

CAREER ADVICE - FINANCE

# Ten Dumb Things Said During Job Interviews

By KELLY EGGERS

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We've all experienced it. That sinking feeling that occurs when the job interview that was going so well suddenly goes off track. Maybe it's the expression on the hiring manager's face, or the awkward pause that ensues, but there is little doubt when it happens.

Common interview mistakes, of course, include bad mouthing your former employer, failing to adequately research the company or the position and just plain talking too much. Careerbuilder.com, a job posting site, publishes an annual list of [10 interview blunders](#), including asking the hiring manager for a ride home or flushing the toilet during a phone interview.

Thanks to the rise of social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, dumb interview moves are taking on a new character. The urge to share everything about one's life with friends and strangers via cyberspace is invading the very private atmosphere of the recruiter's office. Moreover, the need to stand out in the information cacophony of the Web has increased the pressure to seem unique and special.

"We've been socialized to assume that we have to stand out in some way, and we're encouraged to be bold," says Roy Cohen, author of "The Wall Street Professional's Survival Guide" and a New York City-based career coach. "But that is not necessarily what people are looking for in candidates to bring on board. They want people who fit in."

Oversharing has now become an occupational hazard of the job hunt. Here are 10 examples of when too much information was, well, really too much information:

**"My apologies for being late, my husband and I were fighting. It happens all the time."**

"One individual arrived 20 minutes late for her interview," says Lisa Chenofsky Singer, an executive and career management coach based in New Jersey. While the pair walked to grab the candidate a cup of water, Chenofsky Singer asked how the commute had been. "She in turn told me that her commute was horrid, and she and her husband had fought on who was responsible for dropping their child off at day care," she explains. "I followed up with 'Is this a typical morning?' She replied that this is why she lost her last job, and continued on to tell me that the company had no respect for families."

Not only has the candidate revealed that she's having persistent marital problems, but before she's even sat down for her initial interview, she's indicated that those issues impact her ability

to arrive on time to the office, and she expects the employer to be tolerant of it. "You get so much out of a candidate in that short walk to the coffee station. People talk much more informally then," Chenofsky Singer says. "She had such a great resume," but knowing that her client was already frantic, "I knew I couldn't bring more chaos into his life, I had to make it simpler."

### **"I'm in anger management because I hit a former co-worker."**

"I've had candidates share with me their anger management problems, views on gender, age, and other things that can be damaging in an interview," says Shilonda Downing, owner of Virtual Work Team, which helps business owners find remote workers. "One candidate recently mentioned that he was going through anger management for hitting a co-worker in corporate America, and that is why he would like to work from home going forward."

Major character flaws, particularly when they are of the physical-harm variety, shouldn't be brought up in an interview. Bringing up disagreements with colleagues or managers as a reason for leaving a former employer doesn't bode well that you'll be reliable and reasonable in a new position--even if it is a remote one. "Mentioning this is typically deemed as someone who is unable to handle situations professionally and without violence," Downing says. Unless you're required to disclose that you're undergoing some kind of psychological treatment, find an honest way to work around it.

### **"Well you're cute, too."**

"There was a man who asked the junior recruiter interviewing him out on a date during the interview," says Winnie Anderson, a former recruiter for the casino gaming industry. "She excused herself somehow and came into my office to tell me about it. She was really flustered." Anderson asked the applicant into her office, as the fellow's original interviewer was too uncomfortable to continue herself. "I then proceeded to thank him for coming in, and explained we wouldn't be able to consider him for a position because he had asked Jane out and that was inappropriate conduct in an interview," she says. "He then said, 'Well you're cute, too.' I said he could go now."

It should go without explanation, but any level of flirtation in an interview--subtle or blatant--should never occur. It especially shouldn't occur twice in the same interview.

### **"My old boss was a monster, and it's really scarred me emotionally."**

"I have a client I was working with who exited from a very difficult situation at work, where she had worked for someone who was really a monster," Cohen says. "The feelings were so very raw about working for this individual, and she truly felt that she had been treated unfairly when she was dismissed." Whether or not that was the case, Cohen says, she shouldn't have been focusing on something the interviewer doesn't need to hear about.

Disagreements between managers and their lieutenants are common, but knowing that an employee was scarred by a bad relationship with their supervisor doesn't reflect positively on the

job applicant. "When interviewers meet candidates, they're not psychotherapists. They don't want to know the deep dark secrets you might be hiding, they just want to know that you can do the job, that you're basically sane and that you'll fit in," Cohen says.

Offering more than that can make them question your suitability for the role. "Anyone who did their homework would find that the individual my client worked for had a reputation that preceded her as being very difficult to work with," he explains, "but she should have come up with a more appropriate way to bring up the separation."

### **"Oh, that's because I just took a Xanax."**

"I interviewed someone who swore she'd be great at the job, but she was talking incredibly slowly," says Chenofsky Singer, the career management coach. "A single word would take forever. I wanted to pull them out of her mouth." Concerned that the applicant might be suffering from a legitimate medical issue like low blood sugar, Chenofsky Singer asked if this was the candidate's typical rate of speaking. "'Oh, yes,' she replied, 'I take a Xanax before a meeting or a presentation because I get so nervous. I don't think I'm doing poorly, do you?'"

Having some nerves before an interview is normal, but before medicating, be sure of the effects on your personality and disposition. "More than trying to pick on her individual interviewing style at the time, I was concerned that there was something I should know," Chenofsky Singer says, which served as a distraction from a discussion of her qualifications.

### **"That other guy you are interviewing? Think twice."**

"One of my clients was in an interview, and he knew that someone he was acquainted with was also interviewing for this position," explains Cohen, the career coach. "He asked the interviewer about what qualities they were looking for in the right candidate, and what the other people they were considering were like," he says. "He then went on to say, 'Also, I hear you're interviewing so-and-so for the same role. Let me just warn you, you should do your due diligence before you hire them.'"

Disparaging anyone in an interview, especially your competition, doesn't reflect positively on your judgment or character. "First of all that kind of information wasn't requested of him, and he introduced it very inappropriately," Cohen says. "It makes him seem far more competitive than he should have indicated, and showed that he's not really collaborative, or the 'team player' that was essential for the role."

### **"Just a little itch."**

"I was recruiting for a sales director position for my employer," says Dany Bourjolly Smith, who's a recruiter with a professional services firm selling to C-level executives. "I was thrilled to have this candidate in for a live interview based on his resume. During the interview, he was saying all of the right things. Suddenly, he takes his right hand and sticks it inside his sock and shoe and begins scratching under his heel furiously."

Bourjolly Smith described the itching as "aggressive," and the candidate continued it while he was talking and answering questions unfazed. "At the end of the interview, I did my best to be subtle and not shake his hand. This amounted to an awkward bump of elbows. He definitely noticed that I didn't shake his hand."

For a client-facing position like the one this candidate was interviewing for, but really, for any position at all, behaving in a strange and unprofessional manner--particularly when it's hygiene-related--is a big red flag. "Naturally, I declined him for the position," Bourjolly Smith says. "If he would behave like that in front of a recruiter, I can only imagine what he would do in front of our clients during a sales meeting."

### **"I locked a mentally ill patient in a room to teach him a lesson."**

"A few years ago, I was hired by a nonprofit that provided services for the homeless, the majority of whom were developmentally disabled, to find them a facilities director," says Bruce Hurwitz, author of "A Hooker's Guide to Getting a Job: Parables from the Real World of Career Counseling and Executive Recruiting." Hurwitz prescreened one well-qualified candidate who didn't raise any red flags, and sent the applicant forward to his clients for a full interview. When asked for examples of how he had interacted with people with psychiatric issues, "he told my client that there was a person living at his facility who refused to stay out of the library.

"One day, the candidate waited for the man to enter the library and locked him in. The man called him numerous times begging to be let out of the room. He refused until the man was about to soil himself. When he promised never to enter the library again, my candidate released him."

When asked for real-life examples of your skills and expertise, it is best to refrain from bringing up wild, controversial examples, like ones of abusing people to keep them in line, particularly when they're developmentally challenged. "The sad part? My candidate actually thought he was telling the client positive things about his judgment, and had no idea why they didn't want him," Hurwitz says.

### **"Sorry, I'm having a hot flash."**

"One of my clients happens to be menopausal, and she has occasional hot flashes," says Cohen. The client, Cohen explains, dresses in layers that can be easily taken off or put on. During a second-round interview, she evidently began to feel a flash coming on. "She explained to the fellow interviewing her that she was in menopause, and then proceeded to remove her sweater, revealing a rather skimpy camisole," Cohen says. "She also began to fan herself."

As a general rule of thumb, physically exposing too much of yourself makes people uncomfortable and should be avoided. Adding commentary about your hormones will only add to the awkwardness. "It was uncomfortable for her, yes, but even more awkward for her interviewer," says Cohen. "A classic example of 'TMI.'" If you're prone to any sort of potentially embarrassing problem, prepare yourself to handle it in an acceptable manner: In this case, don't wear layers that would be inappropriately revealing, and don't over-explain behavior that is as

simple as removing a sweater.

**"Oh, he was killed in a drug deal."**

"I had a woman do an excellent interview," says Holly Wolf, who's currently the chief marketing officer with Conestoga Bank in Pennsylvania, but was formerly responsible for hiring staff for an emergency clinic. At the end of the interview, when she asked why the woman wanted to be a nurse, she explained that she had gone back to school after her husband passed away, and she wanted to serve as a good role model for her young girls.

"She was about 33 so that was an incredible accomplishment," Wolf says, "so I said, 'I'm sure your husband is proud of you and what an excellent role model you are for your daughters.' She looked at me and said, 'He really wasn't a good role model for our children. He was killed in a drug deal that went bad.'"

Bringing up losses of friends or family members in an interview can be a touchy subject. Bringing up the illicit and illegal dealings of your late friend or family member is an example of taking it too far. It can be acceptable if you're careful to bring it up in a casual way, and without so much detail that it makes someone uncomfortable. Despite it being an excellent interview, the candidate tainted it by sharing more than was necessary.

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