

Reviews of Victoria Pilate's *Dorm Rooms to Boardrooms*

"...Insightful. Brought forth issues and concepts that every college student should understand as they prepare for graduation. It is a great read for college students who all eventually enter the world of work. "

Hazel O'Leary, Ph.D.
President
Fisk University

"An excellent career resource and planning guide. Valuable information."

William R. Harvey, Ph.D.
President
Hampton University

"Dorm Rooms to Boardrooms provides a wealth of useful pointers about issues, from the mundane to the vital, which can be advantageous for college students to consider when entering the 'real world'. A helpful, easy read for students, advisors, and employers alike."

Angela N. Romans
Associate Director of Admission
Director of Minority Recruitment
Brown University

"The content illustration/highlighted areas throughout the book provided attention and stimulated interest in defining the book's subject content. It should have the greatest significance to both graduates and undergraduates that are either new to or already exist in the world of employment and politics to actually survive in today's society. The book touches on things that are only learned through having experienced outcomes of real life situations."

Willie H. Thomas, Ph.D.
Director
Division of Continued Education and Community Service
Alabama State University

DRAFT MANUSCRIPT

Dorm Rooms to Boardrooms

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September 2006

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Crandell & Rose



Dorm Rooms to Boardrooms

Victoria Pilate

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Chapter 1

Hitting the Pavement

There's good news and bad news about job hunting. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) forecasts a favorable job market for the major industries over the next several years. BLS research suggests growth in most occupations for the period of 2004-2014. Some occupations such as computer systems analysts, registered nurses, physical therapists, and pharmacists are predicted to experience growth by as much as 25 percent.

The overall economy has improved over the last few years. Large U.S. corporations are hiring more; employment trends among mid and small sized employers also appear steady. For some industries, hiring has increased as much as 25 percent over the last 18 to 24 months.

For the last economic recovery, research in early 2005 found that it will take a graduate, searching eight hours a day, 4 months to find a job. Subsequent data, published in mid 2006, suggest a strong improvement with the median search taking 2.7 months.

However, the bad news is that the economy is showing signs of slowing. Already, as many as a fourth to a third of college graduates will graduate without a job waiting for them. Employment data indicate better job prospects but a highly selective market. According to some statistics, as many as ten percent or more of college seniors will still be looking for work six months after graduation.

The key is to be flexible. You may need to relocate further than expected for your ideal job. Likewise, you may need to take a stepping stone job outside your ideal career path to get started. Alternatively, you may need to interview with a variety of employers, even those whose industry is different from your ideal job. For instance, you may end up taking, as a first job, an electrical engineering job with a power company, but your goal is to be with a manufacturing corporation.

My advice to college students and new graduates is to keep applying and looking. Don't sell yourself short by ignoring jobs

that are not in your ideal sector of the economy. Also, don't be too quick to dismiss a job that doesn't sound superb on paper. A short job description is rarely enough to make a final decision about whether a job is right for you.

Apply. Apply. Apply.

You can decide after the interviews and offers which jobs work for you. A short job description is never enough to decide if a job works for you.

Remember that a third of last year's graduates still don't have career-related jobs. Don't be too picky or have too high expectations of the *perfect* first job.

Interview and ask questions. Do so with enthusiasm and curiosity. Some jobs on paper may not sound compatible, but turn out to be just right once you're on the job. In some situations, you can mold the job to your needs and create job tasks that develop and enhance your skills.

The reverse can happen also. Some jobs on paper or at interviews sound like winners, then they turn into stinkers. It's a rare situation to find the perfect first job that offers everything you want. With the

economy and the uncertainty surrounding it, you may have to work outside your ideal area or your ideal job description, at least initially.

Don't be concerned about having to make career or job changes early on. Data reported by *Kiplinger's* stated that nearly 10 percent of new college grads hold their first job for less than a year. That may reflect both voluntary and involuntary job changes. Today's workers can expect to have at least seven jobs over their careers. Many changes will happen early on. Research shows a quarter of new hires will not make their fifth anniversary.

The aspect of job changes or job hopping that causes some nail biting is the involuntary part of attrition statistics. Many dismissals are not due to downsizing or a lack of skills. It's the people factor. A study by Manchester Partners International found that 40 percent of new management hires fail, and the key is failure to build good relationships with peers and subordinates. That's a critical factor in many jobs. Competency will get you in the door but it walks hand-in-hand with interpersonal skills. You don't have to like or be liked by everyone, but you have to have good relations with people. It is possible to have good relations with someone you dislike.

Getting an Early Start

Job hunting doesn't start in your last year of college. You actually should be thinking about job hunting much earlier.

"Use all resources available, including the career services office at school. Don't wait until your last semester to go to career services for help. Start talking to the career counselors in your sophomore and junior years. One could also join (as a student member) a professional organization for the career that they seek. For example, I am a member of the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants and the Maryland Association of CPA's, even though I'm not a CPA yet. These organizations offer a lot of free information, including job postings."

Survey Respondent

Your sophomore and junior years are perfect times to hone your skills and also build your resume. You can gain great work experience without leaving campus. Work-study jobs, volunteer work, or a campus organization are resume and skill boosters.

Being part of an organization can be helpful for many reasons. First, this will be your first experience at networking. Imagine how beneficial it would be to you and others to brainstorm and share information on internships and permanent jobs. As well, being a part of an organization enables you to learn people skills. Often within any club, you may need to negotiate or compromise toward goals. Also campus organizations are opportunity to develop leadership and financial management skills. Learning these skills now will help you later.

Another application booster is to have a published writing sample available. Easy places to get published are in a club's newsletter, the campus newspaper, your college's alumni newsletter, or a publication like the *Black Collegiate*, *Student Leader*, or *U.* magazines that serve multiple campuses.

The single most effective way to bolster your chances of having a job waiting when you graduate is to work before you leave school via an internship or co-op. *U.S. News & World*

Tips for College Sophomores and Juniors

Intern or co-op.

Do volunteer work.

Join a campus organization.

Research.

Publish articles.

Report reported that 65 percent of one university's grads found permanent jobs through co-ops. Similarly, the National Association of Colleges and Employers reported that companies go on to hire 38 percent of their interns and 50 percent of their co-op students.

"I did research on the company and as much about its officers as possible. Made calls to see if I could determine with whom I'd be interviewing and to learn as much about them as possible.

One secretary proved very friendly and helpful, and gave me her boss' dog's name, told me about his family (just in general terms), and gave me the telephone numbers of several employees to ask questions. I wound up not getting that job."

Survey
Respondent

Job Hunting Hints

Author Buddy Hobart emphasizes that the devil is in the details of job hunting. "The people who are successful at finding good jobs straight out of college are usually the ones who understand the importance of the little things." A sharp resume and a professional sounding message on your voice mail play a role in landing the interview and the position. In doing my survey, I was shocked to see some respondents' e-mail addresses; anything of a sexual nature or even some hobbies (babydoll, doll_collctr, sexie_girl, me_rudeboy, poopie_babe) as e-mail addresses can discredit you.

Get the Word Out

Use all possible contacts, from your former professors to local employees of a large corporation. The U.S. Department of Labor estimated 48 percent of job seekers get hired

through networking. Another estimate from a CNN.com article is that upwards of 80 percent of job openings are never advertised in newspapers or other public means. Writer Kate Wendleton estimates

Job Hunting Tips

Have professional sounding e-mail address.

Watch your voice-mail greeting on your answering machine.

Research.

Brush up on the industry's jargon.

Evaluate your interview wardrobe.

that only about 10 percent of all jobs are found through recruiters.

Family and friends can be great sources of information. Don't expect a job offer because you have a family member with your prospective employer; expect a tip on who to see or what skills to promote in cover letters and interviews.

Reading about market trends, checking out the employer's website, as well as briefing yourself on happenings within the industry are all pluses for the job search and interview process.

The Mixer

Often, employers sponsor mixers or social events rather than formal interviews to meet candidates. These can be equally as important as the all-important interview. A recruiter told a *Smart Money* magazine reporter that they watch the candidates at social gatherings for clues. How much a person drinks, how much the student eats, and whether the student can interact successfully socially are all things recruiters watch.

"Corporate receptions were mandatory at my school. Two of the worst I ever heard of were one in which a professor got drunk and at another students were hoarding food from the buffet. It was so embarrassing to listen to someone tell me about it."

Survey Respondent

Quick Tip

Turn off your cell phone at job fairs and mixers. I was on a college campus recently, standing near a group of students, when one student's cell phone went off. I was fairly speechless by her ringtone of "Don't you wish your girlfriend was a freak like me."

These gatherings also may include junior staffers or new hires; recruiters may watch you for how you treat or interact with new staffers. Recruiters take note if you ignore the junior staffers or ask unprofessional questions.

Research the company and mind your manners. You're not there only for the food. Talk to as many of the corporate representatives as possible. Treat these mixers as informal interviews; so be prepared to ask

pertinent questions and to be asked questions about yourself. Always, seek out the recruiter(s) to say thank you before leaving.

Don't forget to ask for a business card; a growing number of students and others are having personal cards (similar to business cards) printed to exchange at such events. Generally, you will not need resumes at mixers.

The Job Outlook 2005 survey of more than 200 employers found that cleanliness and conservative attire are noticed and desired in interviews. Respondents ranked various appearance factors as being a strong influence, a slight influence, or of no influence on an interviewee's suitability for employment. The National Association of Colleges and Employers survey found the following as influential:

1. Grooming 70%
2. Nontraditional attire 49%
3. Nontraditional hair color (tie) Body piercing 32%
5. Handshake (tie) Obvious tattoos 28%

Source: *Christian Science Monitor*, December 9, 2004.

Job Fairs

Attending your university's job fair is an important step in getting on the radar screen of recruiters. Recruiters at fairs often are the same ones who do the campus interviews.

Typically, the job fair recruiters are from human resources (some may be hiring managers or recent new hires) and, if you ask, can tell you what skills or coursework the company wants in a new hire. That gives you an edge on how to mold and present yourself in the actual interview. If you're an undergraduate, such knowledge helps you in deciding any changes to your coursework to make yourself more attractive to recruiters when you become a senior and are interviewing for jobs.

Take time to make the rounds, talking to as many recruiters as possible. That includes talking with recruiters for companies and industries that may be outside your ideal career path. One mistake I've seen students make at career fairs is to snub recruiters of companies that do not interest them. That's rude and unprofessional. When approached by a recruiter for a company that disinterests you, listen politely and briefly before moving on; thank the recruiter for the information.

Don't expect to have lengthy or in-depth discussions with recruiters. You can expect some of the same questions of

Hitting the Pavement

interviews. Job fairs are often treated as weeding tools by recruiters. They are often interested in your grades and coursework primarily. Always have resumes handy.

Pay attention to the recruiters and how they communicate. Since they are often the people who will do the real interviews, notice what their communication style is. Some ask many questions; others hold back and let you do the talking. You'll have an idea of how to pace yourself in the interview if you know the conversation style of the interviewer.

Tip for job fairs from an unnamed career services center:

Carry breath mints.

Tips for Job Fairs

Be ready with a one minute commercial about yourself.

When you introduce yourself, use your first and last names and mention your major.

Dress appropriately and comfortably for temperature changes and for standing long periods. Check outerwear in coatroom.

Hopefully, there will be new hires at the career fair. This is an excellent opportunity. New hires have just gone through what you're soon to go through with the interview and hiring process. They can have valuable information on what the company is looking for in a candidate and can share the insides of that employer's hiring process.

Likewise, new hires can provide insight on the corporate culture of their employer. This can be invaluable if you must decide between job offers later. If a corporate culture is clearly and intolerably incompatible with your personality, it's best to eliminate that employer from consideration before you get on board. Few corporate cultures would be so intolerable, however.

If you need to get back with a recruiter, remember a few points. Some recruiters are on the road for weeks at a time, going from one school's job fair to the next. If you need to contact a recruiter after a job fair, have reasonable expectations for getting in touch with the person. Also, you may remember the person vividly, but the recruiter may not do the same. A recruiter meets hundreds of students at each university and visits a few universities in a given month. In your phone call or e-mail, you may need to jog the recruiter's

mind with a sentence or two about how you met and why you're contacting him/her.

Usual Questions

Why did you choose this agency?

What are your weaknesses? What are your strengths?

What is your worst quality?

Tell me about yourself.

How did you hear about this job?

Are you familiar with our company?

How much do you make at your current job?

Collect business cards and company brochures. Have a bag or briefcase handy for material as you collect it as you'll need a free hand to shake hands with the next recruiter. Juggling papers and portfolios to shake hands makes a poor first impression. Likewise, have a pen handy to write down your contact information for the recruiter, if necessary. Here's a good reason to have personal cards (business cards for students) printed.

Above all, remember to dress the part. Your attire should be the same as for interviews. I was shocked to see the attire of students at recent job fairs I attended. Have a suit in a conservative color and style. The general rule of thumb is the darker the suit, the more conservative the image. Be sure the suit's style is also conservative; I was blown away by a male student wearing a baby

blue suit with a knee length jacket at a recent job fair. Think about the dressing styles of people who live in the public eye and hold public positions like politicians and newscasters.

Your wardrobe at job fairs and interviews should be accompanied by a professional demeanor including a good handshake and sincere smile. This is important for both genders. For interviews and for any professional events such as job fairs, the consistent advice of experts is to use good posture. It connotes confidence. Poor posture is much more noticeable than many people believe.

In late 2004, Pilot Pen Corporation of America hired its first chief graphology officer, Sheila Kurtz. The handwriting analyst was hired to help make a final decision on applicants based on their handwriting.

Lastly, express appreciation to the recruiter. Thank the recruiter for his/her time before moving onto the next booth.

Resumes

Remember the resume doesn't get you the job; it gets you in the door for you to get the job. It's a tool to the goal. It should highlight skills and abilities as Steven Provenzano, a certified professional resume writer, pointed out in his Top Secret Resumes and Cover Letters. He observed "To be successful, you have to get in the minds of the employers. Do the thinking for them."

Ideally, you could anticipate their needs and then market yourself as meeting those needs. Companies surveyed in 2004 by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) said they are most interested in good communication skills. The NACE survey also identified honesty, interpersonal skills, initiative, a good work ethic, and team skills (in that order) as important characteristics.

I've had the opportunity to read several students' resumes. I've been greatly disappointed in the terse nature students often have in describing jobs. Pull from job experiences all available skills and experiences and strategically describe them on resumes. That includes fast food jobs which have a surprising level of value. For example, here's the job description a student used for her waitress job at an assisted living facility. She wrote succinctly in bulleted format: "served and bussed tables; experience in working with and serving elderly people."

Resume Tips

Include a high GPA, but don't include a low GPA.

Use action verbs and active voice.

Highlight analytical skills.

Note teamwork and interpersonal skills.

If you have little job experience, highlight volunteer work.

Omit hobbies.

Emphasize communication skills (speeches, presentations, written products).

Note if you are bilingual.

Include awards, scholarships, and honors.

Here's how she could have described the job: "served food to residents in a timely manner with attention to details of dietary restrictions of residents; evaluated customer service needs and complaints of residents, handling minor complaints myself and independent of supervision; bussed tables; on an ad hoc basis trained new employees; developed excellent communication skills to meet needs of the hard of hearing and infirmed; earned employee of the month recognition two times."

Tips for Scanning Resumes

Use white or ivory paper; even lightly colored paper can cause problems with some scanners.

Use a 65 space line and ASCII text of 10 to 14 points.

Avoid columns, graphics, and justified margins.

Not all typefaces or font styles are equal; courier and Times Roman are among the most popular ones.

Change bullets to asterisks or hyphens.

Based on guidance of the National Business Education Association (January 1998) and *Kiplinger's* January 2005.

That's the same job, but the second job description clearly makes the job and the candidate far more interesting. Notice the relationship to the NACE list of desired traits.

Career counselor Emory Mulling advised in a *Kiplinger's* magazine interview to leave off the objective section of resumes as that "limits the job search too much." He also suggested describing accomplishments in percentages, dollars, and timeframes.

The bad news is that as a college student you probably don't have any such accomplishments. Or do you? Have you ever done a club fundraiser, and raise an organization's coffers from zero to \$x? Have you ever tutored a C student into a B student? Have you led the campus chess club from obscurity to the state championship? Has your supervisor at your part-time fast food job complimented you on your 98 percent cash drawer accuracy?

Online Resumes

E-resumes have grown tremendously in popularity over the past seven years. One estimate by Computer Economic put e-resumes at five million a year for 1999 and they have grown in popularity each

year since. E-resumes reduce paperwork and mailing costs for job seekers. With the benefits, some job seekers misuse them by sending mass e-mails with little regard to a human touch.

A recruiter suggested in a *USA Today* interview to not just write “I saw your posting on the Internet” because there could be several positions available. Keep formatting special effects to a minimum. Some formatting—highlights, large fonts, italicizing-- is often lost, making the e-resume hard to read and appear sloppy. Those get tossed quickly.

Though e-resumes to job boards may be growing in popularity among job seekers, they are not very effective in the

“A magazine article pointed out that I was interviewing the company as much as the company was interviewing me. That sentence put a whole different spin on the process!!!”

Survey Respondent

volume for new hires. Top Echelon, a placement company, found that less than five percent of all hires result from job boards. Part of the drawback with job boards is that the job boards are national whereas most hiring is far more local.

Don't Miss the Basics!

Tri-fold cover letter and resume in envelope. Top fold should be top of letter.

Don't include a photo.

Two spaces go after a period or colon and between the state abbreviation and the zip code.

On envelope and on cover letter, use *Mr.* and *Ms.* before the name of the recipient.

Researchers advise only posting your resume on a website with a firewall. Exclude a phone number and address to avoid harassment and identity theft. Contact information should contain only an e-mail address or voice mailbox, if you have one. A voice mailbox, not your home number, is needed for internet postings. A skilled villain can track you using your home number and other information on the website.

Including keywords in resumes is critical to making the cut. Often, employers use search software that looks for keywords in a scanned resume. Keywords help to identify professional licenses, education, experiences, and certifications. The more keywords, the better the chance of getting a hit when the resume is scanned.

Despite this impersonal approach of communicating only on paper or electronically, you will have some opportunities to make yourself stand out. *The New York Times* website (career writer Sabra Chartrand) gave some unorthodox advice on e-resumes. Chartrand discouraged applicants from limiting themselves to one page--at one time, the golden rule of resumes.

For a college student, you may have a difficult time even filling one page of experience. I've seen students successfully list a campus organization under job experience; one student, as president of a campus organization, had managed the other officers, planned large-scale fundraisers, organized tutoring programs, led the 100-plus member organization, and had won reelection. That almost sounds like a full-time, paying job.

Traditional resumes have emphasized job chronology. Chartrand suggested that the contemporary resume emphasizes skills. Another career writer advocated listing the most important job first. If your last job

"The best resource I had for my first job was attending a professional association's annual conference where I was interviewed and got my current career."

Survey Respondent

was fast-food but you did two internships, the recruiter may stop reading after seeing the fast-food job. This issue can be a sticky one. There are diehards who want the chronology. Recruiters may think your resume is disorganized if you list jobs out of order.

You do not need to attach a photograph or writing sample to your resume. If you've been published in a noteworthy publication, you may include that fact in a section on your resume entitled publications. Keep the writing sample handy as recruiters often

Use Resume Integrity.

"The story on the resume isn't the story that comes out on the job interview under questioning."

John Ridgeway
Recruiter and Senior Vice
President for Customer
Relations at a Fortune 500
Company

Quick Tip

Using a professional resume writer generally is not worth the money for a college student with little work experience. There are many low-cost and free resources to help you do the writing.

ask for them at or after interviews. Good choices are a short research paper related to your major or a newsletter article.

Cover Letters

If you thought writing the resume was bad, it gets worse with the cover letter. The cover letter is to introduce you and present your resume. It should be brief and summarize your qualifications.

"One cover letter of a prospective employee was so bad the company circulated it around the building then used it for a training class for new employees. The guy didn't just toot his own horn. He had a whole orchestra going. It was so pompous. The person who showed me the letter in the training class said they invited the guy to interview just to get a look at him then laughed when he lived up to their negative expectations."

Survey Respondent

Personalize the letter as much as possible. Take time to learn the names of the human resources head or recruitment director so that you can address the letter personally. Often such information is available on the company's website. Never use "To whom it may concern" or "Dear Sir/Ma'am."

Include your contact information and e-mail address. Since the letter and resume may take time to get into the right hands, include a permanent address if you're applying near graduation and you plan to move back home. In the letter, thank the addressee for his/her consideration.

References

Traditionally, resume writers have included a section for references but then wrote, "Available upon request." At one time, that was a clever ploy to figure out which employer was nibbling. I recommend including references on the resume.

Nearly every job application or interviewer will ask for a reference either before the interview or soon afterwards. Good

Cover Letter Tips

Avoid "Dear Sir/Ma'am" salutations.

Demonstrate knowledge of the company and industry.

Briefly highlight your background and qualifications.

choices are former supervisors (or coworkers) and also professors.

For references, be sure to get permission to use a person before listing him or her. Most references will be verbal. A phone number and/or e-mail address is most helpful to recruiters. Recruiters rarely will take time to write the reference. Also note the reference's relationship to you (e.g., current colleague, former supervisor, advisor, etc).

Possible References

College Professor
Work Study Supervisor
Off-Campus Job Supervisor
Supervisor at Former Internship
Volunteer Coordinator at Volunteer Job
Advisor to Campus Club or Fraternity

A few employers still like to have a written letter of reference. Don't be surprised if you're asked by your reference to draft it. Busy professionals often will have you start it, and they will finish it. On the other hand, for those references who actually write it themselves, you may not get a copy. In any case, choose references carefully, and allow them a reasonable turnaround time. More than a week is needed for a letter of reference.

Suppose you suspect your former boss is speaking negatively about you to prospective employers when they call for a reference. You can do some snooping to find out. There are several companies that will do a check on your job references.

In a CNN interview, Martin Yate of Allison & Taylor, a company that does reference checking, suggested that half of the time the references present no problem. But the other half, he said "ranges to misinformation that can be cleaned up or, in many cases, things that are being said that are inaccurate or illegal."

Typically, the reference checking companies will ask the same questions as regular employers, but don't expect them to pose as a potential employer. They will not lie and make up a story, nor will they reveal that they are working for you.

Allison & Taylor, Hunter Communications, and Documented Reference Check (www.badreferences.com and www.myreferences.com) will check your job references. The cost ranges from \$50 to \$100. These services can help you avoid

using potentially damaging people as references.

If you find that you have been blackballed by a former supervisor, immediately stop using that person. Damage control over what that person has already done may be limited; trying to assure the new potential employer of your merits or having other references dispute the person's discrediting statements may help. The more likely situation is that your name would be placed at the bottom of the list behind other candidates with no blemishes on their records.

Legal action may be possible. CNN reported that lawsuits against former employers account for a third of all defamation cases. The easiest thing to do is to not use a person about whom you may have misgivings or doubts. A former coworker can substitute for a malicious boss. As well, give thought to any credence of the poor reference. Did the person have a legitimate gripe? If so, work on improving yourself.

Interviews

The first step after you have an interview scheduled is to do your homework. Research the company, the division (if known), its competitors, and the industry. Be conversant in the issues confronting the industry. Know the information well enough so that you don't sound like you're spitting out memorized data.

Before you walk in, do a five-point check.

Cell phone and pager are off.

Hair and teeth look good.

Zipper is up.

No runs in hosiery.

Resume, writing sample, and pen are handy for quick locating.

Kisses of Death for Interviews

Lack of company knowledge

Unprepared to discuss career plans or goals

Unenthusiastic approach to interview

Poor physical appearance

Pleading poverty over qualifications

Difficulty discussing experience

Source: partially based on an Accountemps poll

Try the employer's website or do other research. Websites like www.wetfeet.com and also

www.rileyguide.com are resources for company data and they also offer interview tips. You can also try www.vaults.com, www.hoovers.com, and search engines like Yahoo and Altavista to find company data. Most campus career centers have access to Vaults and Hoovers on subscription. Go there for access without charge.

"I had an interview with a panel that asked me questions rapid fire. It felt like target practice and I was the target. In a way they had to do that because the office was one that required people to think quickly and on their feet. I knew from the type of work they did it was survival of the fittest and this was a test of how I could survive."

Survey Respondent

Practice where possible. Ask your roommate to rehearse with you and vice versa. Watching or interviewing someone else helps you to pick up nuances of human behavior that you likely share.

The interviewer sizes you up before you sit down. Some even notice

small things like how you knock on the door; a timid or tentative knock can be taken the wrong way. Above all, have a sincere smile and a firm handshake. People notice insincere behavior; their first clues to your character are your smile and handshake. My biggest pet peeve is a weak handshake. Women often give limp handshakes, and men often give limp handshakes to women.

A study by Professor David Kenny of the University of Connecticut found that job interviewers will size up a candidate within 30 seconds. Keys to making a good impression are: neatness, good posture and a strong voice. Surprisingly, these are often overlooked in the rush to study interview questions or to perfect resumes. Watch yourself in the mirror and ask others to size you up in your best interview suit.

Quick Tip

If asked a conceptual question, you're being judged on how you respond and how you rationalize your answer. If the interviewer asks, "How many gas pumps are there in the state of Virginia?" This isn't about your command of useless trivia. It's about how you think. Weird questions are about how well you can "outline a logical procedure for estimating the answer," according to William Poundstone.

Source: *Business 2.0*
July 2003

Don't bad-mouth a former employer, even one which was an internship or work-study job. If it was a really bad situation and you must give an answer as to why you left, make it generic like saying "I was disappointed in the direction management was taking the office." Or try "I left for three big reasons," then discuss one or two neutral ones and leave out the big negative one. Another option is to couch the decision to leave as a career move like saying, "The signs were clear the company was headed for trouble. It was clear job cuts were coming." Few could argue with that reasoning.

At one time, the general rule was never to admit to having had a difficult time at a previous job, especially a conflict with a supervisor because, frankly, that's life in just about any office. Conflicts happen everywhere and leaving because of a conflict was thought to be a sign of inability to manage conflict.

However, the new school of thought is that conflict happens and people do and will leave because of it. If you must mention previous conflicts, emphasize that you tried to manage the problem but ultimately

Interview Tip

Weird questions are about thinking on your feet and reacting to unexpected situations. A blank stare, struggling for an answer, treating the question as a joke or tossing the question back to the interviewer (e.g., *I don't know. What would you do?*) are very bad ways of responding to unexpected interview questions.

"One of the worst interviews I had was when I was just plain out of it. I had been traveling a few days before and was going nonstop after I got back. I had the day off from work that day but it was filled with appointments. By the interview that afternoon, I was alert but had a hard time keeping up with the panel's questions."

Survey Respondent

decided to leave to allow yourself professional growth and to direct your energy more positively.

Vanderbilt University conducted interviews of 60 corporate recruiters about interview style; many said they were most impressed with candidates who could "captivate them with accounts of their work experience." They wanted thoughtful, descriptive accounts of experiences.

Dan Rafter, writing in a *Chicago Tribune* article, suggested among the mistakes not to make is to "leave without asking the potential employer

how you did.” That seems a bit inappropriate to me, but it may be appropriate for some professions.

A former coworker described to me such an encounter and the interviewer flatly said, “There is a line between being assertive and being aggravating to another person. You just crossed it.” A good final question from you might be “What’s the next step?” or “When do you expect to make a decision?”.

Watch Your Language

Slang should never be used during an interview. “All else being equal—experience, credentials, etc.—in most cases the employer will select the candidate with the better verbal skills,” says Laura Lorber, managing editor of www.CareerJournal.com in a *Black Enterprise* article.

A former colleague reported being a new hire with one or two years of experience and interviewing at his alma mater. He interviewed students whom he had known while he was a student there. He was surprised that students were far too relaxed with him during the interview. He didn’t expect them to ingratiate themselves to him, but he expected a more professional interaction.

Though he wanted to give them a chance, he had a tough time reconciling their interview behavior to what they would do on the job. Could he fairly recommend John Doe for a job when John couldn’t seem to use a word other than “dude” or “sweet” in the interview?

From my research, one student admitted to having made the mistake of

following the interviewer’s cue on using vulgarities. That was a mistake. The interviewer apparently didn’t realize he

Questions to Determine Your Ambition

Where do you envision yourself in five years?

How is this job going to help in your future development?

What is your grade point average?

Tell me about your life.

“I had an interviewer belittle a scholarship that I had. It was a partial scholarship for four years. At first, I took it as a pressure question to see how I would react.”

Survey Respondent

was using vulgarities and promptly suggested the student change his language. Interviewers are critical of your speech and dress, but will give themselves latitude. It can be “do as I say but not as I do” with vulgarities in interviews AND in the office. That’s a bad habit to drop quickly!

Pressure Interviews

Pressure interviews are used by some companies to gauge personalities. Often, interviewers will act like total jerks to get a response out of you. That ranges from yelling to asking obnoxious questions that would cause Miss Manners to blush. The best defense is a strong constitution.

“An interviewer asked a guy I know about his tie. How much it cost? Would he be wearing it to the office? Since it was a normal tie, he took it as an attempt to poke at him to see how he'd react.”

Survey Respondent

The rule of thumb is not to react; avoid becoming defensive or angry. Unfortunately, some students have taken the advice of not reacting too literally. Some have sat through these performances stiffly without saying a word or holding a silent, tight smile. I think that reaction only adds fuel. In such situations, keep cool and try replying with an even-toned

response which acknowledges the comments but doesn’t react. Try saying “Thank you for your comments” or “I’ll give your comments consideration.”

The same advice goes for unexpected situations. A recruiter described in a recent magazine interview that, after greeting the interviewee in his office, he deliberately missed his chair three times to see how she’d react. The candidate made no response, not even asking if he were hurt. In these situations, students have the mistake of underreacting; don’t lose your humanity.

With angry or bizarre behavior in interviews, have an awareness. This may well be a sample of

“I don’t remember if it was during the interview or my first day on the job but my supervisor says to me in a diplomatic way that his boss was very passionate and it can be overwhelming and could I deal with that. I said, ‘We’re all adults. How bad could she be?’ Real bad it turned out.”

Interview Respondent

what office politics are like for that company. The manager may be giving you a taste of what's to come to gauge your mettle for the real thing. Managers will not come out and say that the big boss is a bully who belittles all employees at every opportunity and that there'll be no one there to run interference if the boss goes off on you.

Generally, at the end of the pressure interview, the interviewer will tell you that the behavior was to test your reactions. That often is not enough to encourage some applicants to return. Some applicants are so taken aback that they abandon pursuit of employment with that company. Knowing this, employers' use of pressure interviews is on the decline.

Group Interviews

One of the worst interview situations I've had was a group interview in which one recruiter talked to about 10 applicants at the same time. Unfortunately, these types of interview techniques are on the rise.

"I had a group interview session for a retail job. I actually didn't get a chance to say anything after we introduced ourselves. One woman kept talking for every question. It never had the feel of an interview. You had to be almost rude to get a chance to speak."

Interview Respondent

Interview Tip

A college career services manager mentioned to me that the number one question that students fall over in interviews is: "Tell me about a time in which you've provided great customer service."

A customer can be an internal or external client (another employee or a member of the public). Giving good customer service may not be a single event. Students often struggle with this question because they try to find one unique event. An acceptable answer is that you treat all customers as priorities and here's how....

Employers with many applicants will have group interviews to weed out candidates at one time rather than the longer process of interviewing all candidates individually.

It works well for the employer but isn't always so beneficial to you. Take time to listen to other candidates as they speak. That includes looking at each person as (s)he speaks.

Generally, it's acceptable for you to ask questions of other candidates as appropriate. Asking an appropriate question of another candidate may be as beneficial to you as answering a question from an interviewer. Don't be reluctant to add to the response of another candidate, but don't interrupt others as they speak.

Panel Interviews

This form of interview is also very popular. You will be interviewed by a group of employees (usually several supervisors looking for candidates for their respective offices) or a supervisor and future peers.

Make eye contact with each person. When answering a question, talk to the panel not just the questioner. If you have a series of interviews rather than one panel interview, don't be surprised if you're asked the same questions over again. Don't let your weariness show. Keep your responses fresh.

Telephone Interviews

Telephone interviews permit employers to gather necessary information cheaply. They often are used as screening interviews. Here is where your voice—pitch, grammar, and tone—is key to your success.

"I had a telephone interview scheduled for a job on the West Coast. We had the time established for them to call me but then I got called into a meeting a few minutes before. They were understanding about it."

Survey Respondent

Be aware of background noises—on your part and the interviewer's. You don't want your roommate to suddenly blast heavy metal music while you're talking.

Also be conscious of your voice's tone,

Questions to Gauge Your Professional Skills

Read this product information and give me a one minute sales pitch in 10 minutes.

What have you done to prepare yourself for this position?

Write instructions for washing a car.

What makes you the most qualified person for this position?

Why are you here?

rhythm, and pitch in a phone interview. One recruiter suggested to a magazine interviewer (*Fortune*, April 19, 2004) to stand while talking; in doing so, the posture of standing changes your breathing and tone of voice toward sounding more confident.

**Brownie Points
for Interviews**

Projecting the image of controlled enthusiasm.

Asking thoughtful questions about the company and/or interview process.

Discussing efforts and/or plans toward self development.

Mentioning certain leisure activities, e.g., volunteering, exercise (a McMaster University study found that working out gives the image of confidence and self control). But don't lie if you don't!

As busy humans, we often tend to rush through some phone conversations; the wrong rhythm of a phone interview can give the impression that you're not really interested in the company, and that you're trying to rush through the interview.

Another idea suggested by a recruiter is to have notes prepared in advance. Though you'll miss the visual part of communication in phone interviews, the plus is that you can have notes ready to use if your thinking suddenly goes cold.

It's not easy to get cues on when the interviewer is ready to end the interview on the phone; you don't get the visual cues that one does from a personal interview. Just keep your awareness up.

Let the interviewer end the phone call. As with in-person interviews, send a letter of thanks to the interviewer. E-mail and faxed thank-you letters have become acceptable.

With telephone interviews, you won't have the opportunity to request a business card, so be sure to ask for all relevant information such as mailing

address, phone number, and e-mail address. I'm always impressed when another person has researched the mailing address ahead of time, reads it to me to

"My worst interview situation was questions about the geographic location I just moved from which showed the interviewer's total stupidity."

Survey Respondent

HINT: Interviewers may feign ignorance to test how well you respond to questions.

confirm it's correct and asks if a mailing code is needed.

Interruptions

If someone interrupts the interview, try to disengage yourself from the conversation between the person and the interviewer. While they are talking, avoid eye contact with them by surveying the interviewer's bookcase or the awards on the wall. Trying to maintain eye contact with the interviewer while (s)he's dealing with the person who came in may be interpreted as impatience.

Disinterested Interviewers

Interviewers often will feign ignorance or disinterest to test your reaction. Or, they actually may be disinterested.

"I was interviewing for a new job. At the time I was working part-time (32 hours a week) and going to grad school full-time. The interviewer got excited when he saw I was working part-time. Despite explaining that I was finishing my coursework and that I wanted to work full-time, I could see him tune me out."

Survey Respondent

Remember, you're one of hundreds of people they may interview in the course of a week. If you make little attempt to be interesting, it will have an impact.

I once had an interview in which I was asked to explain a project listed on my application. I did so and was met with a poker face while I explained it.

After I finished, he said, "I didn't understand a word you said." Fortunately, the technical expert was part of the panel and jumped in. I made the faulty assumption of believing the interviewer, though the head of the office, had the technical knowledge to understand the intricacies of research

Questions to Test Your Creativity and Ability to Conceptualize

How does *Alice in Wonderland* apply to the corporate world?

If you were to write your autobiography, what would you name it?

How many day care centers are there in the state of Washington?

What do a poem and a painting have in common?

design. That's actually not an unusual situation. With downsizings and mergers, it is quite possible that a manager may lack the technical skills of all the employees (s)he supervises.

Interview Basics

Peter Gerstmann, a British occupational psychologist, spent 12 years studying job interviews to come up with a list of the toughest questions. His research included that ever-present, mind-boggling question: "What's your greatest weakness?" Clearly if you try to say "none," that won't cut it.

Quick Tip

When talking about projects and accomplishments, talk about the decisions you had to make.

Trying to play it off with something innocuous like "I eat too much chocolate" also won't cut it. Your response should be thoughtful and reflective. However, you should use some care in how you form your response. If you're impatient with others, are you actually passionate about your work and get frustrated when work gets held up? A passionate personality is clearly more palatable.

I read an interesting article online about how to answer this question. One person suggested to name something unrelated to the job description. If it's a highly technical job which requires little writing, an answer might be "I need to improve my writing skills. I took a technical writing course but I think I should do better." Another option the article suggested was to say something that was "fixable" and not an inherent character flaw.

A candidate was asked that question and responded

Questions to Get a Handle on Your Personality

Can you list 200 friends or acquaintances?
Are you willing to work hard?
Does your family miss you now that you've moved away?
How will you interface with individuals involved in X work?
What five adjectives best describe you?
What characteristic of your personality do you want to change?
How is this job going to help in your future development?
Do you mind working with a bunch of old men?

truthfully, “I want too much out of life. The list keeps getting longer rather than shorter. It can make me feel like I’m not accomplishing anything when I am. I did x, y and z (things listed on her resume) but it still felt like I should have done more.” Where possible, turn a negative into a positive and always be truthful.

Gerstmann also suggested that you need to be prepared to talk about mistakes and failures. A common question is “What mistakes did you make in handling a difficult staff situation?” or “What has been your biggest failure?”

These are actually opportunities to shine. Everyone has failed at something. If you can bring out your motivations,

“I had an interview in which I asked many questions during the interview, but then they expected me to ask questions at the end. And they were looking at me like I needed to ask questions. I couldn’t think of anything else so I asked about the software they use and what happens to their work after it’s released and if they worked with X government agency. It worked.”

Survey Respondent

passions and decision-making while acknowledging that things didn’t work out, you’ll succeed on this question. Also, if you own up to your own shortcomings rather than use a failure as a blame game, you’ll succeed with this question.

Employers want to know what makes you tick and what you’re really like. Often, we’ve never had to share with another person what motivates us. It would be easy to stumble over this question if you never asked yourself.

Similarly, can you describe an achievement? This is not a question about acing an exam. Be prepared to discuss an activity that took thought, preparation, and perhaps sacrifice to accomplish.

A former coworker described to me a meeting she had with a young job seeker who had been the first in her family to go to college. The young woman had been told by her mother that she

“I had an interview with a division director and three managers. The division director (an older man) controlled the interview and kept losing himself. He introduced his staff three times. Then he couldn’t understand why I couldn’t remember the details of a project on my application from 8 years ago.”

Survey Respondent

would not be going to college, despite the scholarship offer, because the mother didn't like the idea and didn't want to pay the fees the scholarship didn't cover. The young woman defied her mother, forged her mother's signature on the college papers, and hopped a bus to the college, using her savings and working nights to pay the uncovered fees. Despite all this, she was about to graduate summa cum laude. That's the kind of story of perseverance that employers want to hear. Your story may not be quite so dramatic, but they want drama.

Also, be prepared to answer questions about any problems on your resume. If you have a low or unlisted GPA, that will register with the interviewer. Recruiters will understand if you had a rough transition your freshman year or a family death and your GPA suffered. Likewise, if you pledged a sorority or became too involved in extracurricular activities, don't expect much sympathy, but you

may get some understanding. In the real world, you'll have to manage personal and work responsibilities; failing to do so in college when there is less stress can be a red flag for how well you will do on the job.

Employers are very understanding with juggling a job and going to school. Use such situations to your advantage if you must explain a poor performance. Show how you took control and improved. Also, note the positive of the situation and explain what you learned from it.

You may be asked some personal questions. Headhunter Mark Jaffe, in a

"The interviewer suggested I come over during lunch. So I did and took an hour of annual leave. First, I had to get through security which took longer than expected. Then, the interview ran over. So I had to rush through the end without asking questions about the office at the end. I know I made a bad impression."

Survey
Respondent

Questions to Determine Your Technical Skills

I see you took X course. Why and how would you use that on the job?

Look at this SAS printout. What do you think?

Explain some basics of polymer processing.

About 15 years ago, Pepperidge Farms failed miserably with its Star Wars cookie brand. Why?

magazine interview, revealed he often asks candidates about their family history and how they grew up, including a question like, “How did you express your teenage rebellion?” Wow! Frankly, personal questions are not unusual.

Research shows that people with troubled childhoods, particularly angry divorces of parents, will have troubled work lives. Questions like that can be weeding tools for future problem employees. If you did have a troubled childhood, you may want to look into the free or low-cost counseling services that universities typically provide.

One respondent had an interviewer say, “You’ve got a 3.93 GPA. So you’re a bookworm.” That’s a hook. The interviewer wanted to be sure the student, though academically skilled, had interpersonal skills. She responded that she wasn’t a bookworm but had been involved in X, Y, and Z campus activities. The ideal situation is one in which you can show a balance between academic achievement, attainment of (personal or professional) goals and personal development including interpersonal skills.

In addition, interviewers want to know your work ethic. They want to be assured that you’ll stick with the project or job and perform. They like people with ambition who are clear-eyed about accomplishing goals. There are few things worse to an interviewer than a candidate with no thoughts, goals, aspirations, or plans for the future.

Your friends and family already know you. You’ve rarely if ever had to tell someone exactly who you are. Now you do. The interviewer needs to know who this person is that just walked into his office.

The interviewer has something about you on paper in your application but that’s not entirely the real you. Unfortunately,

Questions to Ask Recruiters

What kind of training is available?

Where does this position fit in the overall organization?

What current trends affect the company?

Note: If you ask questions like, “Who are the major competitors and/or clients?” or “What are the company’s missions and goals?” the recruiter may have expected you to have already researched these.

you will have only 30 minutes or so to give the interviewer enough of a picture of you to get a call back or land a job. Be prepared for those hard-to-answer questions that throw a person for a loop.

Illegal Questions

Are you pregnant or do you have children?

Are you married?

Can I take your picture?

How old are you?

Are you a U.S. citizen?

Have you ever been arrested?

Do you have trouble with drug or alcohol abuse?

Have your wages ever been garnished and why?

How do you feel about leaving your children in someone else's care?

Would you blow the whistle on a coworker?

Where were you born?

Even the most seasoned student can be thrown off guard by questions about why s(he) is just right for the job. To accurately answer this question may be very difficult if you know little about the specific job. The interviewer wants you to summarize your qualifications and experiences. Discuss your outstanding qualifications.

My favorite question and interview situation is when the interviewer says, "I'm just going to look over your resume for a minute but you get started." Please don't just sit there in awkward silence while she looks over your resume.

This situation is less about the interviewer needing time to catch up on her reading and more about your ability to express yourself, react to an uncomfortable situation and to take the initiative to start the interview. The worst response is no response. You should briefly summarize your reason for interviewing with the company, your background, credentials and objectives for a position.

Illegal Questions

There's a short list of illegal questions or factors that can be used to decide employment. Marital status, race, and gender are at the top of the list. Also prohibited are questions on national origin, age and a few others.

Age and national origin can be a little

difficult for employers to navigate because a person must be a citizen or legal alien to work in the U.S. and be of legal age. An employer may fairly ask you, “Are you legally eligible to work in the U.S.?” or “Are you of legal age to work?”

An employer may ask, “Who is your next of kin for emergencies?” However, she may not ask, “What is your husband’s name?” Questions about being able to perform physical duties are legal as are questions about a felony conviction. However, an employer may not ask about a disability or about a criminal record during the interview. After an offer is made, some jobs in banks or social services may require fingerprinting and criminal background checks for final placement.

“I had one person ask me if I was considered a minority with the right to special perks despite the fact that I was born in this country.”

Survey Respondent

“My worst interview situation was one where I was asked about my body...if I participated in an athletic activity.”

(Female) Survey Respondent

For some employers such as the federal government and government contractors, questions about political party affiliation (e.g., “Are you a Democrat or Republican?”) and sexual orientation are illegal. However, these characteristics are not protected

“During an interview, the man started talking about reading to his children. At the time I didn’t have any but I wondered if he was fishing to find out if I did.”

classes under the Civil Rights Act and, therefore, are not illegal under federal law. Some parts of the government have policies to prevent such questions.

Only a handful of states have laws on sexual orientation discrimination in employment. However, the majority of Fortune 500 companies (86 percent) have their own individual company policies which ban sexual orientation discrimination. One state actually has a law banning weight discrimination in employment.

I was asked in an interview if I could find a babysitter for my children if I had to work late.”

Survey Respondent

Once an offer is made (hence no more protection under the

law for civil rights violations on hiring), an employer may ask just about anything. It is not unusual to be required to produce a social security card or a birth certificate at this point.

Topics You May Be Asked

Your Hobbies

Any Volunteer Work

Any Leadership Experience

Relationships with Classmates

Living Arrangements

Generally, you will not find interviewers who will take a chance on asking these kinds of illegal questions. They are most often concerned about your personality and skills. Many questions will focus on who you really are.

During the Interview

An absolute requirement for a good interview is to know what the employer wants. The top qualities of job seekers according to a Watson Wyatt report are: willingness to share information and ideas; commitment to teamwork; and responsiveness to change. The ability to work under pressure rounded out the top

four characteristics found by the survey.

If you know friends or alumni currently working for the employer, ask about the skills the employer needs. Then mold your responses to reflect how your experiences and background meet those needs.

Showcase your accomplishments, but be wary. In a *New Woman* article, executive Anne Sweeney suggested spotlighting a few projects that best demonstrate your talents rather than trying to show off all your projects. Most likely after reviewing your resume, the interviewer will bring up the ones (s)he finds interesting.

Don't be surprised if you're asked about things that seem unusual. General questions about your life and habits provide hints about the real you. Your

"I was also asked a logic/math question but the interviewer did not ask it correctly and it was literally impossible to answer. If you had nine balls (one weighs more and 2 chances to weigh them, how would you find the heavier ball? You need to use a balance but the interviewer told me that you had to use a regular scale which makes the problem impossible."

Survey Respondent

hobbies provide clues about your character. If you're inclined to grab a beer and watch TV all weekend, employers may be disinterested. If you're into volunteer work that involves leadership or interpersonal skills, you're a more interesting candidate. If you're into team sports, you're also more interesting.

Questions to Test How Well You Express Yourself

What did you
learn in college?

Is there anything
else I should
know about you?

Tell me about
yourself.

What is your life's
philosophy?

What does
success (failure)
mean to you?

How would your
family
(coworkers)
describe you?

Read this and
give me a one
minute
presentation.

Tell me about a
time in which you
failed.

A question about your living arrangements (dorm room, apartment sharing, etc.) isn't being nosy. It may be to see if you have experience with interpersonal issues. Someone unfamiliar with communal living is at a disadvantage over someone who has had to negotiate or bear through group interactions. The same goes with questions about classmates, especially group projects or study groups.

Let the interviewer end the interview. Listen for cues of the interview winding down. One of the last things you should ask is what the next step is or when to expect to hear from the company. Always conclude with saying "Thank you."

Tests in Interviews

According to a Reed Company report, the interview process has undergone a dramatic shift as the world economy emerges from the recession; over half of employers surveyed by Reed report using more personality or competence tests. Over a third of applicants are given

"I was applying for a job with difficult children, and the interviewer decided to act out a scenario in which he 'intimidated' me as one of the older kids might. It was pretty bad."

Survey Respondent

psychometric tests or are asked to give mock presentations and take part in group exercises. For sales and technical jobs, tests are common.

After the Interview

If you didn't receive one, ask for a business card. That way, you'll have the mailing information to send a thank-you letter. Always send a thank-you letter soon afterward; more than a week to respond is too long. Today, it is acceptable to send a thank-you e-mail.

Off the Wall Questions

What are my (the interviewer's) chances of working for XYZ company (the company where the interviewee was now working)?

If you were at a karaoke bar, what would you sing?

What type of work did your father do?

Are you going to abandon your first job to help your dysfunctional family?

What is your take on spirituality?

If you could be an animal, what would it be and why?

Is your father still alive; how did he die?

If there were some lingering question from the interview, you can include a brief paragraph in the thank-you letter addressing it. For example, I was interviewed by three people. During the interview, I was asked about working weekends because the way the conversation went I didn't get a chance to answer the question adequately. In the thank-you letter, I added a paragraph about that question. You may also take this opportunity to provide a writing sample.

A thank-you letter is important and can be as important as how you perform on the interview. First, it gives the interviewer a reminder of you. Second, it's good manners and can make a further good impression. Unfortunately, many forget to do this. One study found that women were far better at getting thank-you letters written than men. Many job seekers simply neglect to do it. If you were interviewed by many people, send an individual letter to each.

Accuracy of Credentials

A new hire can cost in the low thousands of dollars in recruitment costs to bring on board. Replacing a seasoned employee can cost upwards of \$11,000 according to an estimate by the Employers Resource Association. Added to that, ADP

Screening and Selection Services found that 44 percent of Americans lie about their work history. For these reasons, employers are taking closer and closer looks at candidates. According to a CNN article, 40 to 50 percent of top employers in the U.S. use extensive background checks.

The Society of Human Resource Management found that more than 80 percent of employers perform background checks for various infractions; eight years ago, only two-thirds did. *Smart Money* magazine reported that 79 percent of employers regularly check lengths of employment at old jobs. More than half check titles. More than a third check salary history. In a poll by Management Recruiters International 68.7 percent of executives surveyed said their company requires drug testing during the hiring process.

Privacy and American Business magazine found 28 percent of workers thought checking credit histories of job applicants was acceptable; a full 91 percent were okay with checks for sex offenses or criminal records. Another 92 percent favored checks for resume accuracy. People don't like competing with fakers, and they dislike the thought of working next to Jack the Ripper.

There have been several high -profile situations in the news lately in which resume inflation by current employees cost people their jobs. From the Notre Dame football coach who lied about his academic and athletic background to the U.S. Olympic Committee President Sandra Brown, ordinary and influential people alike are getting caught, with embarrassing outcomes. Little fibs on resumes and during interviews can catch up to you. The best defense is to be honest.

That includes handling questions or false accusations about

Questions to Determine How you Handle Pressure or Uncomfortable Situations

What do supervisors tend to criticize about you?

What makes you special?

Will you have trouble driving 35 miles home after a long day?

How do you rate me on conducting this interview?

Are your grades a good indication of who you are?

What could I say that would make you not want this job?

Why should I hire you instead of someone else?

Do you want my job one day?

your credentials. In June 2002, the Vanderbilt women's basketball coach wrongly was accused of resume inflation resulting from a newspaper report. The situation resulted from a mix-up at his graduate school which recorded that he had one master's degree instead of two. Coach Collen chose to rewrite his resume to reflect the incorrect record of his alma mater rather than argue about it. The bottom line was that he was forced to resign under pressure, but later the mix-up came to light.

Where necessary, be prepared to present any documents to verify your credentials or the names of collaborating parties. It is rare but does happen that someone will be falsely accused in such matters.

At one time, anyone bent on puffery in his credentials could actually get away with it. A University of Colorado management professor found that job application deceit often succeeds. Thirteen percent of the applicants in the study engaged in "extreme fakery." That may be the reason for the heightened background checks. With the ease of accessing information via the Internet, fakers are becoming easier to find.

You may be surprised by the breadth of a background check. Your potential employer may be interested in your credit history as well as a criminal past. According to *Smart Money's* Charles Butler, the federal Fair Credit Reporting Act prohibits background checkers from searching more than 10 years back for criminal misdeeds; seven years if you're applying for a job that pays less than \$75,000. That open container arrest back freshman year can haunt you for years to come. Likewise, a shoplifting indiscretion back in high school may still be on your record. A credit check is legally permissible if related to your job. The time frame for checking criminal background also applies for credit checks.

Watch what you tell the Internet about yourself. When employers do background checks, all public information is fair

**Red Flags that Prompt
A Background Check**

Unrealistic or confusing
reasons for leaving
previous jobs

Breaks in employment

Unsigned applications

Past criminal
convictions (felonies)

Incomplete applications

Source: *The Baltimore Sun*
November 21, 2004.

game. That includes facebook entries, student websites, and online blogs. In a recent media interview, a recruiter told of discovering his fresh-faced interviewee had posted pictures of her drunken escapades in online blogs.

Making the Decision

Hopefully, when the time comes, you'll have more than one offer to consider. Factors such as corporate culture, proximity of the new city to family, fringe benefits, and possibilities for promotion are things to consider. More still, weigh the options carefully, including the total compensation package and fringe benefits. One employer who offers a salary of \$10,000 less than another may actually be a better choice if the total compensation package includes stock options, profit sharing, and full health care coverage. Two offers of the same salary are not equal if one offers annual performance bonuses.

In 2001, 65 percent had performance bonuses; 39 percent had stock options, and 35 percent offered signing bonuses or a guaranteed first-year bonus. The average signing bonus can average as much as 19 percent of one's salary. With tougher economic times, offers may include fewer or smaller performance bonuses and signing bonuses are often limited to those bringing years of experience.

A fortunate few will receive a signing bonus from employers. Many such bonuses do not come with a requirement for continued employment. If you accept a signing bonus, be prepared to stay at least a year.

If you start looking for a new job and accept a new job quickly, you should return all or a portion of the signing bonus. Though not required by contract or law, leaving and keeping the signing bonus leaves a sour situation and sullies your reputation. Don't forget future prospective employers call previous employers for job references.

Quick Statistic

Women tend not to negotiate starting salaries. Only seven percent of women but 57 percent of men will negotiate for a first job's salary. In negotiating, men will increase their salary by an average 7.4 percent.

Source: Women Don't Ask: Negotiations and the Gender Divide by Linda Babcock, Ph.D. and Sara Laschever.

Approximately 80-90 percent of U.S. companies offer stock options, according to data of Towers Perrin. An employee may have to be vested or have worked at least a year before being offered options. A stock option is the agreement to allow the holder to buy company stock at \$X price, which is generally substantially less than the market price. Generally, there is a time requirement before one can exercise the option.

A stock option could profit an employee substantially if the difference between the market stock price and the stock option is great. With the stock market shocks of the dot.com fallout of 2000 and the post terror attacks of 2001, stock options can lose their value and be worthless. However, the terms may be rewritten.

Also weigh fringe benefits like vacation, maternity, and sick days. In the U.S., the average number of vacation days for a worker with one year of service is 10. A more valuable vacation plan is one in which you can carry over vacation days to the next year. If you think you'll want to start a family and stay with the company, what are the maternity (and paternity) benefits? Some employers offer little in the way of maternity benefits, requiring employees to use accumulated sick days instead.

Think about worst case scenarios. If the industry is highly vulnerable to volatility, how do the companies compare in how they handle laid-off employees? Also, consider vesting requirements and 401(k)s. For some companies if you leave or are downsized before a certain time period, you forfeit the company's matching contributions.

Play the probability game as you weigh offers. Employer A that has generous bonuses but seldom awards them compares unfavorably to Employer B that awards relatively smaller bonuses to a large number of employees. As a new employee,

**Job Offer
Tiebreakers**

What are the vesting rules for each company?

Do the employers have a matching 401(k) and how much? Is there a time limit or vesting requirement?

If you are thinking about grad school, what do the companies offer in tuition remission? What are the requirements on your part for continued employment?

How generous are the performance bonuses? How are they determined?

the odds in favor of your getting an award are greater at the second company. Getting an award means more than the cash in your pocket; it increases your credibility and reputation.

Lastly, not all fringe benefits should play into your initial decision. Telecommuting is great but is often reserved for seasoned employees. Anne Kates Smith in a *U.S. News & World Report* article suggested to “let bosses think it’s all about them.” She discouraged starting out asking about telecommuting or flexible hours. It’s good to know if the company offers them; however, some companies have a waiting period before such benefits are offered to employees.

Employment Contracts

The typical job contract contains things such as the nature of your job, compensation, length of employment or guaranteed employment, and severance procedures and benefits. Some go a step further and address noncompete agreements or post-employment activities with a competitor. Some, particularly for the financial services industry according to Julia Hartman’s Strategic Job Jumping interview of an employment lawyer, require arbitration if a future disagreement develops.

Noncompete agreements will prevent an employee from accepting a new job with the current employer’s competitor. There may be a waiting period before a person can work for a competitor. The law looks a bit beyond noncompete agreements; some courts have upheld decisions that have prevented employees from going to a competing employer even though there was no noncompete agreement.

The law also can be flexible. Litigation and a court ruling in mid-2006 found that if a former employee moves to a state which does not recognize noncompete agreements, the employer may not sue.

The theory is “inevitable disclosure” in that some employees have in their memories valuable proprietary information that will inevitably be disclosed to the new employer to the first employer’s detriment. The Economic Espionage Act of 1996 also may have application for people in these extreme situations. In addition, a noncompete agreement might be considered blacklisting. Approximately 37 states have blacklisting statutes.

Graduating Without a Job

If you graduate without a job, it's not the end of the world nor a sign of failure. Typically even in good economic times, as many as a fourth of graduates may not have a job waiting when they graduated. For the last economic recovery, more than half of college grads surveyed by one research company planned to move home after graduation. The economy has improved since then and, although job prospects are better, the prospect of temporary unemployment should not be dismissed. Keep positive and keep your eyes open.

Before you leave campus, act on and consider a few things. First, register with your school's electronic resume bank if it has one. Even though you're not on campus, recruiters can access your information. If you stay in the area of your alma mater, you likely will still have interview privileges on campus. Nearly all schools allow their graduates to interview when recruiters visit. I graduated, moved back home, got the recruitment schedule for my alma mater, signed up for interviews by phone, then drove back to campus to interview and landed a job.

You may want to keep some textbooks rather than selling them. I occasionally refer back to some textbooks for work projects. Also consider keeping your dorm refrigerator. I still have my dorm refrigerator. It is now in my office along with a microwave and coffee pot. The three save me hundreds, if not thousands of dollars, each year in not having to buy breakfast, snacks, or lunch.

If you move back to your parents' home after graduation, keep a few things in mind. Have the outgoing message on the answering machine polished. If you have much younger siblings at home who may

What If You Graduate Without a Job

Volunteer

Write for local paper

Take seminars or short courses at community college

Attend social and professional conferences

Stay active

Be a tourist for awhile

Keep reading

Apply for grad school

Check out your health insurance plan

answer the phone, coach them, if your parents haven't already, about how to answer the phone and to take messages.

A college graduation may kick you off your parents' health insurance plan. Many plans will cover you only a few months after graduation or until age 22. You can buy coverage for a few months under individual plans.

A short break is acceptable between graduation and starting work. If you don't have a job waiting, this might be the perfect time for a vacation before you jump into job hunting full-time. Once you start working, you won't get a vacation longer than a week or two until you retire; so enjoy it now.

If you move back home and away from your alma mater, look into interview privileges at local universities and community colleges. Many universities will permit students and graduates from other universities to fill unused interview slots, generally at the last minute.

Regardless of your living arrangements, consider part-time or temp jobs. It's important to have flexibility with your day hours for interviews and phone calls. Some great jobs are working as a substitute teacher, camp counselor, library aide, or research assistant.

Other great part-time jobs are parts of everyday life. Jobs at grocery stores, drug stores, chain coffee houses, and some major retailers make great opportunities. Even better, some offer great benefits to part-time employees. Employers such as UPS, Starbucks and Whole Foods offer great packages that often include profit sharing, health insurance, and 401(k)s for all employees; some even offer vacation days to part-timers. Some fast food restaurants, like Chick-fil-A, offer all employees with a few years of work the opportunity for tuition remission. Working these kinds of jobs may seem like underemployment or a step down. There's surprising value in these kinds of jobs. Part-time jobs in semiprofessional or service industry jobs can be opportunities to cultivate conflict resolution, leadership, communication, and customer service skills.

Get the word out that you're looking. I've seen many people too embarrassed to admit they were unemployed to ask others for job leads. Make connections with alumni groups, fraternal organizations, and professional organizations in your field. Alumni organizations are often great places to look; alumni

often have insider information about their employers' hiring plans, know what their employer wants in a new hire (skills set) AND they'd love to see a fellow alumnus get the job.

It's also important to keep busy and to keep your skills sharp. Do volunteer work. I've yet to see a nonprofit that could not use an extra hand. However, not all volunteer work is equal. Working in an animal shelter cleaning cages is admirable but doesn't help keep your skills current.

Doing a variety of tasks at an animal shelter is more ideal. Tasks such as answering phones, managing client inquiries, writing press releases, organizing fundraisers, building websites, *and* cleaning cages are skill builders that look great on resumes. Nonprofits likely will be willing to work with you on a position description and volunteer tasks that are mutually beneficial.

In doing volunteer work, negotiate job titles. This comes in handy later when applying for jobs. Resumes are dumped into a database and managers use key word searches to search for candidates. Key words are often job titles but also can be skills. Your job title can be intern but you're actually doing the same work as an accounting manager.

Write for local paper or alumni magazine including doing interviews. You get experience, you meet others who may have job leads, and you build a portfolio. Even science graduates could use a portfolio that includes a *published* writing sample.

Another great volunteer opportunity and skill builder is to write for a local paper or alumni magazine. Even in my sleepy hometown, I found three weekly papers that were interested in volunteer writers. This isn't about pursuing a new career path; it's about building a portfolio. Your transcripts, work experience and examples of your work and writing skills all make up a portfolio. Even with high-tech careers, writing skills are a plus. Good writing skills are among the most desired skills, according to some surveys.

You don't have to be a journalism major, either. With the right amount of research and editing, you can push out a few articles on human interest topics like parenting, gardening, upcoming or recent cultural events, meanings of upcoming religious or cultural events, or interviews of local officials.

Also consider further training. Even though you may be

Hitting the Pavement

happy to be out of school, you should never stop learning. A break after college is a great time to build more skills. Become familiar with common office software, even the software you don't expect to use. I met a lawyer who didn't know how to use Microsoft Excel and a new hire auditor who also didn't know Excel; their lack of skill in using common software held up progress on group projects. In addition, consider a second language or professional training (team skills, budgeting, business communications). Each builds skills and looks great on a resume.