

Hotel Business Review

Best practices, insights & trends

Ten Common Interview Mistakes: How to Make the Big Day a Treat Instead of a Treatment

By Paul Feeney, President, Sanford Rose Associates



Mr. Paul Feeney

Interviews are like blind dates: one prays for the best but fears for the worst.

The job candidate hopes that he or she will find the perfect next place of employment – bright people working for a great organization that has its act together and operates with a powerful sense of purpose and high degree of urgency.

The employer, likewise, hopes to find that rare individual who walks on water and motivates others to follow.

Yet sometimes, for a variety of reasons, the parties fail to put their best foot forward, spend a frustrating day learning little about each other and part company uncertain about the outcome.

Much has been written about the interviewing mistakes that candidates make. Less has been written about the other half of the equation. But, as one byproduct of tens of thousands of candidate debriefings after their "blind dates" were over, Sanford Rose Associates has compiled a list of 10 common employer mistakes, along with some practical suggestions for avoiding them.

1. The interview got postponed – again and again and again.

Good recruiters sell urgency to candidates and promise decisiveness on the part of employers. That's because it is difficult to create excitement about tentative situations. In recent years, however, with productivity and multi-tasking the order of the day, corporate managers are overburdened and their schedules in a state of flux. While it's thoroughly understandable to them why their daily plans change from moment to moment, it creates doubts on the part of the candidate: just how important is the job and how urgent is the need to fill it? Therefore, try to schedule interviews for Mondays and Fridays, when people are most likely to be in town. Build redundancy into the interviewing team, so that one person's absence does not kill the day. If a truly vital member (for example, the CEO) bails, schedule a second interview but don't cancel the first. Demonstrate urgency and control.

2. The candidate wasn't made to feel at home.

She arrived at the airport after dark, hailed a taxi to the hotel, dined alone, took another cab next morning to the interview, received a less than warm welcome ("Do you have an appointment?") at the reception desk, was eventually escorted to HR, from there proceeded to several interviews and finally was deposited back in the lobby, where she had to ask the receptionist to call another cab. How little effort it would have required to meet her at the airport, take her to dinner, pick her up the next morning, have all concerned expecting her arrival, etc., etc. – thus turning what otherwise would have been a lousy first impression of the employer into a positive one.

3. Members of the interview team didn't know their roles.

There is little necessity to have five, six or maybe even seven people meet sequentially with the candidate – each one asking the same questions. (Rest assured that candidates the world over are prepared to give a sincere, spontaneous-sounding response when queried about their greatest need for improvement.) If politics require the opinions of scads of participants, assign each person a role and vary the time they will spend with the interviewee. One could be asked to verify technical expertise, another to explain the interface between marketing and R&D, and so on. Sanford Rose Associates believes strongly in scheduling one long interview (in which the hiring manager and an HR professional delve deeply into the candidate's past accomplishments and how he or she made each happen), followed by a series of brief courtesy interviews. Another approach is the group panel, particularly appropriate for individuals who will be required to think on their feet.

4. Critical information was not obtained.

This is another unintended consequence of poor planning. No one was asked to probe the candidate's international experience, so no one did.

5. There was no system in place to evaluate the candidate objectively.

"OK, we've interviewed the candidate at length. "Now what?" In the absence of an objective rating system and/or a common understanding of who will make the decision (vs. who was along for the ride), it can be difficult to agree on an outcome. The candidate was pretty good, but somebody wondered if he looked too young to go before the Board of Directors. Or, the candidate was a financial whiz, but her navy suit and white blouse were a cliché. Human Resources, working in concert with the hiring manager, can develop a "what counts" list of key performance and personal characteristics required to do the job. Such a list can help alleviate the nagging doubt that someone better is lurking just around the corner and reduce anxiety about being blamed for making a "wrong" decision.

6. No one sold the job, the organization or the community.

In the corporate mating dance, it takes two to tango. It is expected that the candidate will show great enthusiasm in selling the employer on his or her capabilities for the job. But, alas, there is another side to the coin: what is the employer doing to make the candidate fall in love? Members of the interview team might well be instructed to lace their conversations with a few compelling stories as to how the outfit beat a competitor, launched six new products in two years, paid for an employee's advanced degree, etc. And a story about a recent concert or sporting event might help reassure the candidate that the local community is not a cultural or sports-and-entertainment backwater.

7. Actions did not agree with words.

Some things get said because they are true, while others get said because they ought to be true. If the job is "absolutely critical to the future of our company," be prepared to make an up-or-down decision within a few days – not sometime in the next several months, whenever the interview team can be reconvened and corporate can be asked to review the offer. Similarly, buzzwords such as "teamwork" and "collaboration" may be best left unsaid if a visitor is likely to observe a lot of people sitting behind closed doors. Management by wandering around requires wandering managers.

8. Money became an object.

Unless the employer intends to make an offer and receive an acceptance before the day is out, there is no need by either party to discuss compensation. Poorly coached candidates raise the subject in the mistaken belief they can up the ante, while misguided employers sense an opportunity to save a few dollars – turning what could have been a successful marriage into a failed romance. That is why the negotiable elements of an offer (such as pay and perks) are best handled by an outside search consultant, who can carefully determine the upper and lower limits of an offer that will stick.

9. The candidate left with unanswered questions.

The reverse of the unstructured interview is the over-structured one. Unless the candidate's assertiveness is being tested, encourage him or her to ask questions and turn what otherwise runs the risk of becoming a one-way interrogation into a conversation. In fact, the quality of those questions provides some of the sharpest insights into a candidate's preparation for the visit, intellectual curiosity and interest in the position. Beware of the person with no questions to ask.

10. Next steps were not spelled out.

No one likes to be left dangling, uncertain as to what will happen and when. At the end of the day, explain what the next steps will be (a hiring decision, a second round of interviews or whatever) and commit to a date by which the candidate will hear from you or your search firm. Vagueness communicates deviousness or indecision – neither of which supports the image you want to create (and deserve) of being a great place to work.

Paul Feeney is currently the President of Sanford Rose Associates, an Executive Search Firm located in Butler, New Jersey. Sanford Rose Associates was founded in 1959, is a full-service executive search organization conducting retained and contingency searches through a network of 60+ offices worldwide devotes its practice to all areas of finance, accounting, general management, operations, technology, management consulting and project management for national and international searches. Paul has over 14 years of executive search management and corporate recruiting experience while working in New York, London and Prague. To contact Paul, please call 973-492-5424, fax 973-492-5422, e-mail pffeeney@sanfordrose.com or visit www.sanfordrose.com/wayne

[back to top >](#)

[close window >](#)

Copyright © 1997 - 2005 HotelExecutive.com