

# Seven Ways to Flunk a Job Interview

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You don't need interview advice, right? After all, you've got stellar credentials and years — maybe even decades — of work experience. To be completely honest, you're actually overqualified for the job. In fact, you shouldn't even have to interview.

Stop right there! In this age of shrinking workforces and shuttering businesses, you've also got plenty of equally qualified company. And when was the last time you interviewed? Chances are, those skills could use a little polish. Fear not. But make sure you don't throw yourself out of the race by committing one of these common — and fatal — faux pas.

## **Mistake #1: Drop your guard in front of “the help.”**

Interviewing is stressful. Sometimes you just want to explode. But don't. At least not in front of anyone who could influence the hiring decision.

Ron Panaggio, regional HR manager for security systems provider SimplexGrinnell recalls one candidate who took himself out of the running when he thought no one was looking. After meeting with Mr. X, a strong contender, Panaggio, who was then working for Emery Worldwide in New York, asked the receptionist who greeted the candidate to share her impressions. Turns out, Mr. X had launched into a profanity-laced tirade about the company's lack of visitor parking spaces.

Panaggio notes that although the guy may have had a point — the parking situation wasn't ideal — his delivery, and his questionable decision to attack his would-be employer set off warning signals. “If he was that critical about parking, we could only imagine how he was going to react to substantive policies that he disliked,” says Panaggio.

Employers know that job seekers interact with receptionists and other support staffers — often with their guards down. “They don’t see those people as decision makers, so they tend to be more genuine in their interactions with them,” says Panaggio. But employers routinely ask these employees for feedback. “We like to see whether the interview persona matches the unscripted persona that walks through the door,” says Panaggio. Consider that the next time you’re waiting for a tardy interviewer (who’s probably busy and making do with a reduced staff).

### **Mistake #2: Over share.**

Candidates worried about explaining employment gaps on their resumes have been getting way too personal, says Wanda Cole-Frieman, an executive recruiter for Blue Shield of California. While she enjoys building rapport with the applicants she meets, certain topics are off-limits — or should be. They include descriptions of your medical conditions and information about your sick parents or childcare woes.

It’s not just a matter of propriety. Chatty candidates put interviewers in an awkward position when they raise issues that could identify them as members of a legally protected class. Cole-Frieman recalls that one of her colleagues was forced to contact the legal department for guidance after a candidate announced that he used marijuana for medical purposes. The legal drug use wasn’t a dealbreaker, but raising such issues won’t endear you to interviewers. “We’re trained to say, ‘Thanks for sharing, but Blue Shield doesn’t consider those factors in its hiring decisions,’” says Cole-Frieman.

- [See also: How to Not Look Old in an Interview](#)

### **Mistake #3: Assume your resume speaks for itself.**

Your resume may have helped you get the interview, but it won’t get you hired. Susan Strayer, a career coach who also works in corporate HR for a Fortune 500 company, urges job seekers to go out of their way to connect the dots for interviewers, highlighting their work experiences with stories that clearly describe what they accomplished in each role and how it relates to the position they are seeking. Don’t assume that your interviewer is familiar with obscure acronyms and non-intuitive job titles that have no significance outside the organizations that use them.

Strayer recalls meeting with an unsuccessful candidate who breezed through his resume, touting his “A-76 experience,” a term that meant nothing to her at the time, and never pausing to explain it. Strayer says he would have been better-served by taking a moment to add, “If you’re not familiar with A-76, it’s a government mandate to ensure tasks are performed in the most cost-efficient way. My role on the A-76 project was to...”

- [See also: Five Ways to Revamp Your Resume](#)

### **Mistake #4: Show the interviewer how important you are.**

You’ve got places to go and people to see — we get it, you’re a big deal. But when an employer has taken the time to meet with you, your undivided attention is a must. “You’d think it was a joke, but employers tell us about candidates who check voicemail and e-mail, text, and even

take phone calls during the interview,” says Corinne Gregory, president of Social Smarts, a program that teaches social skills, primarily to young people.

Note to Gen-Yers (and iPhone addicts of all ages): Acing the interview is your primary mission. If you lack the impulse control to keep your hands off your phone, leave it behind.

### **Mistake #5: Talk the employer out of hiring you.**

Especially in this tight job market, you may find yourself interviewing for positions you would ordinarily consider beneath you. That’s what happened to Russ Merbeth, now an attorney with Integra Telecom when he applied for an in-house counsel position with another company. During two days of interviews, Merbeth says he expressed his doubts about the position, which he viewed as poorly conceived and not perfectly suited to his talents. “I basically rewrote the job description for them,” he says. Not surprisingly, they hired someone else.

While Merbeth’s story ended happily — eventually — he would have been wiser to keep his options open. “Always close strong, and get the job,” he says. “You can reject it later.” It’s advice you likely won’t hear from recruiters, but then they’ve already got a job.

### **Mistake #6: Stalk your recruiter.**

There’s a fine line between enthusiastic and desperate, and you don’t want to cross it. Human resources consultant Jessica Miller-Merrell was impressed following her interview of a VP-level candidate for a position with OfficeMax, where she worked at the time. The guy was one of two finalists for the job — until the phone calls.

Two days after the interview, Miller-Merrell was out of the office, attending an all-day training. She had forwarded her office calls to her cell phone and noticed 15 hang-ups, all from the once promising candidate. Though he finally left a message (about a matter so trivial that Miller-Merrell can’t remember its substance) the obsessive hang-ups left a negative impression on her. “Someone at this level should be able to maintain composure and professionalism at all times,” she says.

### **Mistake #7: Treat social media communications casually.**

These days, many employment relationships begin — or end — with social media. To ensure that yours falls into the former category, heed this tale.

Mark Sullivan, director of talent acquisition for Time Warner Cable in Austin, Texas, posted a link to a Senior VP-level job description that he needed to fill on LinkedIn. Among the candidates who responded, was a woman who wrote, “Dear Mark, That link don’t[sic] work.” Her next sentence began with a lowercase letter and was missing a crucial “the.”

“Whether you’re using Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, or instant or text messaging, you still have to be professional in every communication related to your job search,” says Sullivan. So, keep yourself in the running by proofreading before you hit “send.”

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