



Careers

Interview Mistakes That Can Cost You The Job

Jenna Goudreau, 02.08.10, 4:35 PM ET

David Lewis, president of OperationsInc, a human resources consulting firm, has seen his share of embarrassingly bad job candidates. He says one woman crossed her legs, looked at her feet and realized she had forgotten to change from sneakers to heels before the interview. She stopped him mid-sentence to change her shoes. Another brought her lunch to the midday interview and proceeded to eat it in front of him. When he asked what she was doing, she responded: "You know I am here on my lunch hour!"

Extreme, yes, but these examples highlight the myriad gaffes, mixed signals and wrong impressions that could happen in your one shot at proving yourself. With unemployment rates hovering at 9.7% in January and 8.4 million jobs lost in the last two years, job competition has skyrocketed. Fewer jobs and more applicants require job seekers to have packed résumés *and* impeccable interviewing skills.

Plus, "Whatever people say, gender issues can still be present in the interview process," says president of executive search firm Alliance Consulting, Paul Sorbera. While men and women make many of the same mistakes--arriving late or unprepared, refusing to answer a question or lying about previous experience--women can make particular missteps that may cost them the job. From appearance faux pas and chattiness to not emphasizing their strengths and professional wins, the experts are clear about what you should *not* do the next time you're in an interview.

Some women, in an effort to avoid stereotypes that paint them as overly emotional or indecisive, *overcompensate* with chilly professionalism. If the woman appears too stiff or standoffish, the interviewer may have trouble relating to her. "Women are a little reticent to let energy and passion show," says Gail Blanke, CEO of [Lifedesigns](#), an executive coaching firm. "This is the time. People are looking for that because things are so bleak."

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Women can also fall into the trap of fumbling over family questions. C-level executive recruiter Patricia Lenkov says women have been taught that speaking about children and family make them appear less ambitious, causing many to glaze over questions about career gaps due to child-rearing. Instead, she suggests offering a well-cultivated answer about how you managed to stay plugged-in and productive over a gap. A good response might be, "While I was not employed during this time I did do a fair amount of volunteer work to keep myself active and mentally challenged. Now that my kids are older, I am ready to get back to my career."

Another common misstep is talking too much. Women often wait for the interviewer to cut them off, uncertain of how much information is necessary, says Dory Hollander, Ph.D., career coach and founder of [WiseWorkplaces](#). She suggests that applicants keep answers concise and let the interviewer speak 60% of the time.

But the wrong kind of silence can also damage an interview. Many women are reluctant to tout their accomplishments, fearing they'll appear arrogant or overly ambitious. "Women have a tendency to wait to be discovered," says Lifedesigns' Blanke. She suggests that applicants boldly and clearly state their achievements and talents.

Career coach Hollander also notes that some women have a tendency to issue disclaimers in their interview responses. For example, when asked a question about her management experience, an applicant prefaces her response by saying, "To be

honest, I haven't actually been in charge of an entire division, but..." Hollander calls this "testifying against yourself," and says that this stops people from hearing what may have been an acceptable answer and projects insecurity and self-doubt.

If a candidate focuses more on her weaknesses than her strengths, the interviewer will likely do the same. Instead, Hollander advises applicants to focus on the assets they'll bring to the job. For example, asked the same question about management experience, the savvy job seeker could say, "I've always been great at motivating a team, and I could apply those same skills as a manager here."

Since first impressions have a lasting impact, women need to choose their interview outfits wisely. A common mistake that women can make is appearing "too flashy," says Patricia Cook, CEO of Cook & Co., an executive recruiting firm. Showing too much skin, donning dangling or distracting jewelry or wearing too much makeup or perfume will damage an applicant's chances for employment, she says.

Instead, wear sedate colors like navy blue, dark gray and black; tone down jewelry and makeup; and keep hemlines to the knee and heels modest. It's also a good idea to find out what the dress code is for the company's employees. Ask around, and if all else fails, go to the site and watch people as they're coming in and out, noting formality. Ultimately, "it's better to overdress than under dress," Cook says.

But even when a woman successfully leaps over all of these interview hurdles, there's another big obstacle in her path: the pay package. According to Sara Laschever, coauthor of business advice books, *Women Don't Ask* and *Ask For It*, most women don't negotiate as hard as they should, and they often set their targets too low.

"Women tend to get excited and feel automatically grateful, and they end up accepting [the offer] right away," she says. Since employers rarely offer the maximum salary that they can pay, women who don't negotiate can cheat themselves out of a substantial amount of money. Laschever recommends searching Web sites like Salary.com and JobStar.org for salary information, as well as talking to other professionals in your network and job recruiters about what the market is currently paying.

Once an offer has been made, Laschever recommends asking for a higher amount than your goal and then pushing back a few times until both sides are in agreement. She cautions, however, against negotiating too aggressively. She recalls a woman who worked as a high-end designer and made it through several rounds of interviews at a bohemian design firm. The company loved her and offered her the job, but for considerably less than she was hoping. She felt she needed to make a strong case and forcefully negotiated for a higher salary. She watched as her potential employer wheeled back in his chair away from her, eyes wide and mouth agape. Knowing that the approach might have actually cost her the position, she went back and softened the request, clearly explaining her rationale and illustrating that she would be flexible if he would be fair. They ultimately agreed on a package, and she accepted the job.

Being flexible can be a valuable asset for job seekers in this down economy. Instead of latching on to the perfect salary figure, candidates should also consider other benefits that go along with the job, such as office space and title. During negotiations, prospective employees may be able to trade salary points for a better office, more vacation time or an assistant to help with some of her tasks.

In the end, the company has a role to fill and positioning yourself to meet that role will benefit both sides. "I think the most important thing to remember is that the interviewer usually knows less about what you've accomplished and sometimes knows less about the job than you do," says recruiter Cook. "Just remember that you're the expert on you." It might be the very thing that convinces them.

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