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Five Common Interview Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

Have you ever left a job interview saying, “I could have answered that question better than I *did*”? If so, you aren’t alone. Even those with strong skill sets and years of experience in the accounting profession don’t always know how to sell their qualifications effectively to hiring managers.

If you’re looking for a new position or plan to do so in the future, carefully consider your interviewing techniques. Here are five common mistakes and advice on how to avoid them:

1. Failing to research a company

Not preparing for the discussion in advance puts you at a disadvantage before you even walk into an interviewer’s office. Primarily, this means learning as much as possible about a prospective employer.

Generally speaking, the more senior the role for which you are interviewing, the more critical it becomes to know a firm from the inside out. Hiring managers will assume that, at minimum,

you’ve investigated their organization’s website, so expand the scope of your research efforts. Use your professional network, the Internet,

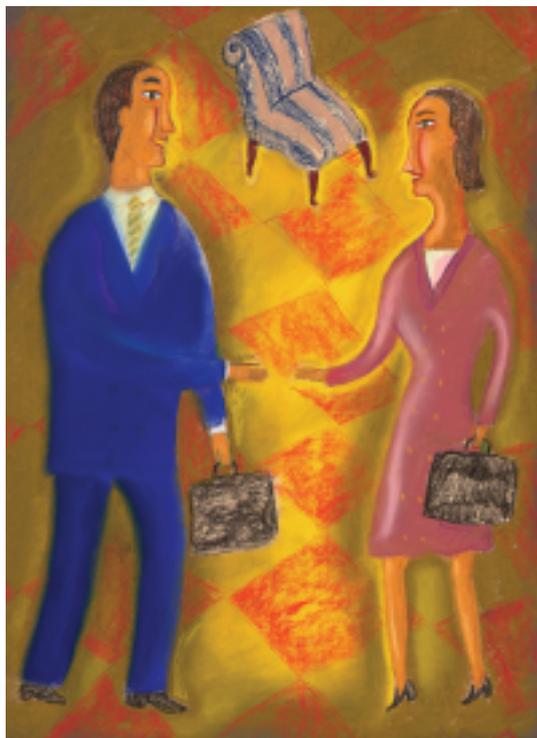
and industry publications to determine the company’s business priorities, competitors, and market position. This will help you translate your financial and management expertise into concrete examples of how you can make a difference at the firm.

2. Saying too little/too much

You don’t want to gloss over vital information as you respond to interview questions, but you also don’t want to go into too much detail. Both extremes can create a negative impression with hiring managers. If your responses are too brief, interviewers will learn very little about you and your qualifications; if they are too lengthy, you may lose the hiring manager’s attention.

Advance preparation and practice are the keys to giving thoughtful answers. Days before the interview, consider your answers to questions an interviewer is likely to ask about

your background. The intricacies of Sarbanes-Oxley 404 compliance, for example, will be less challenging to explain in a one- or two-minute



response if you have crafted a summary of your experience with compliance efforts before the interview. Be prepared to support broader statements with specific examples that showcase your accounting and leadership skills. Consider practicing your responses with friends, family, and trusted colleagues. They can provide candid feedback that can help you refine your answers and ensure they are the appropriate length.

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When faced with difficult questions, resist the temptation to say the first thing that comes to mind. Take a brief pause to collect your thoughts before proceeding. If a query is vague or confusing, don't be afraid to ask for clarification.

3. Ignoring cues from the interviewer

One of the most valuable and underrated interviewing skills is the ability to listen. If you concentrate too intently on forming your responses as the hiring manager is speaking, you can miss critical information.

Throughout the discussion, interviewers may provide useful clues as

to what they are looking for in candidates, allowing you to tailor your answers to their requirements. For example, a chief financial officer might mention the company is undergoing rapid growth, which can indicate a need for employees who adapt easily to a fast-paced environment and assume challenging demands.

Also take note of the hiring manager's reaction when you are speaking. If he or she is constantly looking at the clock on the wall or interrupting you before you've finished talking, your responses may be straying off topic or becoming too long.

4. Not being yourself

Avoid becoming so focused on saying the "right thing" that you don't give an accurate portrayal of your skills and interests. For instance, you might exaggerate your role in analyzing financial reports because you think that's what the job calls for while failing to emphasize your proven ability to identify cost-savings opportunities—a competency the firm may actually value more. Remember, it benefits you and the hiring manager if you present an accurate picture of your qualifications so that both of you can be satisfied the job is a fit. The hiring manager is trying to get to know you, so do your best to provide a glimpse into what type of employee you will be.

5. Misusing the opportunity to ask questions

Interviews go both ways, so be ready with your own questions at the end of the discussion. Prepare a few before you arrive at the company, and write down any additional issues that arise as the conversation progresses.

Make certain you ask specific questions about the company's mis-

sion, business practices, and expectations to determine whether they are in line with your own career aspirations. Also find out about the organization's long-term priorities and how your contributions would impact those plans.

While you no doubt want to learn about the compensation and benefits package, avoid asking about this aspect of the position until you are further into the process or the interviewer brings it up. Remember that you must first demonstrate your value to the organization. Hiring managers know salary is an important component of the dialogue, but they will be more open to this discussion if you have established a rapport and clearly communicated your qualifications.

By avoiding the five mistakes outlined above, you can create a more favorable impression with hiring managers and get more out of the interview process. Research prospective employers thoroughly, practice your responses, and learn as much as you can about the opening during your visit. Adequate preparation and effective communication may well give you the edge you need to secure an employment offer. ■

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