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ExecuNet Career Guide:

Job-Search Sabotage: Avoiding the 50 Common Blunders that Kill Interviews and Offers

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Job-Search Sabotage: Avoiding the 50 Common Blunders that Kill Interviews and Offers

by John J. Marcus

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About ExecuNet

Founded in 1988, ExecuNet is the leader in providing career management services to the \$100,000+ executive and senior-level manager. It is the "first source" executive and corporate recruiters use to find top executive talent. For the latest in job market intelligence, or to learn more about ExecuNet's services, visit us on the Web at www.execunet.com.



Dear ExecuNet Member:



When you come right down to it, the search for a new job can be neatly divided into two categories: Those things we can control and those that we cannot. But just as adversity tests us to reveal our innermost strengths as we rise to the challenge, I believe the way we deal with Those Things We Cannot Control in a job search is just as important to our career success as handling those we can.

Some just can't resist the temptation to "take charge" by diving helter-skelter into their job search. They plunge into the fray with what I call the "ready, fire, aim" approach.

They waste time and energy with this scattershot approach, and ironically often harm their chances by pushing for results where they have less control, such as trying to put inappropriate pressure on a contact or coming on too strong during an informational interview.

But others understand — either intuitively or perhaps with the help of an executive coach or other resource — that while indeed there is much they can't control in the course of their job search, it is wise to focus their energy like a laser beam on those areas where they do have some control. It represents a targeted and ultimately more effective approach that I encourage everyone to take.

It is in that spirit that we offer you this excellent guide from John Marcus, author of *The Résumé Makeover* and *The Complete Job Interview Handbook*. Aside from being an "easy read," *Job-Search Sabotage: Avoiding the 50 Common Blunders that Kill Interviews and Offers* offers up some very practical, real world advice and counsel on three critical areas of this whole process (Your Résumé, Getting Interviews and Being Interviewed). I like the tangible value of John's tips almost as much as I like how he keeps his focus on what you, the job seeker, can control.

They say that luck is the place "where preparation meets opportunity." I find a lot of wisdom in that old saying; and since "preparation" is the only part of the process over which we have complete control, we've focused this informative and helpful guide in that direction. In other words, these tips are things that you can do without waiting for someone else!

Some of what you find here may feel basic. In fact, I hope that's the case, because all too often the things that seem so obvious and simple are just the things we forget. These "little things" can and often do come back to bite you. They aren't called "common" blunders for nothing!

Our hope with this guide — and with everything we do at ExecuNet — is to help you focus on the "little things" you can control so that you never miss an opportunity to seize the big ones.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dave". The script is cursive and fluid.

Dave Opton
Chief Executive Officer & Founder
ExecuNet

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

John Marcus has more than 30 years of experience in recruitment, job-search counseling, and résumé writing. He lives in Sarasota, Florida, where he provides career services to executives nationwide. Mr. Marcus is an ExecuNet résumé writer.

JOB-SEARCH SABOTAGE: AVOIDING THE 50 COMMON BLUNDERS THAT KILL INTERVIEWS AND OFFERS

YOUR RÉSUMÉ

Not being clear on the job you want

It's possible that Socrates was writing his résumé when "Know thyself" first occurred to him, for it's virtually impossible to write an effective résumé unless you know the position you want to find.

The only purpose of your résumé is to generate interviews for a specific type of work. In order to open the right doors, your résumé must highlight those parts of your background that'll convey your capability for the job you're after. If you don't tailor your résumé this way, it'll lack focus and impact and elicit a poor response.

If you're not sure of your job objective, you'll be better off first trying to decide exactly what you want to do. Then you'll be able to write a targeted résumé that will produce the interviews you want.

Writing your résumé without getting feedback from others in your field

While you might believe your résumé reads a certain way and convincingly conveys your qualifications, other people might see it completely differently. To ensure that you're making the best presentation possible, get feedback from others in your field who understand the type of work you do and who have also seen you perform on the job.

Don't rely on the feedback from close friends, family members, or a significant other, even if one of them is or was an English instructor at an Ivy League college. They just won't have the objectivity you need or the savvy about what you do for a living.

Even the Lone Ranger looked to a coworker for advice: his trusted assistant, Tonto.

ExecuNet Member Resume Review: http://members.execunet.com/e_home_résumé.cfm

Using only one résumé when you have multiple job objectives

Many people are interested in several types of jobs but use only one résumé for presenting their qualifications.

The problem with this approach is that their résumé lacks focus. It portrays them as a jack-of-all-trades but master of none. Regardless of the position they submit their résumé for, they won't be seen as an expert in that area.

If you're interested in two, three or even four different jobs, write a separate résumé for each one, where you showcase your qualifications for the specific position you're seeking.

In the movie *Sweet Home Alabama*, the heroine's father said to his two-timing daughter, "Honey, you can't ride two horses with one ass." Well, this principle holds true in résumé writing.

Stating your requirements for an employer in your job objective

Some job hunters state objectives like these:

"Seeking a responsible accounting position with a growing company that values its employees and promotes from within."

"To join an established company as a manufacturing manager; especially interested in a company with a nurturing, empowering environment that encourages both professional and personal growth and rewards outstanding performance."

These kinds of objectives are a real turnoff to employers, sending the message that the applicant is looking for a company that will take care of them. When employers read a résumé, they're not interested in hearing about someone's wants and needs. Their only interest is what the person can do for them and how well they'll perform a job they're currently trying to fill.

All you need to do with your job objective is state the type of position you're seeking and any industries in which you are especially interested.

Creating a résumé that lacks quantifiable accomplishments in the introductory section

Recruiters and employers are bored with introductory sections that begin with statements about how "dynamic," "success-driven," "self-motivated," "results-oriented" or "people-oriented" someone is, or how they have a "take-charge personality" or "hands-on management style," or what an "out-of-the-box thinker" they are. Readers often snicker when they see these statements, considering them to be fluff and quickly move to the next résumé.

To immediately gain the reader's interest, state two or three of your most outstanding accomplishments in your introductory section, using numbers to show their scope and preceding each accomplishment with a bullet.

These statements will serve as hooks that will instantly convey your capability and prompt recruiters and employers to want to read on in order to learn more about your background.

Instead of using descriptors in your introductory section to tell people how good you are, show them. The way to do this is through presenting accomplishments.

Focusing on responsibilities versus accomplishments in the experience section

One of the biggest blunders job hunters make is to discuss their responsibilities and omit any mention of their accomplishments. Since past performance is the best indicator of future performance, recruiters and employers will be much more interested in knowing *what you did* and *how well you did it* versus *what you were responsible for*. Your accomplishments should therefore comprise the lion's share of your experience section.

To ensure that you make a compelling case for your successes, review all the positions you've held and see what important contributions you've made. Then state them beginning with past-tense action verbs such as the following: directed, led, managed and supervised; achieved, delivered, drove, generated, grew, increased, initiated, instituted and launched; decreased, reduced, cut and slashed; accelerated, created, developed, established, implemented instituted, performed, pioneered, planned, produced, reengineered, restructured, saved and transformed. To give your accomplishments prominence and power, precede each one with a bullet.

When listing your successes, don't include everything you've ever done. Focus on the important points. The less you say, the greater the impact of what you do say.

Heed the words of Polonius, the wise counselor to the king in *Hamlet*: "Brevity is the soul of wit."

Using a functional résumé

A functional résumé is the kiss of death because many employers and recruiters won't even read this type of résumé.

In the functional approach, work experience is grouped according to certain strengths and capabilities versus being discussed according to each employer. For example, a financial executive could list achievements in "Corporate Finance," "Mergers & Acquisitions," "Cost Reduction" and "IPOs." A human resources executive could detail accomplishments in "Organizational Development," "Training," "Compensation & Benefits," "Recruitment" and "Labor Relations." And a sales and marketing executive could discuss achievements in "Strategic Planning," "Key Account Growth," "New Market Penetration," "New Product Development & Launch" and "Advertising & Sales Promotion."

The emphasis is on what someone has done, and it's impossible to tell when or at which company the work was done, which is the very reason why the functional résumé has such low readership.

To ensure that you don't get screened out by using this format, use the widely accepted chronological approach.

Creating a one-page résumé that's a "wall of words"

Some job hunters believe that their résumé must be one-page long. To meet this "requirement," they use very small type and create a document that lacks sufficient white space. The end result is a résumé that looks like a wall of words and that no one wants to read.

The truth of the matter is that a two- or even three-page résumé is perfectly acceptable, especially for job hunters with more than 20 years of experience.

Since eye appeal is so important, never use a font smaller than 9.5 point and be sure there's ample white space at the margins as well as between section headings, names of your employers, descriptions of their business, your job title, and the discussion of your work experience.

Lying on your résumé

Liar's dice might be fun to play at a bar, but you never want to play dice with your career by lying on your résumé.

Today, many companies conduct rigorous background checks before they'll make an offer. Not only do they use their own in-house resources, but they also contract with outside services that specialize in verifying the accuracy of information appearing on a résumé, with special concern for job titles, dates of employment, the college education that's listed, and whether or not the person is eligible for rehire.

If a lie is discovered, your chances of getting hired will be in great jeopardy.

When writing your résumé, remember the words of Sir Walter Scott, "Oh, what a tangled web we weave/when first we practice to deceive."

Using an exotic font or bright-colored paper

Tennis pro Andre Agassi once made a television commercial promoting Canon cameras where he said, "Image is everything." Well, this is true with résumés.

At first glance, if your résumé has a poor image, it'll never get read.

Don't try to attract résumé reviewers' attention by using an exotic font or bright-colored paper such as canary yellow, lime green or chartreuse. You'll be conveying the wrong image. People won't see you as a serious business professional.

Be conservative and use white, off-white or light gray stock. Select Times Roman, Ariel, Helvetica, Tahoma or Garamond for the font.

You'll attract all the attention you need — plus convey the right image — by writing a résumé that begins with an introductory section that contains two or three of your most exciting accomplishments.

Including graphics in your résumé

While graphics can add an exciting visual element to the presentation of your qualifications, they can wreak havoc with readership of your résumé and cause immediate elimination.

If you're e-mailing your résumé, the presence of a graphic can take so long for the document to be downloaded that many recruiters and employers won't wait the amount of time that's required, and they'll delete your e-mail.

If you send your résumé as hard copy and it's scanned into a recruiter's or employer's system, the software might not be able to read the graphic, and what was initially an attractive feature will lose its appeal.

Unless you're mailing or hand carrying your résumé to someone and are certain it'll never be read by software, don't use graphics.

ExecuNet Resume Center: http://members.execunet.com/e_centers.cfm?currentcat=Résumés

GETTING INTERVIEWS

Having a child record your voice-mail message

While you might find it adorable for little Jimmy or Susie to have recorded your home voice-mail/ answering machine message, this sends the wrong message about how seriously you take your career.

You're looking for a job and are expecting phone calls from recruiters and prospective employers. These individuals know this, and they won't think it's cute or respect your judgment when you make them listen to a child's voice that reminds them of the song "All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth."

To project an image of professionalism and seriousness of purpose, record your own message.

Failing to use multiple strategies for generating interviews

Let's face it. Looking for a job isn't fun, especially when you don't have one. As a result, many people focus their interviewing plan on the one or two strategies they're the most comfortable with. This dramatically limits their exposure and number of interviews.

Pro golfers carry 14 different clubs in their bag — each club best for a specific situation — to maximize their number of pars, birdies and eagles. Likewise, you need to have multiple job-search strategies in your arsenal so that you'll be able to hit a hole in one, which is landing the job you're looking for.

To be a pro at winning interviews — just like Tiger Woods is with golf tournaments — draw on the following strategies: networking, contacting prospective employers and recruiters, visiting corporate websites, visiting internet job sites, answering ads in trade publications and the classified section of Sunday newspapers, contacting your trade association or professional organization for job listings, contacting your college's Career Center, and attending job fairs.

The more strategies you use, the quicker you'll land the job you want.

Not accompanying your résumé with a cover letter

Whether you send someone your résumé via e-mail, snail mail or fax, it's in the poorest of taste not to include a cover letter. Many recruiters and employers will be offended by your lack of courtesy and poor understanding of business communications, and your candidacy will be in jeopardy.

Begin your cover letter by explaining why you're writing to the person, then add a paragraph that states a few of the most important things about your background as they pertain to the position you're seeking. Close the letter by stating that you hope to hear back from the person or that you'll be calling them shortly to discuss the appropriate next step.

Don't allow a simple oversight to cause you to strike out at the plate, preventing you from even getting to first base, the initial interview.

Contacting the HR Department versus the individual who could hire you

In the Dustin Hoffman/Meryl Streep movie, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, unemployed ad man Ted Kramer is so committed to getting a job that he bypasses the HR Department at his would-be employer and goes directly to his prospective boss, the Creative Director of the ad agency he hopes to join. Not only does Ted Kramer get the offer, but it's made to him on the spot.

While the HR Department plays a vital role in the successful functioning of an organization, the hiring decision is always made by an applicant's prospective manager. For this reason, you want to initiate contact with a company by approaching the person you'd be working for, not a member of the HR Department.

A key benefit of this approach is that it'll enable you to circumvent all the other applicants whose résumés are sitting in the HR Department waiting to be reviewed. Additionally, if your background isn't right for an existing opening but the manager is impressed with your experience, s/he might create a position for you. This is something the Human Resources Department can't possibly do.

Sending companies and recruiters a video résumé

No doubt about it, the video résumé is an emerging job-search strategy, but its time has not yet come because it isn't seen as an accepted way to convey work experience.

The technology presents four problems.

1. Many employers' and recruiters' computers lack the software necessary to view a video résumé.
2. An effective video résumé can last as long as four minutes, and few people will want to spend that much time viewing it.
3. Many employers won't consider these résumés for fear that they'll be at risk of discrimination charges from a diversity applicant if they don't subsequently interview the person.
4. By using this unorthodox approach, you're taking the chance that some people will see you as a maverick and screen you out. Just as you're not abiding by the commonly accepted method of conveying information about your background, employers and recruiters could see you as unconventional and question your ability to fit into a team.

Since the video résumé isn't what employers and recruiters are looking for, play it safe and use the traditional chronological résumé, which works just fine.

In the words of Yogi Berra, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

Using the Internet as your primary source for interviews

Americans used to wake up, suit up, and go for a jog. Today, many wake up, go to their computer, and surf for a job.

These job hunters believe they're using their time diligently, but in reality all they're doing is entering a black hole. I don't hear of more than one person a year who received a job offer this way.

The problem is that because surfing the Internet is so easy that's how most people spend their time trying to get interviews. As a result, there's a glut of competition, and almost everyone loses.

I'm not saying to ignore positions listed on corporate websites and job sites. Just don't make the Internet the focus of your job search. You don't want to put all your eggs in one basket, especially a basket with a large hole in it.

Providing a non-specific subject in your e-mail message

Stating a subject such as "Résumé of (your name)," "Vice President," "Manager," or "Sales Representative" will do nothing to gain a reader's interest in opening up your e-mail versus the dozens of others on the screen.

What you need is a hook in your subject, something to convey that you could fill an important company need.

Here's how to transform the above subjects into eye-catching information: "Vice President — Finance, with IPO and Multiple Turnaround Successes," "Manufacturing Manager with Plant Start-up, Lean, and JIT Experience," and "Medical Device Sales Representative — New Account Development/New Market Entry."

With this added information, a recruiter or prospective employer has every reason to open up the e-mail.

Using a cutesy e-mail address

Some job hunters use addresses such as LakersFan@aol.com, DogBreeder@msn.com or SurfingGal@hotmail.com, which are obviously based on an interest very dear to their heart. These addresses, while catchy, do nothing to endear the job hunter to employers and recruiters. In fact, they have the opposite effect, sending the message that the person's identity and primary interest are something other than that of a business professional.

Don't try to attract attention with your e-mail address, using it like a vanity license plate. The way to gain interest is through the subject portion of your e-mail message, as just discussed.

Employers and recruiters are swamped with résumés — in good times and bad — and they look for reasons to screen applicants out. Don't give them the opportunity to eliminate you because of your "personal interest" e-mail address.

To create an acceptable address, use your name or initials.

Sending your e-mailed résumé only as an attachment

Many people won't read résumés that have been cut and pasted because all the formatting has been lost and the document is cumbersome to read. They prefer résumés sent as an attachment. Others, however, won't open up attachments for fear of a virus, and they'll only read résumés that have been cut and pasted.

To maximize your audience and readership, state in your e-mail message that your résumé is being sent in the email and as an attachment.

It's sort of like two heads being better than one.

Failing to follow up on résumés sent to prospective employers

Sending your background to prospective employers but not following up on your correspondence is dropping the proverbial ball.

Companies are deluged with résumés, so following up on your submittal will ensure that your background doesn't get lost in the stack. Additionally, your initiative and motivation could result in your being given special consideration as an applicant.

There's also a key advantage to following up with a phone call as opposed to a letter or e-mail. If you're told that your background isn't what the company is looking for, you have the opportunity to ask for referrals to other companies that might be looking for someone with your experience. Here, you can transform a rejection into a new networking contact.

I realize that this follow-up is extra work, but remember, the tortoise beat the hare because he never stopped trying.

Sending recruiters and prospective employers an Instant Message when you know they're online

Nothing could be more presumptuous or rude, unless someone is waiting for urgent information from you and will recognize your screen name, than to send an Instant Message. In all other circumstances, the "no" button will be clicked to get rid of you.

To attract someone's attention, use the traditional e-mail approach, where the subject provides important information about your background.

Underestimating the size of your network of contacts

When many people network, all they do is discuss their goals with family members, close friends, and perhaps a few people at work. This dramatically limits their exposure and doesn't come close to tapping into all the resources that exist.

The more people who know about your qualifications and availability, the quicker you'll get the interviews you want.

Maximize your network by considering the following individuals: fellow employees, former coworkers, customers, suppliers, competitors, members of your professional or trade organization, club members, your accountant, banker, stockbroker, insurance agent, lawyer, doctor (or any healthcare professional for that matter), religious leader, as well as civic and community leaders, and college and high-school alumni.

There's just no telling which of these people might be able to make the introduction that will quickly lead to your next job.

No one has a more extensive network than AT&T. Follow their advice: "Reach out and touch someone."

Neglecting to network your way into your 'A' list of companies

Career experts unanimously agree that approximately 75% of job hunters find their new position through networking.

The moment you hear of a job you're extremely interested in, send in your résumé. But then set a networking campaign in motion. See if you know anyone who works at the company or if you know anyone who knows someone who does. Speak with this person (regardless of the position they hold) and ask if they'll give your résumé to the individual who would be your prospective boss. For example, an inspector in a company's Quality Control Department, an accountant in the Finance Department, or a secretary in the Information Technology Department could get your résumé into the hands of any number of senior executives, even the President. Through networking this way, you'll bypass the competition, whose résumés will be among the dozens or even hundreds that are waiting to be evaluated by the HR Department.

Since networking is about getting your foot in the door, increase your number of interviews by following the time-tested saying "It's not who you are; it's who you know."

Failing to stay in touch with your networking contacts

In *The Terminator*, Arnold Schwarzenegger said, "I'll be back." You need to have Arnold's resolve to be a successful networker.

You just can't expect to get immediate interviews by telling people about your interest in a new position, the type of job you have in mind, then sending them your résumé. You'll need to get back to your networking contacts on a regular basis to cultivate the relationship as well as to make sure they continue to be aware of your interest in going on interviews.

Depending on how well you know someone, you might call the person once a week. Others you might call once a month. It's a good idea to ask each contact how often they would like to hear from you. Also, make the relationship a two-way street by asking if there's anything you can do to return the favor.

By continuously getting back to your contacts, many more job opportunities will be called to your attention, not to mention the additional people you'll be introduced to in order to expand your network of contacts.

Not lining up your references prior to starting your job search

One of the more famous lines from the movie classic *Casablanca* is when the Chief of Police nonchalantly says to his assistant, "Round up the usual suspects." Well, when looking for a job, you need to round up your references. However, you can't do it in a casual way.

First, contact your previous managers, advise them that you're looking for a new position, then explain that you'd like them to serve as references and that you'll be sending them a current résumé so they'll be familiar with your career progression.

Then, when a company has asked you for references, immediately call these people and tell them about the company that will be contacting them, the type of job you're being considered for, and the key points you'd like them to emphasize about you.

Proceeding this way will enable your references to make statements about you that will push the right buttons with a prospective employer and position you as the ideal candidate.

Not providing your references with this detailed information will leave them unequipped to make the most positive statements about you possible.

If you know that a previous manager will be making unfavorable remarks about you, then line up someone else in authority at the company as a reference who will vouch for your capability.

ExecuNet Networking Center:

http://members.execunet.com/e_centers.cfm?currentcat=Networking

Build Your Professional Network with ExecuNet:

http://members.execunet.com/e_networking.cfm

AT THE INTERVIEW

Dressing inappropriately

In *Hamlet*, Polonius also said, "The apparel oft proclaims the man."

This statement is so true in interviewing, where a snap judgment will be made about you based solely on your appearance at the time the interviewer greets you. The way you're dressed will never win you the offer, but if you make a poor impression, the interview will be a mere formality.

When deciding how to dress, consider the type of organization you're interviewing with (the industry, its corporate culture, size, whether it has a reputation for being a formal or informal place to work), and the level of the position. For example, a vice-presidential responsibility at a bank calls for completely different attire than does a graphic artist job at a small advertising agency.

Use your best judgment when trying to decide how to dress. As a rule of thumb, dress up versus down.

Being disrespectful to representatives from the HR Department

While representatives from the HR Department don't make the hiring decision, they can be very influential in seeing to it that you're not made the offer. For this reason, never be disrespectful or rude to someone from HR even though the person you're meeting with might lack an in-depth understanding of your work.

Here are the two most common blunders job hunters make when meeting with a representative from the HR department:

- When meeting an HR representative before the interview with the hiring manager, some applicants consider their questions to be unimportant and say things along the lines of, "I'd prefer to go into this in detail with the person I'd actually be reporting to."
- When meeting an HR representative after being interviewed by a prospective boss, it's not uncommon to be asked certain questions a second time, and applicants have been known to reply with, "I've already covered this with (name of the hiring manager)," insulting the HR representative and sending the message that the interview is just a formality.

It's not. An HR representative can't make you, but s/he can easily break you.

Having little knowledge about the company you're interviewing with

Companies want to hire people who are hard working, motivated, and who take their career seriously. If you show up at an interview knowing little about the organization, how can an interviewer possibly think that you're this type of person? After all, this is where you might be spending 40-50 hours of your time each week.

To get information about a prospective employer, the first place to go, of course, is their website.

Your local library can provide a wealth of additional information. *Moody's Industrial Manual*, *Value Line Investment Survey*, and *Infotrac* contain write-ups on thousands of companies. To find out about any recent developments at a prospective employer that were covered by a newspaper or

magazine, see *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, *Business Periodicals Index*, *F&S Index*, *The New York Times Index*, and *The Wall Street Journal Index*.

A company's Dun & Bradstreet report will be especially helpful if the company is privately owned.

Throughout the interview, you'll have many opportunities to ask probing questions and make insightful statements about the organization, demonstrating that you've taken the time to become knowledgeable about it. This will impress all interviewers.

In the words of the eminent English author Sir Francis Bacon, "Knowledge is power."

Not being able to clearly explain the position you're seeking

Just as employers want to interview people who are knowledgeable about their company, they want to hire people who are clear on the kind of work they want to do.

When an applicant gives the impression that s/he doesn't have a specific position in mind, it's easy for an employer to feel that the person will accept any job s/he can get. Here, an employer can't possibly feel that the person, if hired, would put their head to the grindstone and try to perform at the highest possible level. There could also be concern that this person might leave the company after a brief stint, having found more interesting work elsewhere.

When being interviewed, you must be able to convincingly state the type of job you're looking for, including the specific tasks you want to perform. Your clarity about your job objective will depict you as someone who's committed to succeed at their work and who can be counted on for stability and longevity.

Failing to build rapport with the interviewer

A saying in the career field goes like this, "It's not competence that counts — it's chemistry."

There's no doubt about it: The chemistry between interviewer and interviewee can play a pivotal role in the selection decision, where the rapport between the two individuals can be as important — if not more important — than the applicant's actual ability to perform the job.

It is therefore essential that you build as much rapport as possible with an interviewer.

Before going on an interview, see if you know someone who works at the company, or know someone who knows someone who does. Try to learn about your prospective boss. Any information you can glean will give you a leg up on the competition.

When entering the interviewer's office, notice the pictures on the walls and any personal objects on the desk. They might reveal an interest the two of you have in common. You could then initiate a discussion in this area that would build rapport and possibly lead to a strong bond between you. For example: "I see from that picture you like to bowl. I'm in a league that meets every Tuesday night."

Not being able to succinctly state your accomplishments

When you're being interviewed, your prospective boss will devote considerable time to learning more about the accomplishments you've listed on your résumé, and you must be prepared to

discuss them in detail. As stated earlier, past performance is the best indicator of future performance.

Have at the tip of your tongue each of your accomplishments at every position you've held, and be able to describe them in a crisp, clear, and concise fashion. You'll make a poor impression if an interviewer asks you about your activities at a certain job and you fail to provide a convincing discussion of your successes.

If any of your accomplishments exceeded the established goal or industry average, be sure to include this impressive fact in your discussion.

Being unable to explain the reasons for your accomplishments

It's a fact that some job hunters take credit for work that's not entirely their own.

In some instances, their boss was the primary contributor. In others, they were a member of a team that was responsible for the accomplishment. Therefore, be prepared for interviewers to ask, "So how'd you do it?" in an effort to verify that the work was yours as well as to find out the methodology you used to make the success possible.

Explaining the specific steps you took will not only confirm that you deserve credit for the achievement, but you'll show the interviewer how you perform at your job in order to bring maximum value to an employer.

Not being able to clearly state your strengths

Just as interviewers will be interested in discussing your accomplishments, they'll want to explore your strengths. Not only are your strengths the engine behind your accomplishments, but they're the backbone of your qualifications for being able to hold positions of increased responsibility or to make a complete career change, whichever your goal may be.

You must therefore know exactly what your strengths are and be able to speak of them with conviction. If you're unable to do this, your knowledge of your field and capability will be suspect and your candidacy will be in jeopardy.

Rigorously review your work experience and compile a complete inventory of your strengths before you go on any interviews.

Not acknowledging weaknesses in your background and stating what you're doing to improve yourself in those areas

Interviewers will also want to talk about your weaknesses. We all have them, and you must be willing to discuss them. If you don't admit to having any deficiencies, you'll appear foolish and naïve, and your credibility will be at risk.

When discussing your weaknesses, however, never mention one that would interfere with your ability to perform your work. Instead, state a weakness that would have little impact on the quality of your performance. Equally important, tell the interviewer what you're doing to improve yourself in that area.

For example, many people have great difficulty speaking in front of large groups. To overcome this, they enroll in the Dale Carnegie Training seminar "Successful Public Speaking." Others join Toastmasters International, where they not only improve their public-speaking skills but learn how to "think and speak on their feet."

Having a poor explanation for failures that may have occurred

Noted British essayist Alexander Pope wrote, "To err is human."

Because of this, interviewers will want to discuss your failures in addition to your strengths and accomplishments. Many will even ask you point blank, "What's been your greatest failure?"

If you've made a serious mistake or significantly underperformed in a certain area, admit to it rather than trying to cover it up or circumvent the interviewer's question. An astute interviewer will become suspicious about your response, then zero in on this part of your background in an effort to discover what you've been trying to conceal. You'll lose points for not having been forthcoming. A thorough reference check will expose the failure as well.

When discussing a failure, explain why it occurred, what you've learned from it, then describe the measures you've taken to ensure that it won't happen again.

Many people are reluctant to discuss a failure for fear that it'll doom their career. On the contrary. No better example exists than that of Lee Iacocca, who was fired from Ford by his boss, Henry Ford II. Iacocca immediately joined Chrysler, where he orchestrated one of the most dramatic successes in the history of Corporate America. He rescued Chrysler from imminent bankruptcy, then delivered record profits in just six years.

Being unable to explain what you did that was new or different

Growth is the goal of all companies. They achieve this growth by creating new products and services, entering new markets and businesses, as well as developing more productive and cost-effective business processes. The juice behind this growth is innovation.

Nothing will impress interviewers more than statements you make about innovative things you've done and the positive results that ensued. Your innovation will set you miles apart from the other applicants who will be speaking of performing their job only along traditional lines, where they just go through the motions and show no interest or initiative in making a major improvement.

Carefully review all the tasks you've performed — especially your accomplishments — and see what you might have done that was new or different that dramatically enhanced your performance and resulted in key contributions to an employer. Then look for opportunities throughout the interview to discuss your new ideas and the impressive results they produced. Companies seek out motivated people who want to make a difference.

In the words of Mark Twain, "Inventors are the creators of the world — after God."

Not asking the interviewer questions about the position and the company

Your interviews shouldn't be a one-way street, with the interviewer asking the questions and you providing the answers. If you allow this to happen, you'll appear to have little interest in your job and career as well as a low level of energy and motivation.

Show your enthusiasm, personality and drive by taking an active role in the interview through asking questions about the position and the company. Asking questions will also help you build rapport with the interviewer, and nothing is more important.

Questions about the position: In addition to technical queries regarding the tasks to be performed, ask questions such as "What are the most pressing things you need to have accomplished, and by when?" "How do you see the position changing in the next year or so?" and "What kinds of positions would this position lead to?"

Questions about the company: "How do you see the company changing in the next year or two?" "What can you tell me about any new products or services that will be introduced shortly?" "Can you discuss any of the company's plans for growth and expansion?"

Skip over questions about salary, medical and dental plans, vacation time and sick leave. You'll be able to find out about these matters once you've been made the offer.

ExecuNet Member Resource: [45 Interview Questions to Determine Fit:](#)

http://members.execunet.com/e_centers_detail.cfm?id=1821¤tsubcatid=¤tcatid=3

ExecuNet Member Resource: [Favorite Interview Questions From a Top Recruiter:](#)

http://members.execunet.com/e_centers_detail.cfm?id=1820¤tsubcatid=¤tcatid=3

Being unprepared for hardball questions like "Why should I hire you?" or "Tell me about yourself"

Job hunters dread being asked these questions, especially when the interviewer begins the meeting this way. Their palms get sweaty, and they begin to hem and haw, not knowing what to say.

Actually, you should hope that an interviewer begins the conversation by putting you "on the hot seat." Here, you're being given the perfect opportunity to discuss your most important accomplishments and strengths that directly relate to the position you're being interviewed for. What better opportunity could you ask for to show that you're the ideal candidate for the job?

Be the Barry Bonds of interviewing. Turn these hardball questions into a home run.

ExecuNet Member Resource: [The Top 21 Questions You Must Be Prepared To Answer in an Interview:](#)

http://members.execunet.com/e_centers_detail.cfm?id=1570¤tsubcatid=¤tcatid=3

Having poor explanations for why you changed employers

Interviewers will be asking why you left your previous employers or why you're looking to make a change at this time, and it's essential that you offer positive reasons, not negative ones.

Otherwise, your explanation(s) will be looked upon with disfavor.

The following reasons for leaving a company always make a poor impression: a personality conflict with your boss, the company didn't promote from within, there was no opportunity for growth, the job was misrepresented in the first place, the environment wasn't a nurturing one, and the dress code was too strict.

The most damaging reasons of all are, "I was burned out," "I found a job that was closer to home" or "I found a job offering more vacation time."

Explanations that will always be respected by interviewers are ones that pertain to career development, such as increased responsibility, the opportunity to do a different kind of work, and greater opportunity for growth. Receiving a large increase in pay will command the respect of interviewers as well.

Not being able to describe a plan for career growth

Mark Twain wrote, "What is the most rigorous law of our being? Growth." Because of this, companies want to hire people who are motivated and who want to learn more about their specialty and grow into positions of increased responsibility. To test you in this area, you can expect to be asked, "What do you want to be doing in one year? In five years?"

Not only should you be able to state the types of positions you want to hold, but you should be able to explain the steps you plan to take to qualify you to perform this more challenging work. In fact, interviewers may follow up their initial question with, "How do you plan on getting there?" just to see if you really have a plan for career growth. If you can't state a plan of action, your response to the first question will have no credibility. Interviewers will think that you're just telling them what you think they want to hear.

Stating that you expect to perform exceptionally well in your initial position, which will result in your being given additional responsibilities, is a logical plan of action. Additionally, taking courses at night, pursuing a college degree or advanced studies at night, or enrolling in special programs for professional certifications will demonstrate that you indeed have a plan for managing your career.

ExecuNet Member Resource: *Preparing & Planning For Your Job Search:*
http://members.execunet.com/promo/pdf/Preparing_For_Job_Search.pdf

Fidgeting or continuously changing positions

It's natural to be nervous about being interviewed. After all, interviewers hold all the cards. They pass judgment on the statements you make and have the power to decide whether or not you should be hired.

The more nervous you appear, the more your self-confidence and capability will be questioned.

While interviewers are accustomed to an applicant having some dry mouth at the beginning of the meeting, nothing annoys them more than someone who fidgets or continuously changes positions. Not only is this considered to be a telltale sign of extreme nervousness, but some interviewers find this constant movement so annoying that they want to end the interview as soon as possible.

There are relaxation techniques to calm jittery nerves.

While traveling to the interview, do breathing exercises, where you deeply inhale for 10 seconds, then slowly exhale. This will automatically reduce tension.

While you're sitting in the reception area waiting to meet with the interviewer, you can do isometrics, and no one will even notice. Simply place your hands on your thighs and press down as hard as you can. If you're sitting in a chair with arms, you can fold your hands in your lap and forcefully press your elbows against the arms of the chair. These exercises will drive tension away as well.

ExecuNet Member Resource: *Interviewing Intelligence: Smart Moves to Ace Interviews:*
<http://members.execunet.com/promo/pdf/InterviewingIntelligence.pdf>

Trying to control the conversation

A myth abounds that the skilled job hunter controls the conversation with the interviewer. The purpose of this control is to talk only about matters in which the job hunter has strengths and to avoid discussion of any areas that would point out weaknesses, shortcomings or even failures.

The technique that's used to gain control is to continually ask questions about topics the job hunter wants to discuss and, when necessary, to respond to an interviewer's question with a question of his or her own to divert the conversation to another area.

Don't think for one second that you can get away with this tactic. Interviewers will see you as rude, abrasive and uncooperative. Even worse, the skilled ones will know exactly what you're doing and will probably even call you on it. One thing's for sure: They won't call you back for a second interview.

No one likes a control freak.

Name dropping

Name dropping turns off all interviewers. For example, stating that you used to chat regularly with Jack Welch when you were at GE or that you once spent four hours with Sam Walton when he was visiting the store you ran in Arcadia, Florida, will do nothing but make you look foolish as you try to promote your capability by aligning yourself with the top corporate brass.

Impress interviewers with your accomplishments and strengths, not by mentioning that you've hobnobbed with nationally-recognized executives.

Bad mouthing a previous employer

"If you have nothing good to say, then say nothing at all." — Anonymous

Something that really irks interviewers is when an applicant bad mouths a previous employer. It's considered to be one of the most self-destructive things a job hunter can do.

Unfortunately, some people who were terminated, caught in a downsizing, or left a company for fear of an imminent downsizing, try to "get back" at the company by speaking ill of it. This tactic comes back to haunt them.

Regardless of how difficult or unpleasant it was working for a certain company, never bad mouth the organization. Complaints that many people have and that must not be expressed include

accusing the former company of breaking equal-opportunity laws; sexual harassment; hiring incompetent people who held their positions due to nepotism; lying to their staff about future salary raises, promotions and bonuses; lying to customers and/or vendors; being a political hornet's nest with back stabbing rampant throughout the organization.

Being unprepared for stress interview techniques

An interviewer may try to test your mettle and self-confidence by putting you in a stressful situation. Techniques include frequently referring to a certain liability in your background, continuously interrupting you and not allowing you to finish what you were saying, trying to intimidate you with their greater knowledge of your field, continually disagreeing with you, or generally being rude, belligerent or antagonistic. In these settings, many job hunters become so flustered or angry that they say things they later regret or forget about the professional image they were trying to project.

Just by being prepared for this kind of interviewer and the game that's being played will enable you to maintain your composure, and you'll never get sweaty palms.

As Cervantes wrote, "The man who is prepared has his battle half fought."

Asking about salary, benefits and vacation time at the first interview

It's a fact that people work to make a living, and very few would stay at their job if they won the lottery.

It's therefore natural to want to know what a job pays and what the benefits are. However, asking about these matters at the first interview is considered to be in poor taste. It's just a matter of interview etiquette.

If an interviewer brings up salary and benefits, by all means feel free to ask any questions you might have. But if you're the one who initiates such a discussion, you'll alienate a good number of potential employers.

Save these kinds of questions for the second interview. Make the focus of your first interview your qualifications for performing the job under consideration and the immediate contributions you would make to the company.

Not asking these kinds of questions parallels the famous words of John F. Kennedy: "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country."

Failing to prepare for drug testing

That's right. You have to prepare for drug testing.

Believe it or not, certain everyday substances can indicate the presence of an illegal drug in your system, and this will kill any offer.

For three weeks prior to a test, avoid the following: poppy seeds and cough suppressants (they'll look like an opiate); tonic water and Amoxicillin (they'll indicate cocaine); anti-inflammatories such as Ibuprofen, Advil, Nuprin, Motrin, Bayer Select PRF, and Excedrin 1B (they'll appear as marijuana); and Nyquil, Sudafed, Actifed, Dristan, Robitussin, and Aleve (they'll show up as an amphetamine).

Although the person administering the test will give you a form asking if you've been taking any of the above, the fact that you have could require postponing the test for three weeks because that's how long some of these substances can remain in your system.

By not having prepared for the test, you run the risk that the company will be impatient and make the offer to someone else, who doesn't have to wait the three extra weeks.

Pressuring the interviewer for an offer

No one likes the amount of time that job hunting takes, especially when they're unemployed. A particular dilemma is the anxiety that often arises after interviewing for a job you really want, and haven't been given any indication of where you stand.

Job hunters immediately start thinking, *How did I do? Will they make me the offer? Will there be a second interview? How long should I wait until I contact the company to find out the status of things?*

In an effort to speed up the process, some applicants will conclude an initial interview by stating, "I'm really interested in your position and need to know whether or not you'll be making me an offer because I have an offer from another company and must give them an answer within two days."

Many interviewers are suspicious about the existence of this offer and resent the statement, viewing it as an underhanded way "to close the sale." Others see the applicant as acting out of desperation, which has an equally negative effect.

Never try to pressure an interviewer for an offer at the first interview. If you want to find out where you stand, the next and final blunder will show you exactly what to do.

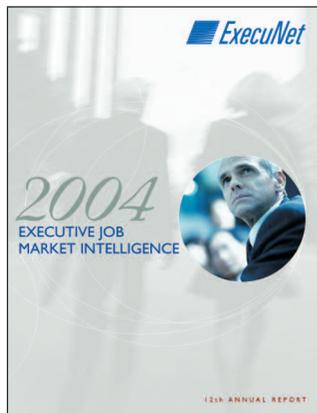
Neglecting to send a thank-you letter after the interview

A great deal has been written in career books and magazine articles about the importance of sending interviewers a thank-you letter after the first interview. Because this practice is so widespread, if you don't send such a letter, interviewers will be offended or just assume that you have no interest in the position the two of you discussed. In either case, you're behind the eight ball. It's therefore essential to write this thank-you letter. It may be sent via regular mail or e-mail depending upon which you feel is the most timely and appropriate.

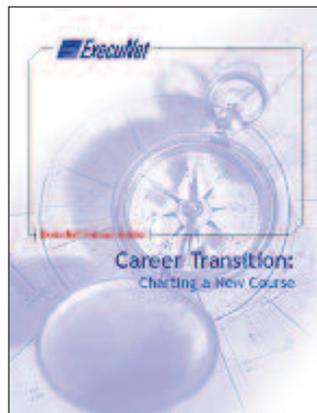
The day after the meeting, write a one-page letter in which you express your appreciation for the interview, then briefly sum up your qualifications for the position, and close by stating your interest in the job.

A key benefit of writing this letter is that it enables you to stay in touch with the interviewer. For a few days after sending it, you'll call the person to make sure it was received. During your conversation, it's entirely appropriate to ask where you stand in the decision-making process. Depending on what you're told, it's also appropriate to mention any offers you're expecting or have already received, including the date by which you must make your decision.

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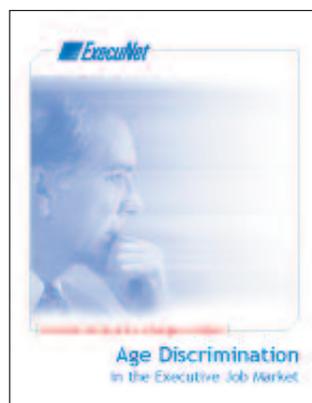
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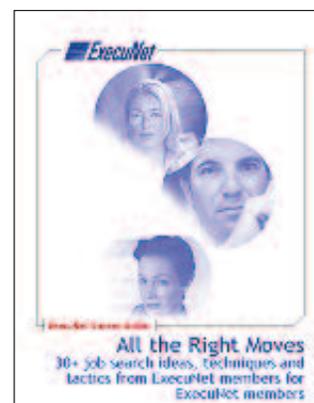
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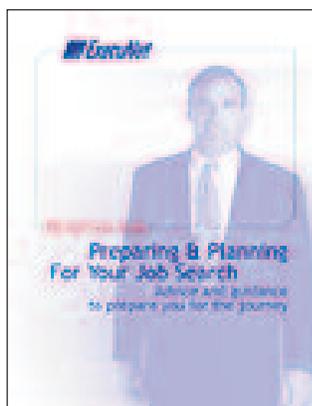
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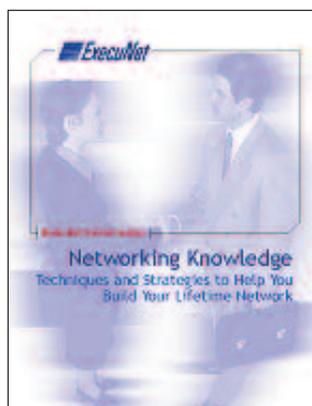
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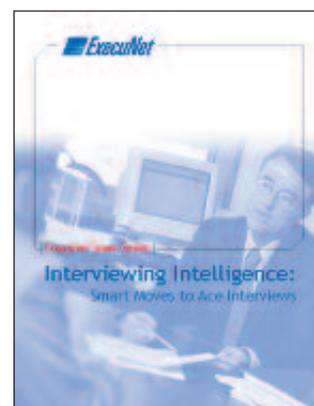
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