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Manage Your Career

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12 Bloopers to Avoid in Job Interviews

By Robert J. Sternberg

In the course of my academic career, I've been interviewed for junior and senior faculty positions as well as for administrative posts like the provostship I now hold. I have also been on more search committees than I care to count. Over time, I've observed (at least) a dozen bloopers to avoid at all costs in job interviews.

1. Good question, but now let me answer the question I wish you had asked. When you receive media training, you learn a technique called "bridging." The idea is that, in an interview with a reporter, you briefly (perhaps super-briefly) answer the question that was asked and then bridge to the point you really want to make. In that way, you appear to have heard and paid attention to the journalist's question but get the opportunity to say what you really want to say.

However useful that technique is in media interviews, it is a dud in job interviews. Chances are the interviewers are asking the same question of every candidate: If you do not answer it properly, the questioner will assume that you either can't answer it or, just as bad, don't want to. The interviewer no doubt thought the question was a good one, and he or she is unlikely to think more of you for not answering it.

2. I have no clue, but I'll be damned if I'm going to let you know that. It's hard to say "I don't know" in a job interview, but search-committees members will think more of you if you admit that you don't know the answer than if you give a poor or irrelevant one. Sometimes they will be impressed that you were willing to admit your ignorance.

While there is nothing wrong with saying you don't know, you should be concerned if you are saying it (or thinking it) too often during the interview. That might mean you should think about

other job opportunities. Or you might do a bit more homework next time: You don't want to show an excess of ignorance about the place where you want to work.

3. I'm so glad you asked. I've got an excellent colloquium on just that question. Occasionally you get the question that you have been prepping for and can't wait to respond. So you answer it ... and answer it.

Question periods are usually short, so interviewers are looking for relatively short answers. If you find that you are going on and on, stop yourself before someone else does. Overly long answers suggest a lack of self-control, uncertainty about how to answer, or, sometimes, an outsized ego.

4. I'm going to keep that face smiling and that head nodding.

When you are talking with a search committee, there may be one or perhaps two people in the group who consistently smile or nod their heads when you answer. Because they seem to be rewarding you for your answers, your tendency may be to talk directly to them and to say whatever it takes to get them to keep smiling and nodding.

The trouble is they are probably not the people you need to convince. You need to pay attention to the stone faces and the frowners. They are the ones you need to persuade that you are viable for the job.

5. A little embellishment never hurt anybody. It is tempting to embellish your record just a little here and there. After all, you are facing stiff competition for the job, and every little bit helps. But that is risky, for at least two reasons.

First, especially with the availability of the Internet for fact checking, it's just too easy for potential employers to figure out that you're stretching the truth.

Second, once you have shown you are untrustworthy, you can kiss the job goodbye. If the hiring committee catches you exaggerating in one area, its members are likely to assume that you have done the same in other areas. You're better off sticking to the truth.

6. You can count on me to make everybody happy. Colleges look for people who are compatible with institutional values. The problem is that different groups within the institution are likely to have somewhat different values, and sometimes the differences cause conflicts.

One approach some candidates take is to show how they can get along with absolutely everyone. But by doing that, you may give the impression of being wishy-washy or unwilling to stand up for principles, if indeed you are perceived as having any. No one expects you to be best friends with everyone. Show who you are. If the committee members don't like who you are, you don't want to go to their institution, and you should thank them if they reject you.

7. Weaknesses? Me? I once interviewed a candidate and asked what I considered to be a thoroughly standard question: What do you see as your major weaknesses? The candidate replied that no one had ever asked him that, and that he had not really thought about it. I knew I would not hire him. Someone who is unaware of his or her weaknesses—or not savvy enough to have thought about a good answer to such a standard question—is not going to be effective on the job. Know what your weaknesses (and strengths) are, and be prepared to talk about them. You can come out ahead in an interview if you demonstrate that you know how to correct or at least compensate for your weaknesses.

Just make sure that, whatever they are, your weaknesses are not fatal for the job. For example, if you do not particularly enjoy teaching, an interview for a faculty position is probably not the place to mention that. (Of course, if you don't like to teach, you might want to reconsider whether you want to be a faculty member in the first place.) Similarly, if you can never stand to suffer fools with a smile, you may find an administrative position very challenging.

8. I've got this great new technology for my talk. One candidate for an academic position was unable to make her technology work and unwilling to start her job talk until she could. We did not hire her. Another candidate boasted that he was using a new technology

that he had never tried out before. He could not get it to work (and he was in engineering!). We didn't hire him, either. Don't use an interview to experiment for the first time with a new technology. If you do use technology in your talk, try to ensure that it will work, but have a backup plan in case it doesn't.

9. We really know how to handle that problem at my university.

We want to hear about your experiences and how you have handled various problems. But if you convey to the hiring committee that you think your current institution has the answer to every problem, some people may wonder why you don't just stay there. We had a job candidate who seemed to be in love with his current college. His candidacy received little support from members of the search committee, because no one could figure out why he wanted to leave where he was.

10. Here's a long list of what I need for the job. I made that mistake once. Asked during an interview what I needed to make the position work, I went into great detail. The problem was, I didn't yet have an offer. And I didn't get one.

You have to be careful about specifying conditions of employment too soon in the process. You will be in a bargaining position after you're offered the job, but not really before.

And remember never to accept or turn down a job you have not officially been offered. If you don't have an offer in writing, you really don't have an offer, as I learned painfully many years ago when what I thought was an oral offer evaporated into thin air.

11. I'll teach you never to ask such a stupid question again. It was my first job interview. I was 25 years old and naïve. A scruffy-looking guy in the audience who appeared to be a first-year graduate student asked what I thought was a really dumb question. I gave a response that was too clever by half—sort of a putdown. How was I supposed to know he was the chair of the search committee?

I have never given a snarky answer since, no matter how weak I thought the question was.


12. That will never work. When someone on the search committee offers a solution to a problem the college or university faces, and you don't think it will work, the job interview is not the best time to say that. You are better off saying that you would have to think, or that there might be ways to make it work. Who knows? If you think about the issue more, you just might see the merit in the idea.


By now, you probably would like a comparable dozen pointers of things you *should* say in a job interview. That's understandable, except that what works varies from place to place, search committee to search committee, and job to job.


Your best bet: Be yourself and speak honestly. If the institution does not hire you, be glad you avoided landing at a place where you would not fit. In the end, jobs are about fit, and your role in the process is to ensure that when you do take a job, it is at a place that is a match for you. Bad romances are painful not only in one's choice of partner but also in one's choice of jobs.

Robert J. Sternberg is provost and senior vice president at Oklahoma State University, and a professor of psychology and education there.

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Trey Medley · 11 months ago

The thing I never know what to do with, though, is the inappropriate question. Things like "Who did you vote for in the last election?" or "So, are you planning on having any more kids?" Quite frankly, that's none of your business. Those type of interviews never seem to work out well.


54 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share >



inlibrarian → **Trey Medley** · 11 months ago

I think inappropriate questions are killers because they catch us off guard. I have had such questions in so many interviews that I am now prepared. I responded to a search committee member's question about whether I had kids and would the job make childcare difficult with, "My family has already worked out excellent childcare arrangements, thank you." Later the head of the search committee apologized and thanked me for being gracious. I got the job.

71 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share >



ram83 → **inlibrarian** · 11 months ago

excellent way to not be the lawyer at the interview (You know, you really can't ask that question.).

20 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



elyria → ram83 · 11 months ago

I once had a lawyer ask me in a job interview where I went to church...

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



NHPROF → elyria · 11 months ago

I am not sure I would be able to resist one of my ever-ready one liners if I ever had to field that question. Of course, I would have to be prepared to kiss the job good-bye too, but it would probably be worth it given the nature of such an intrusive and irrelevant question (unless, of course it's a religious based institution where being a member of their faithful may be a BFOQ)

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



temporaryname → NHPROF · 11 months ago

I don't know if it'd sink your candidacy quite so instantly —if you were properly cleverly snarky in your response to such an unwarranted question, you might end up with my vote, at least.

6 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



NHPROF → temporaryname · 11 months ago

Thanks...made my day! :-)

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



ram83 → Trey Medley · 11 months ago

Committees may not ask such questions. They are usually trained on what is not appropriate (your marriage status, kids, own or rent home, etc...). But open forums, all bets are off and your ability to take that question and turn it into a response about your qualifications for the job are key.

17 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



brent_chesley → ram83 · 11 months ago

Committees may not ask such questions legally and directly, but in the majority of the interviews I had, someone would talk about what a great public school system the area had, or the fine churches, or the other opportunities for employment in the area, or the housing opportunities, and wait for me to reply.

12 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



juillet → brent_chesley · 11 months ago

Actually, from what I hear they are legally allowed to ask but they are not legally allowed to make decisions based upon the answers.

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



temporaryname → brent_chesley · 11 months ago

And candidates may volunteer such information, even if only to allay fears by, e.g., letting a search committee at a university that doesn't offer spousal positions know that the candidate is married to someone whose career allows them to change locations easily.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



landrumkelly → Trey Medley · 11 months ago

... and then there's always, "Are you married?"

8 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



sciinstructor → Trey Medley · 11 months ago

I was asked something inappropriate in an interview. I responded by relating a story about a time when I chaired a search committee and one of the committee members asked an illegal question. I got the job.

24 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



t32phage → Trey Medley · 11 months ago

I have responded to two very inappropriate questions with the reply "Is that a requirement for the job?" It is snarky, but in one case I did get the job.

In other cases I have tried to let it slide and give the institution the benefit of the doubt. Being gracious is always better, when possible, but in some cases you should push back a little.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



laoshi → Trey Medley · 10 months ago

Aren't those questions illegal in the Homeland?

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



jadee · 11 months ago

How do you find out what your prior teaching institution is saying about you when you are trying to find a new job? I left my old job under less than desirable circumstances, and I think my old job is saying unfavorable things about me, and as a result, it is ruining my chances of getting another job! Isn't it illegal to bad-mouth a former employee to the point where he is no longer employable for any other work and his very livelihood is hindered or halted? And how do you address this issue if you ever do get an interview?

6 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



margray → jadee · 11 months ago

This happened to my friend, but in business, so what she did might not work for you. She had an acquaintance pretend that she was being considered for a job opening and ask for a reference. They were giving her a terrible reference, and so she no longer listed them as past work history. It gave her a gap in employment, but that was better than a bad reference. After she had more job history, she put them back in, as it was unlikely that anyone would ask them for a reference after such a length of time.

Another time, I had a person that I knew from grad school ask me to ask for his reference, and he was right that it was ruining his chances. It was from a very prominent person in the field, but was such a lousy reference that he needed to get a different one. Usually, there is more than one person in your former department that you can ask to be your reference.

I have seen other people who had an issue with their chair or something that listed a different person in the same department as their reference.

[see more](#)

19 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



jadee → margray · 11 months ago

Thank you; I'll try your advice and pray for the best!

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



richardnesmith → jadee · 11 months ago

I believe this can be called an intentional tort and you do have some legal rights. You can actually have them served with a legal notice to abstain. See Essex, N. (2012). School law and the public schools (5th ed.). Boston: Pearson (p. 166).

7 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**ram83** → jadee · 11 months ago

It isn't illegal if based in fact. Check your personnel file. Get opinion pieces removed. Ask for a letter of reference - dictate yourself and have your supervisor/former supervisor sign it - and get that in the file. Last resort - hire a lawyer.

11 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**tuxthepenguin** → jadee · 11 months ago

There's not much you can do about what they are saying. It's unlikely that they are making things up or telling stories about how bad a job you did. They're probably just lukewarm in their answers. That's a bad sign to potential employers.

11 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**NHPROF** · 11 months ago

Great piece!

Another suggestion: If possible, demystify and personalize that search committee! At the introductions, look each member in the eye and make sure you hear and recall his/her name. Ask what department or area of the college each person represents if s/he does not volunteer the information. Yes, the committee is interviewing several or maybe many candidates, but you may leave a lasting impression if your responses are on target and you establish a connection, albeit brief, with each member of the committee.

21 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**22293837** · 11 months ago

My greatest weakness? I care too much and work too hard.

66 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**richardnesmith** → 22293837 · 11 months ago

Isn't that the truth! ;-)

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**barnwani** → 22293837 · 11 months ago

"I care too much and work too hard."

While I appreciate the facetiousness of this, I have seen the devastating effects this attitude has on a department's culture: it's nearly impossible to have a life beyond the campus; few people can have families, and those who do are marginalized; individuals take on unreasonable numbers of duties in order to keep pace with the workaholics. I would hear this weakness as a serious shortcoming, and I'd want to know (as the article's author suggests) what the person does to overcome it, and how s/he would fare in a culture that doesn't explicitly reward such behavior (assuming such a place could exist...).

38 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**ram83** → 22293837 · 11 months ago

It may be true but if you say it in the interview - they'll laugh (I hope you are joking) - because they all care too much and work too hard.

12 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**Grad School** → 22293837 · 11 months ago

I gave an answer like that once in an interview because I had read some interview advice to answer that question with a "weakness" that is really a strength in disguise. When I gave the answer a committee member started whispering that I was just dodging the question, and they didn't need another phony. Another member responded whispering that the other member was just looking for anything to use against me because he had a relationship with another candidate, and that his question was designed to work against any candidate regardless of their answer. I

designed to work against any candidate regardless of their answer. I didn't get an offer but I concluded that "answering with a disguised strength" was not a viable strategy, so I like the article's advice to have an honest answer, with a strong self-improvement.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



richardnesmith · 11 months ago

I will probably never forget how during an interview (in another country) the deputy dean mocked my accent, my pronunciations, and went on to say how much she couldn't stand the way American's talked. Seriously, I should have stood to my feet and kindly excused myself...for the handwriting was clearly on the wall.

30 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



SAMAPA → richardnesmith · 11 months ago

I'm with you on this. I've decided that the next time a deal breaker like this presents itself in an interview, I'm just going to put my mind on auto pilot and enjoy the little time left on campus and not sweat the job.

9 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



cranefly → richardnesmith · 11 months ago

I can't stand the way " American's" misuse apostrophes.... :)

11 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



richardnesmith → cranefly · 11 months ago

Thanks!

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



raymond_j_ritchie · 11 months ago

Once when I was being interviewed for a job overseas one of the committee brought up the problem of my age (50-60). That is not legal in Australia but apparently it was not in theirs. I responded that I could do nothing about that and I was still producing good work and still an effective teacher. I politely told them I was giving up on the job, told them it was because of the perceived age problem, and a few minutes latter they let me go by mutual agreement. Never heard from them again. Never applied for a job there again.

13 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



richardnesmith → raymond_j_ritchie · 11 months ago

My above experience actually happened in Australia, Raymond, so, guess it's every where.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



raymond_j_ritchie → richardnesmith · 11 months ago

If they did it was not legal and you should have complained if you did not get the job. Never let the bastards get away with things like that. The other trick they will try is make your appointment at as inconvenient a time as possible, like in the middle of your adjunct teaching obligations at another university. That is sheer bloody mindedness. Most interviews in Australia are farcial. They have one or two on the list that they want and candidates C, D & E are merely there to act as distractors. Pity you if you realise you are a distractor during the proceedings. If they sprung an age question on you they had obviously lost interest in you or never were seriously interested in the first place. May all their chooks (chickens) die!

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



richardnesmith → raymond_j_ritchie · 11 months ago

LOL...rofl...thanks for that, Raymond. I just accepted the fact and deciding now that I may as well return to the US

and let my PR status expire.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Steven L. Berg · 11 months ago

Concerning Technology: When I applied for my dream job, I needed to show I could use current technology in the classroom (e.g. PowerPoint). I had my presentation on a disk as well as a back up disk. In case the computer didn't work, I had my presentation printed on overheads. In case there wasn't an overhead projector in the room, I had my presentation printed on paper--one copy for each committee member. Power could have failed on campus and I could still have given my job talk in a dark room. I was prepared. That was my last interview and I have been at my dream job for 13 years.

60 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



ram83 → Steven L. Berg · 11 months ago

I hired a wonderful marketing director base partly on her organizational skills. She brought a windows and a Mac and IPAD to her interview in order to have the best technology for the moment. She adapted quickly, it was only after the interview that I noticed all the technology and she said she wanted to be prepared for anything - great interview technique.

12 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Dana Cruikshank → Steven L. Berg · 11 months ago

I have seen the technology fail happen at candidate presentations more than once, to varying degrees. I think it generally elicits sympathy and an opportunity, like you describe, to show your preparation and flexibility. I have seen a candidate or two, typically in their early careers, who go into a poorly-masked panic when the tech-fail occurs and then project, perhaps subconsciously, a message of "this isn't fair!"

Those folks never get hired. The prepared/roll-with-it types have a pretty good shot.

15 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



mzmaccalarian → Dana Cruikshank · 11 months ago

Very true -- once, during a candidate's presentation, the campus power went out. We were embarrassed, of course, when the backup battery-powered projector and laptop were dead too. The candidate shrugged it off and finished his talk about his research, with a couple of asides along the lines of "On this slide you *would* see..." which got a few laughs. He was a good sport, he coped well, and he got the job.

For a while we joked about planning "power failures" to see how candidates dealt with adversity...

24 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



aloofbooks → mzmaccalarian · 11 months ago

Did the candidate get the job?

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



smattoon · 11 months ago

"If the institution does not hire you, be glad you avoided landing at a place where you would not fit. In the end, jobs are about fit..."

If only job seekers had the luxury of seeking and accepting a best fit, especially in the job market we've known since 2008. It's not right to hold it against candidates for simply wanting a job that is in their bailiwick, even if the fit isn't just right -- the market we're in is not a Goldilocks fairy tale.

65 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



allacademic81 → smattoon · 11 months ago



The fit issue is tough. Certainly, many job seekers do not have the luxury of being incredibly picky about opportunities, and we can't overstate the importance of simply getting your foot in the door. However, taking a particularly bad fit could be disastrous. Take for example the researcher who takes a high teaching/advising load position in a loosely related field and is unable to continue publishing. One could end up stuck in a position they resent.

17 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



smattoon → allacademic81 · 11 months ago

understood, but that may be a lesser evil than not having any opportunity in the first place... as a hiring administrator for faculty, I am fully inclined to leaving that choice to a competent and hungry candidate.

12 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



NHPROF → allacademic81 · 11 months ago

Right...so the person has to begin looking aggressively at other options because it seems the preferable situation is to be coming from a job at any campus rather than from the ranks of the unemployed.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



SAMAPA → smattoon · 11 months ago

But we need to console ourselves with some platitude after an unsuccessful interview. I do tend to agree with the overall sentiment, however. If an institution doesn't hire you, it often means they hired someone who was a better fit. "In the end," you weren't a fit. They did you a favor.

8 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



bioclocks → SAMAPA · 11 months ago

I agree, Speaking as a member of several hiring committees, I will say that sometimes the fit might have been fine, but another candidate had more experience or more grant money to bring. Sometimes there has been a hard, very close decision made by the committee.

I feel very fortunate to be in a job (my second) that I enjoy, with colleagues I like and respect (in a variety of disciplines). Early in my career, when I felt so desperate for a job that I would have taken what was offered, I interviewed at several campuses that would have been poor fits. On two, the fit would not have been great, but it would have been passable. On the third campus, I couldn't get a straight answer about resources to accomplish what they wanted me to do, the faculty asked me a whole string of illegal questions as they treated me to a meal, and the VP kept talking about the view rather than anything of substance. I am SO grateful they did not offer me a job.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



johnnugent · 11 months ago

This article is framed around job interviews, but most of these points are good rules of thumb for *any* meeting you are ever part of.

11 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



green_for_Dean · 11 months ago

I've definitely been guilty of the "That will never work" type of answer but I was under the impression that when someone asks a question he/she really wants the answer to it. But I've learned my lesson! And yes, jobs are all about fit. it's just hard to keep that in mind when jobs are so few and far between and trying to find the one or two places that are a good fit for you can be such a long,

grueling process that not everyone has the luxury (and the time and money) of going through.

7 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



marshallcollins · 11 months ago

I was on the committee for a provost search where one of the candidates at his mid-day meeting with our group said that he was not sure, but he may have been racially offended by one of the faculty in an earlier interview. We just didn't know how to respond, and he continued pressing the issue as though he was using it for leverage. Again, we were stymied, and we didn't know whether to apologize or get him to HR to file a complaint.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Steven Salaita · 11 months ago

As to point #11: did you REALLY make it all the way to the job talk without having met the search committee chair?

10 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

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