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WHY PEOPLE FAIL

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Summary



WHY PEOPLE FAIL

"There are two kinds of failures: those who thought and never did, and those who did and never thought." Laurence Peter

Failure can happen for a myriad of reasons. However, all too often it is down to a lack of planning and research, a lack of belief or poor application of a considered strategy.

This article will show you the importance of planning and research when applying for a new job. It will also demonstrate typical techniques interviewers use to test the candidates they meet. A careful and well researched application should give you confidence and therefore belief in your own success. Whilst there cannot be an absolutely failsafe methodology for a successful job application, this article should help you to ensure that your progress is not hampered by many of the common pitfalls of the job applicant.

For employers this article should help you to detect ill-prepared applicants. If a job applicant is ill prepared at the stage when they most need to impress you, how could you possibly have confidence in their diligence if you recruit them for a position?



1) A POOR CV

For the vast majority of job applications a summary of ones relevant skills and experience is a prerequisite. The Curriculum Vitae or Resume helps an employer to select the most suitable applicant for the role. A CV performs quite radically different functions in different professions and differing circumstances (i.e. a CV for a Graphic Designer would potentially have a very different format to that of an Accountant). However, a CV is NEVER an historical account of ones work, life and academic experience. It is a selling tool to enable you to obtain an interview. Therefore, as with any sales document, you should adjust it to meet your market. There will almost always be elements of your CV that will appeal to some employers more than others (for example some employers put greater value on experience than education) and researching the typical wants of a targeted employer can help you write an effective document.

Poor Use Of English And Spelling Mistakes

There can be absolutely no excuse for poor use of English on a CV. This simply shows a lack of the thoroughness or attention to detail that is required in almost every job.

Over reliance on software spell checkers is one of the major contributing causes of poor spelling on CVs. For example, “coordinate” is commonly misspelt as “co-ordinate” as it is not picked up by spell check software (‘co’ and ‘ordinate’ are both words in their own right). You should always ask a friend to read through a CV to check for elementary mistakes. Why bother to write and send a CV to employers, if they are going to put it straight in the bin? An extra 5 minutes care and attention can make all the difference.

CVs That Are Too Short

A CV is a key selling tool and a lack of any substance will not sell you effectively, particularly if you leave out skills relevant for the role such as knowledge of a particular software programme, or important aspects of your experience relevant to the role.



Example:

Jan 03-Jan 05: PH Pharmaceuticals Ltd.
Job Title: Salesman

This job involved selling to customers in order to make money for my company. I also used the computer to track sales.

OR

Jan 03-Jan 05: PH Pharmaceuticals Ltd.
Job Title: Salesman

- Door to door sales of a variety of pharmaceutical products such as perfume, aftershave, hand cream and lotions
- Was targeted to make 10 sales a day as a minimum, I achieved this target almost every day and on a weekly basis generally exceeded it by as much as 50%
- Mentored new staff, helping 3 new recruits become top performers
- Route planning: this role developed my ability to quickly plan time efficient strategies to visit as many potential customers as possible
- Managed a computer database to track sales and monitor performance
- I was the salesman of the year 2004

Both descriptions legitimately describe the position but only the second description *sells* the experience of working in this particular role. The second example also tells the employer something useful, i.e. he has experience in specific areas of pharmaceuticals, he regularly exceeds his targets, he has management potential and he is well organised.

CVs That Are Too Long

When you have a large number of documents to look through you tend to skim read them all, picking out details that are particularly relevant to you. A long CV can make this difficult for employers to do as too much information makes it hard to spot the most relevant details. If they miss key information you might miss an opportunity.

As a rule of thumb, employers do not tend to look much beyond two pages when considering a CV. Despite this a three page CV is rarely fatal and is sometimes essential. Therefore, you should keep your CV as brief as possible but if you feel it will do more damage to your potential to leave something out



then you can consider including it balanced against the detrimental affect of a longer CV. Ensure that what is included in your CV is relevant to the job you are applying for or says something interesting about you. There is virtually no point listing your hobbies as; 'reading and going to the cinema' you are better leaving this section out and utilising the space elsewhere. However, if you have achieved something that makes you unusual such as sailing around the world or climbing K2 then it can be advisable to leave this in. Not every job you have ever done needs to be listed, jobs from a long time ago can be listed by just dates of employment, company and job title; or left out entirely. The fact you did a paper round in 1976 will not give you any advantage at all over other applicants. An endless list of very minor qualifications (such as Bronze Swimming Certificate) may also look pedantic and fail to impress.

Dazzling Layout

Hiring a new employee is a very important decision for a business and the fact that you used pink paper, included a photograph or used a font and layout that you could patent is unlikely to help you. Gimmicks do not work, in fact they only serve to distract from what your CV is really supposed to be selling: you. Keep the format relatively simple, don't use more than two fonts or colours, ensure that it is easy to read. As we have already established the most important thing to achieve is that an employer can easily spot the attributes you have that will be relevant to them.

Other Useful Advice

Profiles/Objectives/Career Statements tend to limit, not increase, your chance of success. Stating that you are a "team player" or "a strong communicator" does not make it true in the eyes of an employer. Equally if you make a broad statement of intent at the start of a CV such as "I wish to become a manager in two years," if a job cannot offer that then this will put an employer off. Be very careful to omit position specific claims such as, "I really want to pursue a career as a financial advisor", if the position is for something else.

CVs that are reedited according to the position to which you are applying make a huge difference. When writing a CV try to use a job description representative of the job you wish to apply for. Read it through carefully and try to determine what might be most important to the employer (this is made very easy if the job description includes a skills required section which many of them do).

Consider having your CV professionally edited. The Interview Company.com offers this service for just £35.



2) POOR INTERVIEW TECHNIQUE

Poor interview technique regularly prohibits candidates achieving success even if they are the most qualified person for the role. Even worse than this, many people do not realise that this is the reason why they have failed. You should always try to get feedback from an employer when you have been unsuccessful so you know where you can improve in the future.

One of the more common interview techniques now prevalent is competency based interviewing. A competency is an ability or skill. A competency based interview tends to be concerned with transferable skills, not technical ability, which is why it is favoured amongst HR professionals.

Competency based questions are behavioural, hypothetical or literal.

Behavioural Interviewing

Whilst behavioural interviewing is currently very popular it is rarely used exclusively. Most interviewers use a variety of techniques and styles making it all the more important to recognise a behavioural interview question when it arises. The central core to behavioural interviewing is that 'Past performance in relation to a specific competency is the best criteria to judge the excellence or otherwise of a candidate in performing that competency in the future.'

Or put more simply, if you were previously a good team player it follows that you will continue to be so in a new role.

The format of a behavioural question is to ask for a specific example from ones career or life experience where a particular competency has been exhibited.

Example:

In relation to the competency of communication skills:

"Give me an example of a time where you have let a customer or client down and the steps you took to address the situation?"

Or

"Give me an example of a time where you have had an angry complaint from a client and tell me how you were able to address the situation?"



The key to answering behavioural questions is as follows:

- i. Identify the competency to which the question refers, i.e. attention to detail, communication skills, planning ability, leadership, team work, etc.
- ii. Think of the answer like an essay with an introduction, a core and a conclusion.
- iii. BRIEFLY describe the scenario/situation that occurred (this is not what the interviewer is interested in); in *detail* talk through the process you took to address the situation; finish with a conclusion which should ideally be a positive outcome.

An answer to the second question above might be:

“When I was working with PH Pharmaceuticals I had a complaint from a customer whose products had arrived late.” (This is the scenario)

“First of all, I allowed the customer to speak to me, without interruption and ensured I had all of the details of the issue. I then found out from the customer what they wanted in order to resolve the issue (which was delivery the next day). I told the customer I would call them back in an hour once I had found out if this was possible. I called them back as soon as I had found out that this could be achieved, if this had taken longer than an hour I would have called the customer to make them aware of the delay”. (This is the strategy)

“The result of my actions was that the customer received our products the next day and has continued to use us throughout my time with PH Pharmaceuticals.” (The Outcome)

Hypothetical Questioning

A type of question that tests a competency by proposing a potential scenario.

Example:

Imagine you are doing a report for a client and it is late by one day. The client rings you to complain, what would you do?

When answering hypothetical questions you should always identify the competency the interviewer is testing and answer accordingly. Your answers should always be methodical going through the steps one would take to resolve a potential scenario. In answer to the above question:

“I would first listen to the client, without interruption, in order to ascertain the reason for complaint. I would ask relevant questions where appropriate. Once I had established the issue I would take responsibility for it and set a new realistic deadline that I knew could be met. If appropriate I would offer compensation to the client in accordance with company guidelines.”



Literal

A literal competency based question is quite simply a direct question in relation to a competency.

Examples:

Do you have good customer services skills?

How do you deal with bad customer service? Are you a good team player?

Why?

One could in theory answer most of these questions with a simple, "Yes". It is of course, highly inadvisable to do this. The best way to answer these questions is in the format:

"Yes I have good customer services skills. This is demonstrated by the fact that I currently have a highly customer facing job and regularly receive positive feedback from my customers".

Saying that you have good customer service skills is not as persuasive as saying where these skills have been exhibited.

Obvious Questions

There are several obvious questions that any candidate should be prepared for when faced with an interview. Whilst they do not always arise (experienced interviewers might avoid asking them for the very reason that candidates expect them), if one is asked one of them and flounders as a result there really can be no excuse for an unfavourable interview result.

What are your strengths?

Variant: *Give me 3 key strengths and tell me why you consider them to be so?*

What are your weaknesses?

Variant: *What are your key development needs?*

Why do you want to work for us?

Why do you feel you are suitable for this role?

Where do you see yourself in 5 years time?

Variants: *What are your career aspirations? What are your career goals?*

Questions Designed To Test Your Reactions

Some interviewers will deliberately throw into an interview questions which do not bear any obvious relevance to the job. The reason they are asked is generally to test how quickly you can think and come up with an answer under pressure from a question you could not predict. They are a useful tool to test



the wit and intellect of a candidate, ideal for jobs where communication skills are of high priority or roles where improvisation is essential.

Examples:

You hold a dinner party. You can invite 3 people living or dead, fictitious or real, who would you invite and why?

Money is the root of all evil, do you agree?

Tell me why the Conservative party should win the next general election? (This type of question is particularly devious explicitly asking you to justify a position you might not agree with; a more taxing version of this question might be:

There can be no excuse for committing crime. Tell me why all criminals should be jailed for a minimum of 20 years irrespective of the crime they commit?).

Avoid Standard Answers And Answers Should Fit The Role

Many articles on interview technique (or career advisors for that matter) will suggest a specific way of answering particular interview questions, this can be dangerous.

A standard suggested answer to the question (and everyone knows this is a standard answer so you should never use it), "What would you consider to be your main weakness?" is: "I am a perfectionist which means because of my strict attention to detail I take longer over a task than some of my peers but it does have the side effect that my work is of consistent high quality".

On first reading this seems like a fantastic answer. Now consider this scenario, the role is to work for a television shopping channel selling products to the public as a presenter. Being 100% accurate all of the time is not as important as being able to work quickly and efficiently learning about the products one is going to sell and having the confidence to improvise without the fear of being wrong. Perfectionism suggests intolerance for making mistakes so would likely not be suitable for this type of role.

Body Language

There is enough literature on body language to fill a large number of football stadia. However, whilst it is useful to be able to read basic body signals trying to consciously alter ones body language in an interview can be a distraction and detrimentally affect the result. It is far better to go to the interview with a positive and enthusiastic attitude and your body language will follow suit.

However, in any interview one should maintain regular eye contact with the interviewer; this helps to engage them in the conversation and gives the impression that you are telling them something worth listening to. Looking down or away from the interviewer can come across as being disinterested (you should also keep your hands out of your pockets for the same reason). Sit



slightly forward in your chair; this also conveys interest and enthusiasm. Finally ensure that you give a firm handshake when greeting the interviewer, this exhibits confidence. Unfortunately some interviewers find a weak handshake very off-putting when meeting an applicant.

Always Ask The Interviewer Questions

You should always have questions to ask an interviewer, this is a simple way of showing the employer that you are genuinely interested in the job. You should, where possible, try to ask involved well thought out questions, such as “How important is team work in this environment given the strict regulations you have to adhere to?” instead of simple ill thought out questions such as “How large is the team?” but almost any question is better than no question at all.

Further Interview Technique Support

The Interview Company.com's staff are professional interviewers. If you wish to improve your interview technique we strongly suggest you order a mock interview or an interview coaching session with one of our consultants.

3) APPLYING TO ALL OF THE WRONG PLACES

It is important to target your applications and make educated judgements when applying.

Getting a new job is hard. The longer you fail to get another job the harder it gets as confidence drops and you under perform on interview.

Ensure that you understand the chance of success and failure of any chosen career path, if you have realistic expectations at the outset then one can stave off the psychological effects of failure for far longer.

If you are applying for a job in an area that is very competitive you should be much more proactive in your approach and you should send many more applications than perhaps would be merited in another field.

Wherever possible ask for feedback from employers/recruitment agencies. If you can discover a realistic estimation of your chance of success it can help you target your approach.



Part way towards a goal is better than not achieving it at all. Be prepared to compromise. If you cannot achieve your ideal role in a large corporate find a similar position in a small company and reapply for a larger company in the future or find a different position in the larger company with a view towards internal transfer in the future.

Look beyond the immediate. Don't just consider what the salary of a position is now; look at the potential earning power of that position in the future.

4) UNREALISTIC JOB CRITERIA

Certain industries (for example investment banking) have high expectations as to the dedication of their employees to the positions they are in. These criteria are often offset by high pay. However, you should ensure that your expectations are realistic, it is no good expecting to work 9-5 in an industry where everyone else works much longer than this, equally you should not expect an exceptional salary if you are not exceptional yourself. You should find out the norm within any industry before you apply for a role, if long hours or poor pay are an issue for you then you should not apply for roles where either is the case. It is also sometimes worth making sacrifices in order to achieve ones long term goals; the long hours and poor pay of a typical lawyer on a training contract is totally overshadowed by their longer term career potential.

5) A LACK OF KNOWLEDGE OF THE EMPLOYER

If you demonstrate no interest in an employer how can you expect them to treat you any differently?

It is important to thoroughly research an employer before going for an interview. If you have used a recruitment agency ask them questions about the company. The Internet is a highly valuable research tool, you should always find out key facts such as recent company history (any high profile news stories), product areas, recent company turnover, etc.

6) A LACK OF KNOWLEDGE OF THE JOB

The key to most successful appointments is research. If you don't research you cannot be disappointed if you do not get the role. If you have gone through a recruitment agency speak to them to find their perspective on the role (don't rely on a recruiters perspective entirely as their understanding of positions varies greatly dependent on their own competence and the relationship they have with their client). Use the Internet to ensure that you have found definitions of anything you did not first understand on the job description wherever possible. Ideally speak to people currently in a similar role, so they can give you their opinion of it.



7) OVER RELIANCE ON REACTIVITY

Proactivity is the secret to success when it comes to job applications. If an employer receives your CV before they have advertised a position there is a greater chance they will give more consideration to your CV and deal favourably with your application. If you covet a particular role, career path or employer, do not let the fact that there are no advertised positions stop you. Find out the name of the appropriate contact and give them a call or send them an email/letter, you really have nothing to lose. From an employer's perspective if they have a proactive interested party applying for a role that they hope to recruit they may well consider you as it will certainly save them a small fortune on advertising or recruitment agency fees. Finally, the more applications you send the more chance you have of success. Never rest until you succeed.

SUMMARY

This guide cannot be a totally comprehensive solution to finding a new job. However, many of the tips and suggestions in it are built on years of experience of knowing why candidates succeed and fail in achieving their ideal career path. Unfortunately Interviewers can be difficult to predict and a meeting with someone who has never interviewed before can be trickier than meeting with an experienced interviewer because they are not aware of conventional interview etiquette.

We always suggest that if you are at all concerned about your interview technique you go through a mock interview first. After all this is common practice with most academic examinations and your driving test so it shouldn't really be any different with an interview. Our mock interviews are charged at a rate of £70 per hour or £120 for two hours. For more information on this visit: www.theinterviewcompany.com.

Trained interviewers will almost always pick the best person for the role but more importantly they will be able to discover crucial weaknesses in candidates that could have a highly detrimental affect on the employer if they were selected for the position. If you are an employer with concerns over selection, we can help. Our prices are very reasonable and surely worth the peace of mind.

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