

JOB INTERVIEWS

Two Crucial Errors

A few weeks ago, I spoke to a longtime acquaintance, Susan, who recently had a job interview for an entry-level inspection position at a computer hardware organization.

“Hey Sue! I heard you had an interview. How did it go?” I asked.

“It went great. The pay is more than what I make now, and I think they really liked me. They’re planning to hire 10 people, and the woman I interviewed with told me she would let me know by Friday whether I got the job,” she replied.

“That’s excellent. What’s the name of the organization?” I asked.

“Oh gosh, I can’t remember. Hold on, I have that woman’s card somewhere,” she said.

That’s when I got a sinking feeling in my stomach. I knew Susan had been on several interviews during the past year and each time, to her confusion and disappointment, she received a rejection letter. I was starting to understand why. From our brief conversation, I knew Susan had made two crucial errors in her job hunting process:

1. She failed to research the organization before her interview.
2. She failed to follow up with the organization after her interview.

I have worked in engineering and quality management for the past 20 years and have had the privilege of participating in the hiring process of my subordinates and many of my colleagues. I’ve

Easy—but often forgotten—tactics that will set you apart from other job candidates

by Ray Harkins

interviewed many potential job candidates and have discovered a few opportunities to make a substantial impact that unsuccessful candidates often miss. Failing to research the organization you’re interviewing with is almost always a deal breaker.

Why research?

These days, when even small organizations have websites, it’s nearly effortless to garner a basic understanding of an organization’s product or service line, corporate structure and executive staff. With a little more digging through social media outlets, online trade journals and local media sources, you can learn about recent changes in the organization, such as expansions or downsizings, or even hints about why it’s hiring for the position you’re eyeing.

With all these opportunities to understand the inner workings of an organization, failing to have at least a few relevant facts about it prior to your interview almost is as bad as not showing up at all. It says to the hiring manager that you’re interested in getting a paycheck, but not really interested in investing in the organization for the long haul.

As Ryan Caldbeck, contributing author at *Entrepreneur* magazine, said, “If a candidate hasn’t prepared—and, ideally, over-prepared—for this critical first meeting, what can we expect on a typical Tuesday in the role?”¹

Knowing this, one of the best questions I can ask a candidate early in the interview is, “Tell me, Bob—what do you know about this organization?” His answer to that question sets the pace for the rest of the interview. If Bob says, “I don’t really know what you guys do,” the rest of the interview is just a formality.

Conversely, a well-prepared candidate not only answers that question proficiently, but also weaves his or her knowledge of the organization into the rest of the interview.

One thing to keep in mind while rummaging for information about your prospective employer: You may find some skeletons in its closet, such as a CEO’s recent termination, a pending lawsuit or a similar scandal. Unattractive tidbits such as these may spare you the woes of accepting the wrong job offer. Typically, it’s best to keep any dirt to yourself, at least through the first interview. This will give you time to gain a broader perspective of the organization and perhaps give them a chance to bring it up themselves.



The follow-up

In today's day of ubiquitous communication—emails, texts, tweets, posts and podcasts—job candidates are asking whether another piece of correspondence—the interview thank-you letter—is necessary. After all, the thank-yous and handshakes were exchanged in person, and the HR manager promised to follow up within a week. So why bother?

In reviewing the conventional advice for crafting an interview thank-you letter, I can understand why this form of correspondence comes under scrutiny. Most experts recommend addressing similar points in an interview follow-up letter:

- + Express your appreciation for their interest in you.
- + Remind them of your qualifications and how they will help the organization.
- + Reiterate your interest in the position they're offering.

I would ask, though, does expressing these items add value to the employer's overall picture of you? In some sense, yes. A timely follow-up letter shows that you're polite and organized,

but that alone may not be enough to stop an HR manager from choosing another candidate.

The follow-up letter (or email) is one more opportunity for a prospective employer to get to know you, but a generic thank you may be a waste of that opportunity. It may even come across as bland and impersonal. Be sure, then, to take maximum advantage of possibly the last chance you'll have to sway the decision makers in your direction.

When writing a follow-up letter to the interviewer, I like to make it as personal as possible and an extension of the conversation we had in person. Expressing gratitude for the interview always is a good opener, but try to find an opportunity to make a genuine connection as well. For instance:

"Dear Mr. Silverman,

"Thank you for the opportunity to meet you and your staff. I enjoyed the tour of your facility and was particularly impressed by the rapport you have with your production workers. It is obvious that you are much more than just a boss to them."

Sharing a positive observation about the prospective employer's workplace culture or managerial philosophy is a terrific way to help make that personal connection. These softer aspects of an organization are maintained through the personalities of the people working there, and you noticing those aspects helps the hiring manager decide whether you would make a good addition to the team.

The follow-up letter also is your best opportunity to clarify some

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CAREER COACH

part of the interview discussion or to add useful information you forgot to share. Everyone has those moments in which you reflect on a conversation and wish you had said something different. This is that chance.

Recently, I helped a colleague obtain a director of operations position at a local school district. As he rehashed the details of his interview, we realized that he had left out some relevant work experience that might have weighed heavily in his favor. So, we drafted a couple sentences to fill in the blanks. Here's an excerpt from that letter:

"When we discussed my responsibilities as the operations manager for XYZ Systems, I forgot to mention that, in addition to overseeing the staff concerns and day-to-day needs of the corporate warehouse, I also coordinated the outbound shipments of the organization's four trucks delivering 20 to 30 pallets of product every day. Given the complexities of your district's busing system, I wanted to make sure you knew that my background includes this logistical experience."

Lastly, the follow-up letter is the perfect place to clearly state your desire (assuming you have it) to work for the organization. When you're searching for a job, it's easy to feel like the underdog, with hiring managers on one side and your competition on the other. Realistically, hiring managers are under pressure themselves to find qualified candidates who are going to stick with the organization. And many of the offers they tender get declined.

Earlier in my career, I sat on the interview board for my organization's summer engineering intern program. Our goal was to find three to five solid interns from the pool of about 20 students we interviewed. I remember we pondered many times whether our favorite candidates would accept our offer.

Clearly and honestly stating your intention to accept the position if it is offered answers that question for the hiring manager. A statement expressing your desire to work for their organization could read as simple as:

"After carefully considering our discussion last Tuesday, I am genuinely excited about the possibility of stepping into your quality engineer position."

The goal for the job hunter and the hiring manager is the same: To find the best fit. As Jim Collins, author of the article "Good to Great," aptly stated, "[Leaders of organizations] start by getting the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats."²

With a job candidate's adequate research before the interview and a noteworthy follow-up afterward, both sides can determine more accurately and quickly whether the job opportunity is a good fit. **QP**

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1. Ryan Caldbeck, "These 5 Interview Blunders Will Probably Kill Your Job Prospects," *Entrepreneur*, March 14, 2017, www.entrepreneur.com/article/232196.
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