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### Top 20 Executive Interview Pet Peeves from Hiring Decision-Makers

By Katharine Hansen, PhD

Every aspect of marketing yourself in the job search is highly subjective from the hiring decision-maker's viewpoint. Their view of resumes is subjective; cover letters even more subjective; and by the time we get to the interview phase, opinions could not be more subjective. I've participated in enough interviews from the hiring side of the desk to know that one interviewer can be blown away by a candidate's interview performance and salivating to hire him or her, while another interviewer may be lukewarm toward the same candidate based on the same interview. In the communication venue that is the job interview, where subjectivity reigns and chemistry and rapport are often keys to success, hiring decision-makers at the senior and executive levels still agree on candidate interview behaviors that annoy them – sometimes to the extent of sinking the interviewee's chances.

Through a list of the Top 20 Executive Interview Pet Peeves, hiring decision-makers reveal the landmines aspiring executives can avoid in interviews.

1. **Candidate treats receptionist, assistant, or other lower-level staff poorly or brushes off preliminary interviews with mid-level staff.** A 2009 survey by Office Team reported that six out of 10 executives polled said they consider their assistant's opinion important when evaluating potential new hires. Candidates who give support staff short shrift "are usually the executives who say 'people are our greatest asset,' but then treat staff like they are a financial drain, ignoring them unless they need them," reports Linda Konstan of LMK Associates, a human-resources consultant with 25 years of experience in HR. "I've had receptionists give me feedback on executive candidates, and sometimes we haven't hired that executive, even if he or she was most qualified, because of the way the receptionist was treated – with condescension, arguing about completing an application form, telling the administrative assistant what type of coffee they want before being asked if they'd like a refreshment," Konstan says. Candidates are probably unaware of what a damaging effect their shabby treatment of support staff can have. "If I ever see an example of a prospective candidate treating the assistants or receptionist in a demeaning fashion, they may as well leave before the interview begins as they are history in my book," says Ron Kubitz, recruiting/training manager at Brayman Construction Corp., Saxonburg, PA.

The same caveat about treating support staff well applies to respectful interaction with those, such as human-resources staff, who are conducting preliminary or screening interviews. Linda LoCicero, operations manager/founder of The Staffing Company,

Birmingham, MI, is frustrated by candidates who “act impatient, like I’m the precursor to the ‘real’ interviewer.” If you think early interviews with entities such as human-resources professionals can’t derail your chances, read this story from Jacquelyn Saad, president of Inter-Change Consulting Inc., Toronto:

“Some years ago I was senior vice president, human resources, in a large American bank’s Canadian operation. We were recruiting for an executive-level trader. The most senior executive in trading was interested in a candidate whom he knew from a position he held previously at another bank.” Saad explains that although human resources normally conducted the first interview, she agreed to hold the interview with this candidate last. “I arranged for the candidate to come in on a Thursday afternoon. Shortly before he was scheduled to arrive, he called to cancel the meeting telling my assistant that he had an emergency meeting and needed to reschedule. The appointment was rescheduled for the following afternoon. He arrived in my office wearing jeans and a leather jacket – and this was years before we even contemplated casual Fridays. He sat slouched in a chair, was unresponsive to my questions, and seemed annoyed that he was required to spend his time speaking with me. I came to learn from him that the emergency he canceled the previously scheduled meeting for was a trip to his barber.

“When I refused to give hiring approval, I was informed by the senior trading executive that an offer had already been made and the candidate would be starting on Monday. I suggested to the executive that he now had a great problem as I would not be issuing an offer letter from my department nor would I authorize the individual being added to payroll. So he could start on Monday, but he wouldn’t get paid through my department.” After much cajoling by the senior executive who wanted to make the hire, Saad agreed to add him to the payroll. “He turned out to be a disaster, and we were required to terminate his employment sometime later,” Saad says.

2. **Candidate dwells on economy-inspired negativity or how hard it is to get a job.** “I’m seeing a trend of lower level executives asking up front about severance packages for failures or mergers – before we even get to the meat of the interview,” Konstan notes. That’s just one symptom of candidates who, rendered skittish by a troubled economy, are bringing a sense of doom with them to their interviews. Executive job-search coach Rita Ashley of JobSearchDebugged.com cites candidates who use much of the interviewer’s time bemoaning the fact that it is hard to find a job. “They’ve just admitted they are a loser,” Ashley says. She compares one of her coaching clients who is networking relentlessly and “is so connected he has had interviews, 90-minute-long informal meetings, and introductions nonstop” to another client, a CEO who “has none of this activity and complains. His interviews are very short.” Ashley empathizes with “the beleaguered interviewer [who] has to play mommy instead of interviewing a prospective new hire.” Ashley’s advice: “OK, it’s a tough job market. So, toughen up. Nothing sets a bad tone in an interview more than complaints. Don’t be seen as a victim; be seen as highly desirable.” She recommends instead that candidates be optimistic and upbeat. “It is your self-confidence and positive attitude that will win you the next round of interviews,” she says. Lee E. Miller, a former Fortune 1000 head of human resources and the author of *UP: Influence Power and the U Perspective – The Art of Getting What You Want*, agrees: “Employers want to hire George Clooney, not George Costanza. We are looking for

candidates that are confident in what they have to offer a company." Ashley exhorts candidates to "leave all the suffering at the door. If asked how the search is going, mention how pleased you are with the new connections to strategic people and their eagerness to help. Find something positive that shows you are proactive and a winner, not a whiner."

Also think about the long haul, not just the immediate future. "I want someone with a passion to do the work – not just be out for the money," Konstan says. "That executive needs to prove to me he or she has long-term goals, not just short-term. And asking for severance deal prior to an interview is short-term in my book."

3. **Candidate gives long, boring, unfocused, rambling responses to interview questions.** "Interview responses that drag on and go off on tangents ... signal a BS artist who does not have command of the language or understand the question or the background or expertise to sum up a situation and get to the core issues at hand," says Cheryl Roshak, an executive recruiter with more than 25 years of experience. "This is how he would handle himself in an executive role on the job," says Roshak, who is president at Cheryl Roshak Associates, New York City. "Interviewees should be able to convey their past career successes in a clear and concise manner," says Ken Heisler, director of SALO Search, LLC, Minneapolis, MN. "It's imperative that they get to the point of their narrative and not let any answer bore the interviewer. If the interviewer's eyes begin to wander, chances are they are no longer actively listening to the candidate's response."
4. **Candidate talks the strategy talk but does not walk the execution walk.** "I want an executive who can prove that he or she can execute the vision – even via delegation," Konstan says. "I want someone who can take us from strategy to tactical to action to response/reaction and improve the bottom line both for short- and long-term goals." For David Hughes, vice president human resources at Access Insurance Holdings, Inc., Atlanta, the need for a candidate who can talk about execution depends significantly on the position and the needs of the role. "It's often pretty easy for experienced execs to regurgitate book-learned strategies and techniques, and that's why they need to be able to talk about specific examples of how they personally made the difference in the past," Hughes advises.
5. **Candidate is arrogant and expects to be treated differently from lower-level candidates.** "Often an exec candidate comes in with an air of arrogance that they are above and beyond looking for a position, greater than other people or their subordinates, and will only look at certain types of positions where they are in total control of a group or department," Roshak says. "There is no flexibility in them. In a work situation, they are hard to please and find fault with their staff much of the time." For Nichole Woody, "this behavior is an indicator of how the candidate will interact with people that report directly or indirectly to them." Woody, who is an outsourced HR professional at Professional Placement Services in Solon, OH, believes that executive candidates "should have the interest of the company in mind with each interaction. Lower-level employees will not likely be inclined to go above and beyond when they do not sense appreciation for their efforts. Additionally this behavior demonstrates that this candidate will not 'get his or her hands dirty,'" Woody says. S. Wichman, performance consultant at Wichman & Associates, Los Angeles, notes that

"research today supports the urgent need for senior leaders to build strong relationships, interact with talent throughout the organization, smile, show support, use leadership skills every day, and give credit to groups and teams of people, not always themselves." For Wichman, "ego-driven, reclusive and arrogant managers are dinosaurs."

6. **Candidate is inappropriately groomed or attired.** A surprising number of decision-makers consulted for this book complained about poorly dressed and groomed executive candidates. "Some very accomplished executives believe that their resume speaks so strongly that they need not dress up for the interview," observes Dan Davies, managing director of executive search for VACO Raleigh, LLC, Raleigh, NC. "Showing up like you are headed for the golf course signals ... that you do not take the process seriously." William M. Gaffney of Amaxa Group Recruiting/Career Coaching, Dayton, OH, advises candidates to "come well groomed, with polished shoes, tight knot on tie, recent haircut. You would be surprised how often this is overlooked." As Heisler advises, "even if potential employers say it's all right to dress casually, always dress to impress. In every interview situation, it's better to overdress than underdress. A big pet peeve of most business professionals is when a candidate shows up to the interview underdressed or simply not put together," he says.
7. **Candidate tells employer what's wrong with his/her company.** In her book, *Job Search Debugged*, Ashley equates the candidate who identifies the negatives in the prospective employer's company to telling a parent he or she has an ugly baby. The candidate means well. He or she believes the interviewer will be impressed that the interviewee has spotted and analyzed the organization's issues and challenges. At some point in the interview, the interviewer may even ask for the candidate's thoughts on a company problem. But an unsolicited critique won't sit well. "Hiring authorities are often insulted when you demonstrate you believe you are immediately able to spot and solve problems they have been trying to solve for months," Ashley writes in *Job Search Debugged*. A much better approach is to describe results you've attained while tackling similar issues for past employers. Acting like a superhero who will swoop in and solve the employer's problems is smug and negative. "We want to hire people who really want to work for us and for the company," Miller says. "If you are complaining about what is wrong with the company before you are even hired, what will you be like as an employee?"
8. **Candidate offers solutions to employer's problems without really knowing the background.** "Offering solutions when you don't have sufficient information about the situation raises serious questions about your judgment," Miller cautions. "We have probably spent months or even years trying to figure out the answer. The fact that you have the solution in five minutes doesn't endear you to me." Saying you have the answers when you don't have enough information is "is a particular problem," Hughes says, "when 'big company' people come to interview at closely-held private companies. Typically in a private company, you might have an owner-CEO, or other heavily invested and long-tenure hiring manager who, at the very least, believes there is nothing you could possibly know more about their company. In entrepreneurial environments, adopting a manner of humility in front of the founders is usually the best interviewing policy." Miller advises telling the interviewer "how you

would go about trying to figure out an answer, and what you would look at in doing so." It's also wise to ask a series of probing questions – to equip yourself with the background you need to offer suggestions. Particularly ask about what's already been tried. The techniques suggested our article, Mastering the Case Job Interview, for responding to business-case questions, can be helpful in this situation.

9. **Candidate oversells himself/herself, exaggerates accomplishments – or undersells as a result of poor sales skills.** "When someone tells me how wonderful they are, brags about his or her accomplishments as if no one else could be better, that without them the company would fail, that they single-handedly can run rings around others, you wonder why, if they are so good, they are either unemployed or looking for another job," Roshak points out. "These self-centered egos are difficult to work with or for."

The other side of the coin for Christine Jankus, director at Parkland Business Services in Adelaide, Australia, is the executive who lacks sales skills. "The executive being hired needs first to be able to sell himself or herself and then be able to sell the company that eventually hires him or her," Jankus says. Lack of preparation and research suggest poor sales skills, Jankus says. "You wouldn't buy a car from a person with no product knowledge and who does not listen to your needs. So why would you hire an executive who knows nothing about your company and chooses not to find out?" Jankus notes that "people do not like to be sold to; they like to buy. An executive who does not give a reason to buy is wasting everybody's time – and has not shown what value he or she can bring to the organization."

10. **Candidate gives self too much or not enough credit for team accomplishments; fails to clarify role in projects.** As a candidate, strike a balance between giving yourself appropriate credit for team and organizational accomplishments and giving other team members and employees credit. When you talk about accomplishments and successful projects, hiring decision-makers want you to be clear about your role without either hogging the credit or playing down your leadership. Here are sample peeves from both perspectives: "I frequently run into people," says Vikki O'Keeffe, professional recruiter at Apex Systems, Inc., San Francisco, "who respond to a 'What did you do?' question with 'We did...' This to me is annoying as there was nothing about 'we did' on the resume you sent; it was individual contributions on paper." On the flip side, Gina Gervais, human resources director at TSW Management Group Inc., Anaheim, CA, says, "using too much of the 'I' word and not enough of 'we'" drives her crazy.
11. **Candidate trashes former employers.** "Talking too much about how their former company just didn't 'get it,' finger pointing, and playing the victim as to why they weren't successful," is a significant peeve for Gervais. "This is the worst," Roshak says, "and we advise candidates against this, but it doesn't often stop them from doing it on interviews. It's a pity-me approach that is filled with rage against the former employer and shows inadequate self-control and immaturity. Sometimes bad things happen to good people. What was the real reason for the layoff of this person? Why did he stay so long in a job that was so detrimental to his well being if it was an abusive situation? It raises many questions. He holds grudges and is difficult to work with."

12. **Candidate fails to provide examples of skills or experience.** O’Keeffe gripes that she’ll say to a candidate, “This role requires demonstrated experience doing ABC; tell me about a time when you did ABC?” Instead of complying with the request for an example, the candidate’s response is “I am excellent with ABC. I’ve done lots of it; you should definitely get me the job.”
13. **Candidate demonstrates inadequate knowledge of prospective employer.** “If the prospect has not done his or her homework, he or she cannot prove his or her value to our company and thus is of no value to me,” Kubitz says. “Not to mention the sheer stupidity in not doing the research!” Heisler, in fact, puts employer research at the top of his suggestions for candidates: “My best piece of advice for executive interviewees is to research the company they are interviewing with prior to going to the interview,” he says. “Executives should gather as much information as they can about their potential employer’s history, mission, and overall business practices.” Heisler also advises performing due diligence on the vacant position and learning as much as possible about the people with whom you will be interviewing and potentially working.
14. **Candidate fails to grasp employer’s priorities for position.** Ashley, who was a recruiter for 17 years, calls this issue “losing the thread.” This candidate is extension of the candidate who has conducted insufficient research – and the candidate may not be completely at fault. Job descriptions are notoriously poorly written and often fail to truly convey what the employer needs. That’s why research below the surface is critical. You must talk to members of your network, especially company insiders who have an intimate grasp of what the company is really after. You will also pick up clues as soon as you are in the interview. Listen for the topics the interviewer emphasizes; those are likely the priorities for the job. Be prepared to shift gears if you had planned to focus on different priorities.
15. **Candidate is coy about desire to have the job; acts unattainable.** “This is the strangest behavior to me,” says former executive recruiter Angela Lussier of Springfield, MA. Miller echoes most hiring decision-makers when he says, “I want to hire someone who really wants to come to work for me.” “It’s like the professional version of playing hard to get, only *they’re* the only one playing the game.” Lussier recalls a candidate who “spent so much time talking about all the interviews he’s been on and all the other opportunities he’s looking at that the interview had no substance. He was so arrogant that when I decided to end the interview early, he was happy because he had to be somewhere else anyway.”

The coy, unattainable candidate may not be serious about the job search. He or she may be on a fishing expedition just to see what’s out there or test marketability – or may be on a giant ego trip based on a belief – justified or not – that he or she is highly desirable to employers. If you are in fact, a real “catch,” Miller says, “it’s good that you have other options. That can certainly help your bargaining position, but I want to be your first choice assuming we can work out a fair package.” Employers will be wary if you want the job but your strategy is to make the company beg. In *Job Search Debugged*, Ashley quotes a human-resources director who noted, “The harder it is to bring someone on board, the more likely they were to be the wrong person for the job.” A variation on this peeve is O’Keeffe’s complaint about “the candidate who

sits through an interview for a role he or she has decided he or she doesn't want and deliberately blows the interview instead of being professional and politely saying 'this is not the role for me, thank you.'"

16. **Candidate is unenthusiastic, lacks energy.** "If you can't even be excited about the job in the interview, how will you come to work excited each day and give me 110 percent?" Miller asks. Woody is bothered by "the lack of interest on their face, sigh, or change when candidates are being questioned about a topic that they obviously feel is elementary. These seemingly elementary requirements are essential to the position and need to be covered during an interview. Not only does [the lack of interest] show a lack of respect but clearly demonstrates how the person will react during future situations with direct and indirect reports."
17. **Candidate has weak handshake.** "A weak handshake is a pet peeve for a number of hiring decision-makers because it can display weakness or a lack of confidence," Heisler says. "I always advise the candidates I send out to interviews to try and match the intensity of their handshake with that of the interviewer. That way they come off as an equal – not intimidating, yet not intimidated either," he says.
18. **Candidate reeks of cigarettes.** If you are a smoker, chances are you smell like one. "People assume if you smoke after all that is known that you lack self-control and are stupid," Ashley says.
19. **Candidate fails to ask substantive questions, or asks "me first" questions.** "I expect that candidates will take advantage of being in front of the hiring manager and ask insightful questions about the direction of the group, the challenges the company or groups faces," says Jeff Lipschultz, principal at A-List Solutions, Southlake, TX. "I would expect they would show that they've done a little of their own research and can ask questions based on what they've read." Lipschultz is especially irked when candidates ask "simplistic" questions, such as "when will you make your decision?" or "how much does this job pay?" Lussier notes that the "best" questions she ever got were these:
  - Does the company have a golf league? (This was the first question asked, too!)
  - I want this job because it's close to my house. Will I have to travel at all?
  - Am I going to have to do anything outside of this job description?
  - Me: Any last questions? Candidate: Yes, I have a personal question for you. Do you want to go out sometime?

The worst, Lipschultz says, "is the candidate who has no questions at all. It is a clear signal that they really have little interest in the job or company. If you plan to work at a new company for several years, wouldn't you want to know as much as you can about it? Isn't being in front of a hiring manager at the company the perfect opportunity to learn key aspects to your potential job?" Lussier says she purposely doesn't give out a lot of information during the interview "just to see what kinds of things candidates will ask about at the end. I've been burned before by the 'you already answered all my questions' statement at the end." If the candidate has no questions, Miller says he might think he was so brilliant and thorough that he covered

everything the interviewee could possibly ask about, “but I am much more likely to think you are unprepared, uninterested, and not a good candidate for the job.”

20. **Candidate gives scripted responses that sound like they came from a book.** Preparing responses for potential interview questions is a smart thing to do. Hiring decision-makers note that candidates often give prepared but rote-sounding responses to questions. But interviewers often want executive candidates to go beyond prepared answers. “Most people are not trying to really shine by giving honest and thorough answers,” Lussier remarks. “Their objective is to answer all the questions without messing up.” Lussier is among many interviewers who use behavioral interviewing to get candidates to transcend scripted responses. “Once I start asking questions about how they dealt with things in the past, it totally throws them off their script, and then the real person shines through,” Lussier says. “It’s fun to watch them sweat!”

The best preparation for behavioral interviewing is not scripted answers, in part because the range of behavioral questions that could be asked is so broad that scripting responses that cover the gamut is impossible. Instead, develop a collection of stories about past achievements – stories that you can adapt to the wide variety of behavioral questions. Candidates also need to be prepared for the probing follow-ups that are virtually inevitable after a behavioral response.