

How to avoid the biggest interview mistakes

Can you do the job? Do you want the job? Will you fit in? These are the three most important questions for an interviewer. Avoid the mistakes that will make your answers to them sound like a "no".

Not showing an understanding of the job

Prepare for the interview by finding out all you can about the role, company and industry. Read about the company's history, milestones, values, products / services and customers; and research the wider challenges and opportunities in the sector. Scour industry blogs, trade publications, the company website or LinkedIn page; set up Google alerts for news and use Twitter to find information.

Ask intelligent questions at the interview to clarify your responsibilities and to show that you're someone who wants to make an impact. Ask about short and long-term priorities and how the role affects the organisation as a whole.

Not saying how you did something

Rather than just saying you possess particular experience or a skill, prove it. Practise your story-telling techniques to show how you achieved a result or used your skills.

Find specific examples from your background to match the job specification. These examples should already be highlighted in your CV, so expand on them during the interview. Preparing your examples beforehand means you're less likely to get stuck for an answer or appear tongue-tied.

Make sure your examples are relevant. In Businessweek, the author describes a candidate who ruled herself out of a marketing job:

"I asked her to think about our five-person agency and what we need in marketing. She told me a story about a 24-month intranet project involving 60 people and six or seven levels of organisational sign-offs. She needs a big company atmosphere - her story screamed "I don't understand scrappy not-for-profits at all."

Not knowing why you want the job

Lack of enthusiasm is almost guaranteed to lose you the opportunity. You must be able to say why the role and company appeal. Use the "Tell me about yourself" question to show how your background fits. Be prepared for questions about your future plans and think about how you can answer honestly and thoughtfully without sounding bland, vague, or over-ambitious.

In Graduate jobs: Advice from the experts, one poster gave an example of how genuine enthusiasm trumps anything else. "One girl got into a tizz and made a right mess of her

presentation, but managed to convince us how much she wanted to work for us, and how much she could do for us. We've been very pleased with her."

Negative body language will counteract anything you say. Exude confidence in how you walk, sit or answer questions. Role-playing your interview helps – and not just for answering those difficult, "skeleton-in-the-cupboard" questions.

Coming across as unprofessional

Nobody wants to work with a complainer or a back-stabber. Never criticise a previous manager, colleague or employer. Aim to give the impression of a capable, team-playing professional who would fit in and not be difficult to manage.

Not following up

A post-interview thank you note is an excellent way to reiterate your strongest selling points, and the reason why you want the job.

If you haven't heard by the time you expected (get an idea of their timeframe during the interview) following up shows your commitment and ability to stay on top of things