

# 10 ways intelligent job seekers blow their interviews

By Todd Moster, director of recruitment and placement for Moster Legal Placement

The job interview is one of the most crucial components of a job search. In these lean economic times of long-term unemployment and sparse interview opportunities, it can be a make-or-break situation.



With so much at stake, you'd think job seekers would be at their best when they get that rare chance to meet a prospective employer. But many intelligent job seekers don't know, or don't think they need to know, the most basic rules of good interviewing, [leading to unnecessary disasters](#).

One job applicant's blunder, however, is another's opportunity. Job interviewing may not be easy, but it's also not rocket science. It requires a combination of preparation and common sense. Just knowing the 10 most common ways intelligent job seekers blow their interviews will give you a step up in this ultracompetitive job market:

**1. Plan? What plan?** Many job seekers begin a job search without much advance thought, perhaps due to a recent unpleasant workplace event or a desire to make more money. The absence of a clear-cut professional career plan will be apparent to an alert employer, however, who will judge you as lacking commitment or as simply unsuitable. Even worse, a less observant employer may hire you for the position, which may lead to your entering the wrong next chapter of your career. Know yourself and your fundamental goals before even thinking about a job search.

**2. Research is for wimps:** Not all companies are alike, and even when they are, employers prefer to believe they're different and special. In fact, many will ask you what you know about the company and the position for which you're interviewing. Try to bluff your way through that question and the interview will be over, even if you haven't realized it yet. You can avoid that dilemma by thoroughly researching the company and job responsibilities ahead of time. That will ensure your ability to come up with a unique and convincing answer.

**3. Preparation, schmeperation:** You're a bright person and fast on your feet, right? And who knows about your experience better than you, right? So why prepare? Because if you don't, you're going to blow it. There's a difference between knowing something and being able to articulate that information in a concise and engaging manner. Even experienced attorneys who know their cases inside and out will rehearse before they make a final argument to a jury. Smart politicians who know their positions cold will nevertheless prepare for important appearances. Your career -- and your future -- is worth the same amount of effort.

**4. Dress for failure:** Dress codes in the workplace have taken a dramatic turn toward the informal. That has prompted many a job seeker to assume that "business casual" attire will be just fine for an interview. An employer who pays undue attention to superficial matters such as dress doesn't deserve you anyway, right? Wrong. [Dress for an interview](#) as you would for an important meeting, which translates into a suit or jacket and tie for men and the equivalent for women. Even if your interviewer is wearing a Hawaiian shirt and teases you about your attire, he will understand that you suited up as a gesture of respect and are someone who values the opinion of others. In other words, it doesn't hurt to overdress.

**5. Busy people are fashionably late:** Many otherwise smart job candidates make the mistake of viewing an interview as just another appointment. That mindset tempts them to take the last-minute phone call or gamble that the traffic won't be any heavier than usual. And if you're just a few minutes late, what's the big deal, because it shows you're a busy, important person, right? Wrong. Lack of punctuality is almost always fatal to a candidate's prospects, however qualified she may be and however compelling her excuse for being late. If you're more than one minute late to an interview, you will probably not get the job. The lesson: Plan your commute so that you arrive in the reception area seven to 10 minutes before the interview.

**6. Be loud and obnoxious in the reception area:** All job interviews start in the reception area. Receptionists serve as the eyes and ears of the employer. In fact, they're often sought out by the interviewers after the candidate has left to learn how he behaved before the meeting. So feel free to be rude to the receptionist. Have that nasty cellphone conversation with the client who isn't paying you. Catch up on your dental flossing while you're waiting. Just don't plan on returning.

**7. Find out how much they're willing to pay you:** Compensation is almost always one of the key factors an employer or job seeker considers in deciding whether to extend or accept a job offer. So it seems perfectly logical to ask the interviewer how much the position pays. After all, why waste everyone's time if you and the employer are in completely different ballparks? Unfortunately, there are some aspects of job interviews in which social convention trumps common sense, and salary is one of them. A job applicant's question about compensation is one of the reasons most frequently cited by employers for rejecting candidates. So keep your curiosity in check until you get a job offer.

**8. Don't ask questions during the interview:** There's one thing worse than asking bad questions during an interview: not asking any questions. Many otherwise intelligent job seekers opt not to ask questions during a job interview, even when invited to do so. Ask them why, and they'll tell you they wanted to make a good impression by showing respect for the interviewer and her time. The result, unfortunately, will be exactly the opposite. Employers view job seekers who fail to ask any or more than a few perfunctory questions as lacking interest, enthusiasm or intellectual curiosity. Do your preparation, and walk into the interview [with at least 10 open-ended, substantive questions](#) about the company and position.

**9. Be spontaneous when answering questions:** Job interviews can be as unique as the people and opportunities involved. Still, certain difficult questions come up often. They vary from the straightforward, such as why you're seeking to leave your current job and how much money you're seeking, to the annoying, such as what your weaknesses are, to the truly challenging, such as to describe a recent disagreement you had with a supervisor or co-worker and how you resolved it. You may be the glibbest individual to walk the face of the earth, but fail to plan your answers to the most common and challenging interview questions and you will blow your opportunity. Savvy, intelligent job candidates may in fact need less preparation than their competitors but will prepare twice as hard.

**10. Tell amusing war stories:** In the classic comedy movie "Airplane," the movie's hero, an airplane passenger on a long flight, insists on telling his long and boring life story to his seatmate. When we next see his companion, she is a skeleton. That's a good image to keep in mind when you go on a job interview. One of the key characteristics of successful people in today's busy, short-attention-span world is the ability to communicate in a clear and crisp manner. Insist on telling war stories or giving super-detailed answers to simple questions, and you may find yourself talking to a skeleton. Opt instead to bone up on your communication skills so that you'll be prepared to answer any question, however complex, in 40 to 60 seconds.

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