



Five Common Interviewing Mistakes to Avoid

... by David S. Martin, Managing Partner, Sterling Martin Associates

As Executive Search Consultants, we have a unique perspective on the interviewing process. In today's extremely competitive job market, it is more important than ever to avoid obvious gaffes in your interview, mistakes that are sure to knock you out of contention. Here are five easily-correctable errors I have observed that caused candidates to be disqualified.

A weak opening statement

Frequently, at the start of the interview, the interviewer may ask you to "take a couple of minutes to introduce yourself and indicate why you are interested in the position." Your opening statement is a great opportunity to "knock it out of the park" and set the tone for the rest of the interview. So don't just recite your resume experience; the interviewers have already reviewed that. Yes, you can provide a brief overall summary, but the real question (not usually explicitly asked) is "why are you here talking with us today?" They are not looking for someone who is simply interested in applying for a job. They are looking for someone who really knows the organization and is excited about its mission. Take the opportunity to demonstrate how your experience can help the organization achieve its goals and objectives. Also, notice the time frame specified. The interviewer said "a couple of minutes," so don't carry on longer than that. Be succinct and to-the-point.

Here are some things to think about before your interview:

- What makes you stand out among candidates?
- Have you done your homework? Interviewers like to see that you have, and there is no excuse not to be well informed about the organization in the Internet age.
- How can your experience help solve the challenges of the job?
- Can you relate your experience to the requirements of the position description?

Be convincing in your opening statement, and it will help set the tone for a good interview.

Not Answering the Question Asked/Giving Rambling Responses

I hear this all the time from clients: “They didn’t answer my questions!” If they ask about your management style, don’t carry on for five minutes about strategic partnerships before finally mentioning something about management. Stay focused and listen carefully to the question asked. Think of your initial response to a question as being a “headline” or sound bite – crisp and to-the-point; then be prepared to back it up with more detail and specific examples. You might say, “The short answer to your question is, my management style is flexible according to the situation and is also very participative...and I’d like to expand on that briefly with an example if that is OK”. Boom! You answered their question, then provided additional depth and a specific example as back-up.

Not providing specific examples or anecdotes

A good interviewer will often ask a question and then ask you provide specific examples of how you have done that in the past. This is known as a “behavioral vs. theoretical” approach. It is easy to say what you would do in the future, but can you provide specific examples of how you have done this in the past? When interviewees provide specific examples, the interview team often takes note and then mentions it in their feedback after the interview. Of course, you cannot anticipate *every* question, but you can anticipate many of them. Review the position description; what questions might arise from that? Where have you accomplished in your career that relates to those things? Be prepared with examples for interview questions relating to: **leadership, management style, relating to clients/members, ability to generate new sources of revenue and budgeting/financial matters**. These areas are typical interview topics.

Poor eye contact/body language

If you are interviewing with a search committee or interview panel, don’t forget to make eye contact with each panel member during your responses. Look at the questioner (not your notes) when they are asking you a question. During your response, be sure to make eye contact with each member of the interview team, not just the person who asked the question. Start your response by looking at the questioner, then, as you continue with your response, look around the table at every person there. I have seen situations where the candidate makes eye contact with only two members of a three-person panel and never has eye contact with the third interviewer. This is awkward, and that person likely feels that you do not think they are important in the hiring decision.

Hand shake: Have an appropriately firm hand shake -- not too limp and lifeless, but not hand-crushing either! Of course, wearing clean, pressed, appropriate business attire goes without saying.

Showing up late or too early for the interview

Showing up late seems like a basic no-no right? It's amazing how often it happens. Of course there can be challenges with traffic, public transportation, etc. If you show up late, it will not only be frowned upon by the interview team, but you are likely to be flustered and more nervous at the start of your interview.

On the other hand, don't arrive *too* early for the interview – five to ten minutes early is probably appropriate, but showing up 30 minutes in advance (unless you have been asked to arrive early to fill out paperwork) makes you look desperate.

So here is the solution: *Arrive at the location* (i.e. their building) early. Find a parking space. Check to see if you have to sign in with security so you are not delayed by that. Then find a nearby coffee shop where you can relax and review your notes before the meeting. Or sit in the building's lobby or in your car. Read your notes; rehearse your opening statement; or check emails on your Smartphone. Then walk into the interview cool, calm and relaxed.

Bonus Pointer:

Don't prepare "overly creative" materials for follow-up interviews

It is not unusual to be asked to prepare a presentation, such as a PowerPoint, for a follow-up interview. While it is fine to be somewhat creative, don't go overboard. Doing something outlandish can backfire in a big way and cause you to be disqualified. A small dose of creativity or humor goes a long way, but don't be excessive and "shoot yourself in the foot." Just be certain to answer the questions they have asked you to address.

Also, you may have a list of questions when you start the interview, many of which are answered during the conversation. Don't finish empty-handed. Try to have one or two original, but relevant, thought-provoking questions in your "back pocket." Then you won't find yourself in the position of saying "All of my questions have been answered" at the end of the interview; that may fall a little flat.

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