

## Take that bird off your shoulder

**It seems incomprehensible that, with all the advice available, far too many job seekers still make inexcusable blunders, pros say**

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Right in the middle of a job interview, a candidate answered his ringing cellphone.

Never mind how rude that was. Even worse was that his current boss was on the other end of the line.

And, right in front of the interviewer, the candidate blithely lied, telling his boss he was with a client.

Taking personal call during interview. Lying to boss. Lying to boss in front of interviewer.

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Three strikes and you're out.

"The amazing thing is, he didn't think he had done anything wrong," recalls career coach Daisy Wright, chief strategist for Wright Career Solution in Brampton Ont., of that recent client, who sought her help after making that job interview-killing move.

It seems incomprehensible that, with all the career advice available - from books to blogs to coaches to Globe Careers - job seekers are still making inexcusable blunders when they show up for what ought to be one of the most important encounters of their life.

Yet, far too many people still persist in shooting themselves in the foot.

Hiring managers and career coaches can offer up lots of bizarre examples of job-interview gaffes - from people who have shown up drunk to those who were scantily dressed to those who made stupid comments that all but eliminated them from further consideration.

This week, staffing service firm OfficeTeam released a list of boneheaded incidents that hiring managers have recently seen - including one applicant who fell asleep during an interview, another who arrived with a bird on his shoulder, and a third who forgot to remove a wad of gum from his palm before shaking the interviewer's hand.

And executive job search site TheLadders.co.uk issued its own release of the top five job-interviewing blunders: inappropriate clothing, lying, dissing past employees or colleagues, acting desperate, and being unprepared.

It's all great for laughs, but unfortunately, it's also evidence that a surprising number of those on the job hunt are still making career suicidal moves, says Lara Dodo, vice-president of OfficeTeam in Toronto.

"Even though there is more information about interview dos and don'ts available than ever before, it seems people are not seeking it out."

And it's not just rookies making stupid mistakes, Ms. Wright says. "A job interview is not something you practice regularly, and people who have been in a job for several years may have developed habits or body language that they think are normal but that an interviewer will interpret as signs of trouble or lack of preparation."

With a spreading informality in life in general these days, people can develop unconscious habits that can create a poor impression in a formal setting, such as a job interview, says Cassandra Gierden, owner of Prophet Coaching in Vancouver.

"I continually have to remind people to please turn off their cellphones and BlackBerrys before business meetings and interviews because not only is it rude, it sends the message you are more concerned with your personal life than your work."

Many people also hold the mistaken idea that doing something unexpected can help make them stand out in a competition for a job, she adds.

"It is too easy to go overboard. You should be noticed for your polish and professionalism, rather than the parrot on your shoulder.

"Manners and politeness count. You want to know the rules and go by them and not be the exception to the rule," Ms. Gierden advises.

The interview itself can be so daunting for some people that "it makes their brains go on stun," Ms. Gierden adds.

"A lot of people have high anxiety and that can make them blurt out answers to get through the situation, which can mean they say the wrong thing at the wrong time."

Coming across badly can also result from trying too hard to be what the company wants you to be, rather than being your authentic self, says career coach Colleen Clarke, president of Colleen Clarke and Associates in Toronto.

This can make you contradict yourself, or try too hard, making a stupid error in the process.

Ms. Wright says that many faux pas come down to nervousness, lack of research and lack of knowledge - all of which can be remedied with preparation and advance planning.

In short, "what you need to do is imagine yourself on the other side of the desk," Ms. Clarke says.

"Look in a mirror and ask 'what is the interviewer seeing?' Ask yourself, if you owned the company and needed someone to improve the bottom line: 'Why would I hire me?' " Ms. Clarke suggests.

It's not about your needs, the salary or the benefits but what value you can add to the organization.

"People don't understand that going to an interview is like going to a funeral. It's that serious.

"It's not the time to try to be Jerry Seinfeld."

**CANDIDATES WILL DO THE DARNDDEST THINGS**

## YOU CAN'T MAKE THIS STUFF UP

"The candidate sent his sister to interview in his place."

"The person was dancing during the interview. He kept saying things like: 'I love life!' and 'Oh yeah!' "

"A job applicant came in for an interview with a cockatoo on his shoulder."

"The candidate stopped the interview and asked me if I had a cigarette."

"We had one person who walked out of an interview into a glass door - and the glass shattered."

Didn't do their homework

"The candidate got his companies confused and repeatedly mentioned the strengths of a competing firm, thinking that's who he was interviewing with."

"A guy called me by the wrong name during the entire interview."

"We're a retail company, and when we asked the candidate why she wanted to work for us, she said she didn't want to work in retail any more."

Gum chewers need not apply

"An interviewee put his bubble gum in his hand, forgot about it, and then shook my hand."

"A job seeker gestured with his hands so much that he sat on them to stop it."

"A candidate fell asleep during the interview."

## CLOTHES MAKE THE CANDIDATE

"Someone showed up for an interview in pyjamas and his hair not combed, like he had just rolled out of bed."

"The candidate had a big rip in the back of his pants."

## PUT A SOCK IN THEIR MOUTH

"An applicant was doing really well in the interview until she got to the reason she left her other job. She told us everyone was out to get her."

"A candidate insulted the interviewer on his tie."

Some job seekers still can't get it right when they go for the all-important interview. Here are some of the faux pas uncovered by staffing service firm OfficeTeam in a recent survey of 150 senior executives in the United States and 100 senior executives in Canada:

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### **Getting it right**

Want to avoid the pitfalls and stride confidently into a job interview? Here are tips from the career pros:

**Do your homework.** Study the industry and the company you're interviewing with ahead of time. Research so you don't ask about things you should already know.

**Anticipate.** Write out answers to questions you expect you will be asked on the night before to help relieve stress.

**Scope out the target.** Go to the workplace in advance of the interview, and get an idea of the dress code and the way people interact. It's important to look like you will fit in with others.

**Role play.** Before the interview, have someone critique your body language, dress and grooming. Video-recording can also help you assess yourself.

**Get a good night's sleep.** Being tired can lead to fumbled words.

**Dress up.** A good rule of thumb is to dress appropriately to a job one level above the position you are applying for.

**Arrive early.** Get some fresh air, breathe and get your mind in gear by reading or listening to music on your way in.

**Check the mirror.** Before walking into the interview, stop in a bathroom and look at your appearance front and back. It's not just to check whether you have lipstick on your teeth or an unzipped fly. You need to also imagine how you're coming across to the person on the other side of the desk.

**Avoid distractions.** A parrot on your shoulder may be memorable, but the focus of the interview should be you.

**Keep it positive.** Never bad-mouth a previous employer or bring up a bad experience in another job.

**Drop your baggage.** You want to emphasize your professional qualifications and enthusiasm and not detract from that by talking about your personal life or your need for vacation time.

**Follow the interviewer's pace.** Listen intently; and don't talk about things you aren't asked.

**Be yourself.** Tell yourself you are the best candidate for the job and let that persona show through during the interview.

**Never lie.** Keep it honest. If you'll lie in the interview, there's no reason the interviewer won't figure you'll lie once you've got the job. And with all the checking these days, you are bound to get caught.

**Forget the gimmicks.** By trying too hard to appear different, you can end up looking weird.

*Wallace Immen*