “A guy walked into reception at 9am to say, ‘I’m here for my first day.’ The receptionist didn’t know anything about it, we were all in interviews that day and the managing director was out of the office. Not wanting to appear unprofessional, the receptionist made the guy a cup of tea.”

It wasn't until about an hour later that they finally got in touch with the managing director, who said that no one was due to start that day. Sure enough, the new recruit had got the wrong office - he wanted the company that was based two floors up from Maynard's. To add to his embarrassment, he was now more than an hour late for his new job. The lessons here are to do your research, read the directions in your starter pack, and keep in mind that your first day might not be at the office where you had your interview.

The breakfast club. New starters on Enterprise's induction course often stay in a hotel, which can cause problems. “The nine recruits were told to be in the lobby at 7.45am,” Miller says. “Only five turned up. So the recruiter went to look for the others and found them in the restaurant, having a leisurely breakfast.” An induction is still work, no matter how good the croissants.

Day of judgment. Employers find it particularly annoying when their new recruits compare every aspect of their new workplace with their old job. “Avoid using, ‘At my old company, we did it like this,’” Maynard says. “You used to work at an ice-cream factory; this is an engineering company.” Things are going to be different, and it's going to take you a while to get used to it. “We’ve had some people - especially temps - who don't come back on Day 2,” Rose says. “Be open; every company's different.”

Eager beavers. Relax. “No one's going to expect you to perform miracles on your first day,” Maynard says. “Don't put too much pressure on yourself. It takes three months to get your head around a new company.” Miller advises letting things happen to you, rather than being desperate to show initiative, which can put your new colleagues' backs up.

Loaded questions. It's fine to ask questions about the company, but be careful of the impression you are giving. Here are a few changes that Maynard has heard people ask on their first day: “Why is the notice period so long?”; “Can I take an extended period of unpaid leave?”; and “How quickly can I be promoted?” A particularly good one, though, was, “What is my sick leave entitlement?” “Was he planning to be sick?” Maynard asks. Her final word of advice is not to ask questions that suggest that you are not committed to the job.