

**What  
Employers  
*DON'T*  
Want**



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## Introduction

Chances are you've been overloaded with information about what TO DO during a job search. Did you ever consider what NOT TO DO? We asked a number of employers, recruiters, and career professionals, for their no-no's and tips on the following topics:

- Resumes, Cover Letters, and Applications
- Answering Machine Messages & Email
- Interview Dress
- Interview Questions and Answers
- References
- Nonverbals
- Job Fairs

Get inside the heads of our panel of experts to see how to properly present yourself to the people that matter.



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## **Resume No-No's - What Our Experts Say**

- Including your picture or graphics.
- Using wild paper colors other than white-be conservative.
- Paper size that is not the standard 8 1/2 x 11.
- "I always find it amusing how summer jobs are characterized by students. A summer painting job can be accompanied by some really good 'buzz' words....which actually shows creativity on the part of the applicant."
- "Typos are the worst offense always proofread!!!!"
- "Spelling errors, use of white-out, corrections made by scratching out and writing over it with a pen, stained and/or wrinkled paper."
- "The biggest problem is incomplete or unsigned applications and resumes. Misspelled words also jump out when I read these documents. Our company does a background check before we extend an offer of employment. We've had instances where the information contained on applications and resumes had been falsified or omitted. Needless to say, we did not pursue the applicant!"
- "Blunders we see most often include typos, wrong phone numbers, food or drink spilled on the papers, crumpled or torn paper."
- "I do not like to see 2 pg. resumes for college students! Grammatical errors are a definite no-no!"
- "Supply a 20-page resume. Potential hiring managers love to read resumes that are over two pages in length." WRONG!
- "Leaving out significant accomplishments on your resume."
- "When writing a resume, never mention any teams with which you were associated. That teamwork stuff is really overrated." WRONG!

## **Resume Tips**

- Be as brief as possible, two pages is probably too much.
- Include key words for the position you are interested in.
- The market is so competitive right now employers are only considering quality resumes. Have your resume critiqued before you submit it by a professional at your career center.

- You may want to customize your resume for each company you're applying to. For example, if you are a Marketing and Business Administration major, consider having a different resume for an Advertising firm (highlighting your marketing experience/coursework) as opposed to a consulting company that may be less interested in your graphic design experience as they are with the summer internship you did two years ago in an accounting firm.
- Think electronic rather than hard copy. If you don't submit your resume directly into a database, it will probably be entered into a database upon receipt.
- Needs to flow easily. Make them 'one-pagers' and do not make them hard to follow. Some resumes are simply 'harder on the eye' than others. Clean and to the point.

## **Cover Letter No No's - What our experts say**

- "I have had experiences where candidate/students have sent me cover letters with other company's names in them – they did not catch it when they sent their email or letter out."
- "Cannot think of any specific major blunders though the cover letter I got on Donald Duck stationary was NOT impressive in a professional environment."
- "Typos are the worst offense, just like your resume-proofread!!!"
- "Using a boilerplate cover letter and forgetting to change the firm or company name on each letter."
- "Another common mistake with cover letters – when you are sending out mass resumes and cover letters, you must personalize each cover letter to the specific company you are applying to. If the cover letter is too generic, recruiters know immediately that no forethought went into the letter."
- "Beware of using the wrong company/name for the wrong letter when you're cutting and pasting into new cover letters."

## **Cover Letter Tips**

- Cover letters are becoming less critical due to electronic scanning.
- If it is not in the resume, it must not be important. Most recruiters do not have the time to screen or review anything other than basic data contained in the resume.
- If possible, check the company resource to see if they want a cover letter

- Most recruiters prefer short, concise letters.
- Always check the correct spelling of a person's name before sending a cover letter.

## **Application No No's - What our experts say**

- Not completing the application fully do not answer questions with a standard "see resume."

## **Application Tips**

- Fill out the application completely unless you have the employers ok to omit pertinent information.
- Be honest – Most companies check references, education, and other background information. Falsifying information is grounds for immediate termination.
- Many employers will ask for salary information. Try to find out from the recruiter upfront the salary range for the position you're interested in. Shooting too high or too low may price you out of consideration. Do market research for the position you're applying to and also find out from your career center what average starting salaries are for your geographic location and major.
- Fill out the employment application in a sloppy manner and be sure to leave as many questions blank as possible.
- When you provide reference checks, never use past employers and make sure you get the contact information wrong... or better yet just leave it out. Another opportunity for blanks on the employment application.

## **Answering Machine No-No's - What our experts say**

- "Messages that include loud music, do not allow the caller to verify that they have the correct number/person."
- "Hi, this is the home of Jane and John. We're busy making a baby right now. Leave us a message."
- "Hello, you've reached Michelle and Jane, home of the only women that can't cook with a microwave."
- "They have set up the answering machine to sound like they have answered, you begin to talk...then the laughing begins with some smart remark about not being home... Messages that include loud music do not allow the caller to verify that they have the correct number/person. Messages that have a lot of slang and/or inappropriate language."

- “Hey, please leave a #\$.:’^! (expletive) message.” “I just hung up and filed the application in our “flagged” file.”
- “Hi, this is Jane. If this is John...”

## **Answering Machine Tips**

- Make your personal answering machine greeting professional and short.
- Include your name and telephone number so the recruiter will know they have the correct number.
- Humor is fine, but overly casual or off-color machine messages should be changed to something more professional when a person is in the job market.
- Keep it simple! Crazy messages do not leave the best impression with potential employers.
- No party noise messages.
- If you leave your number for people to call YOU, be sure YOUR message is professional. We had an applicant who had a baby talking (answering the phone) on their voice mail and we couldn’t understand it and thought we had a wrong number.
- Answering machines are preferable to your roommate taking messages, but of course answering machine greeting should be professional.
- Make sure it is appropriate and not childish.
- If you have roommates, use an answering machine that gives the option of leaving a personal message with each individual. Also, make sure your answering machine greeting is clear, appropriate and short. Long greetings, hoaxes, and songs playing in the background can aggravate recruiters trying to leave messages-it takes too much of their time.
- Make sure it is operational....we had a student who "thought" his answering machine was working, but it wasn't....

## **Clothing No No’s - What our experts say**

- “Jeans, baggy oversize pants, t-shirts with inappropriate language, shorts, sweat pants/shirts, slippers, soiled clothing, clothing not properly fitted, clothing that is too revealing...I could go on. We also have guidelines regarding body piercing.”
- “Torn jeans, dirty fingernails, wrinkled flannel shirt over obscene t-shirt. This person was applying for a front desk position. What a first impression they might make to our patients and families! I would have understood if

they were coming straight from another job – especially if they had let me now what to expect beforehand. There is absolutely no excuse for showing up dirty and unkempt.”

- “Too tight, too loose, too casual (this is not the time to wear resort wear or “cutting edge” fashions). Other examples: too much jewelry or dangling jewelry that may distract the interviewer; too much fragrance; open-toed shoes; skirts split up to the hipbone; hip hugger jeans; untucked shirttails; baseball caps.”
- “No jeans, shirts that expose all of your tattoos; extremely tight fitting or provocative clothing; wearing a T-shirt with designs or logos on it under your white shirt; tongue piercing.”

## **Clothing Tips**

- “The whole business world has become more casual over the past 10 years, but it’s still appropriate to over-dress for an interview. The really astute candidates will ask about proper dress when the interview is scheduled. Candidates need to be aware that many interviewers are uncomfortable with tattoos, piercings, unusual hair colors and cutting-edge fashions. Again, dress professionally for the interview and, if hired, gradually let individuality show through.”
- “Your clothing should reflect a professional attitude. Generally students are well dressed and present themselves well. I have also had some who look like they just jumped into their interview garb and really do not realize how important a first impression is to some recruiters.”
- “You only need ONE interview suit, but it should fit, be professional and be clean.”
- “Always professional, don’t assume casual dress unless you are told otherwise.”
- “Always dress appropriately.”
- “First impressions.....always dress professionally! It’s better to find out that you are too overdressed than not:”
  - “Females: I advise against bare legs (even in summer months), ankle bracelets, dramatic hair and makeup, sandals, excessive jewelry (rings, nose rings, tongue piercing, lots of visible earrings, too many rings, too many bracelets that chime together, etc.), knee high boots with short skirts, too high heels. Remember: it’s all about impressions and assumptions not to say that any of these things are wrong or bad they are not (as matter of fact, I do a lot of this stuff now). When you leave the interview session, you don’t want to be the talk of the office.”

“She sounds great but she may not be professional. Did you see the ankle bracelet she had on?” Once you get the job, you can relax on these issues keeping in mind the culture of the company. If this advice makes you think that you wouldn’t want to work at a place that doesn’t accept you the way that you are and you’re not going to change, then you’re right. That’s probably not the place you should be.”

- “Males: Normally the exact opposite of females...too little time is put into appearance. Wrinkled/soiled/torn clothes ALWAYS are seen. That little rip in your shirt that you think your tie covers, it won’t. Be prepared for any situation. Also, think on the conservative side and wait for the statement from the employer that “this is a business casual environment”...khaki’s, Dockers, etc. are fine for work but not for an interview. Try to invest in at least one good business suit and 5 different dress shirts so that you look fresh and new for each interview. Wearing a nice pair of dark slacks and a button-down shirt are good, and also appropriate for any other business functions that you may attend.”
- “Finally if it’s paisley, floral, striped, loud, pastel, shiny, ruffled, etc., it may be too much for a first interview. A compromise would be this: a nice black suit for a female with a hot pink or blue shirt....this is classic but memorable, people remember that about you. For males, a nice dark suit with a yellow tie in the spring is really nice and clean and shows that you can use common sense and maintain a conservative nature.”

## **Interview Response No No’s - What our experts say**

- “I once asked a candidate a simple, legitimate interview question and he talked for 10 minutes in such a convoluted manner that he ended up revealing confidential information. Then he accused me of asking an illegal question!”
- “Telling how much they hated a previous supervisor or how incompetent they felt the supervisor was or the use of inappropriate language.”
- “Too much information-just answer the question. When the interviewer asks a question about what you liked best about your last job, he/she really does not want or need to know about all of your brothers and sisters, about the problems you have had with your siblings, where you like to vacation, what color you like paint your fingernails, etc. Your responses should be relevant, specific, and succinct.”
- “Don’t speak negatively about your previous employer...makes it seem like sour grapes. Don’t share too much of your past, if an employer asks you “tell me a little bit about yourself”, they are not looking for you to dive into the archives and begin talking about the first job you had when you were fifteen!”

- “I don’t know much about your company. I think this would be a good job to get some experience that I can take with me.”
- “Don’t lie about multiple interviews with other companies. Ex: “What other companies are you interviewing with?” “Well, Lilly, Roche, and Pfizer have all made me offers already. I was waiting to see what you had to offer...”  
WRONG!
- “Can I give you an answer next week on that question?”
- “Don’t lie about offers with other companies to increase salary. Ex: “Well, at ABC company I made \$50,000 and your offer is \$35,000 – can’t we meet halfway?” WRONG!
- “I’ll have to go home and talk this over with my parents.”
- “Using inappropriate language.”
- “My mom says that...”
- “My children will need to...”
- “Don’t lie about experience with other positions. Ex: “Well, I balanced books all the time as the secretary...” WRONG!
- “Let me check my notes, I know I expected you to ask me that!”

## **Interview Answer Tips**

- Interview answers are much more ‘generic’ than in the past. Students are often coached in this area. Funny when at some colleges students use the same objectives, examples, and in some cases phrases.
- Take time to think!! You don’t need to answer immediately. Go ahead and “toot your own horn,” that’s what you’re there for.
- Keep interview answers detailed but to the point, never ramble.
- Be curious and do your homework on the company. Know the position for which you are applying.
- You should know about 90% of the questions asked before you walk into the interview. Most questions are about background information, experiences, and education. Practice answering these types of questions prior to any interview.
- If you don’t know the answer to a question, say so. You can ask to come back to the question or simply let it go and focus on the next question.

- Be professional! Remember the basics...Sit up straight and use an acceptable vocabulary for the position. No slang and try to reduce the “you knows”, “I mean,” and “umm”. The quality of your responses could well determine your success!
- Each person needs to let their personality shine through when answering, while finding that middle ground between monosyllables and soliloquy.
- Don't respond with one word answers– you need to say more. Give examples of times when you have done that work before or handled that situation before. If you don't have business experience in that area, think of a time when you have done something similar at school or within your social setting.
- Be prepared to give lots of examples and always elaborate on your answers. Don't lie or say you know how to do something that you don't. It's much worse to not get a job because you don't have all the skills at that time rather than get hired and 6 weeks later be fired because you said you knew how to use Access and you don't, when Access is main function of the position. You're wasting the company's time and money and you're less likely to be hired in the future.
- It is okay to take a second or two to think about an answer that has stumped you. Speaking too quickly and giving a wrong or incoherent answer is hard to recover from. Taking a pause or two shows forethought and consideration on your part.
- Once you have made it past the initial greeting, it is on to the heart of the interview- the question and answer period. This is the easiest portion of the interview to put your foot in your mouth. Watch what you say and consciously formulate your responses. This is not the time to smile and nod and rely on autopilot.

### **Interview Question No No's - What our experts say**

- “You really don't have to pay attention to the questions. It's perfectly acceptable to start talking and then ask, “What was the question again?”
- “Answering questions with as few words as possible.”
- “Make sure you ramble on as long as possible when answering a question.”
- “Answering questions by telling the interviewer only what he or she wants to hear. Avoid sincerity whenever possible. Interviewers wouldn't know sincerity if it walked up and sat in their lap.”
- “When you refer to your past experiences, go back as far in time as possible... interviewers love to hear what you did in the fifth grade.”

- “I’ve asked applicants if they have any questions and have been asked questions that were not job related and sometimes personal.”
- “Tell me about the job I’m applying for. Now if I get this job and then \_\_\_\_\_ job becomes available, are there any hard feelings if I leave?”
- “How soon can I take time off?” “A valid question but wait until later in the process. This is a good way to exhibit how little you want to work.”
- “Can my mom come with me the first day?” “The girl’s mother was actually interested in becoming a nurse and wanted to know more about the career choice of her daughter, but imagine the red flags that put up for an HR professional who is counting on the employee to make decisions on her own that affect patient’s lives.”
- “A woman showed up to an interview for a management position with her two year old (who was stinky and needed changing!) and with her newborn. She proceeded to breastfeed during the interview and asked me to hold the two year old because he got jealous when the baby was being held and he wasn’t. Do you think I hired her?”
- “How long will I have to stay in this position before I can be promoted or move to another area?”
- (To the hiring manager in the Accounting Department), “I like accounting work, but what I really want to do is computer programming, that’s my other major.”
- “I know a little about XYZ Company, but what does your company do exactly?”

## **Interview Question Tips**

- Always come prepared with at least three questions (some may be answered during the interview process so listen and don’t ask it if your question has been answered). Don’t ask questions that can be answered from the website and always study the company’s website prior to the interview.
- Make sure your questions seek company information. Do not ask questions about salary, the hiring process, other interviews, etc...those are questions you ask your recruiter/HR representative. Hiring managers that you interview with want to know that you have done your homework on the company.
- An example of a good interview question: “I read in the paper last week about your recent merger with ABC Company, how do you think that will affect this organization? How will it affect your division?” Other good questions: “How would you describe the culture of the company? What made you join this company?”

## **Nonverbal No No's - What our experts say**

- “Obvious nervousness is an area students need to prepare for. Some interviewers can throw curve balls in an attempt to rattle the student. Always have a phrase or approach to nullify a question which stumps you. I have seen students sit quietly, begin to giggle or laugh, before trying to respond.”
- “Gum chewing, sniffing, eyes wondering, slumped in the chair.”
- “I interviewed a man very recently that looked at the floor and mumbled so that I could not understand him the entire 45 minutes he was with me. I understand being nervous, most people are. Look your interviewer in the eyes at least occasionally! I still couldn't tell you what the guy even looked like. You can bet I'm not going to remember him when a job comes open that he might be qualified for.”
- “Not looking the interviewer in the eye; slouching in your chair; playing with your hair; looking out the window; looking at your feet; tapping your fingers on the desk; clicking your pen; biting your fingernails; rapid speech patterns; answering your cell phone during an interview; eating your lunch during an interview or arriving late to an interview.”
- “Chewing gum; lack of eye contact; too relaxed in chair; or coming too far into interviewer's personal space.”
- “Gas!”

## **Nonverbal Tips**

- Know how to carry on “upfront banter/chit chat.” Try to avoid discussing any religious or political topics.
- Be confident, greet with a firm handshake and always maintain good eye contact. Avoiding eye contact all together leaves a bad impression.
- Practice, practice, practice and relax.
- The biggest mistake people make is lack of eye contact. Body language can send the message of tension, boredom, arrogance, even if the candidate doesn't know it.
- You are interviewed on what you don't say as much as what you do say. Watch your body language closely. Look attentive at all times and be courteous. Know how to shake a hand. Don't look bored or annoyed; sometimes you may meet with several interview panelists and they may repeat questions even if you say the same thing repeatedly.
- Keep your hair out of your face.

- Don't let your eyes roam the room.
- Don't look bored or annoyed-sometimes, you may meet with several interview panelists and they may repeat questions-even if you say the same thing repeatedly.
- Keep hands in lap if not using them.
- Sit up straight, keep good eye contact, firm handshake.
- Don't wear strong perfume or cologne (probably shouldn't wear any at all).
- Carry a planner or portfolio.
- If you think you'll have gas, take something for it!
- Don't carry with you clunky key chains or heavy purse, leave sunglasses in the car.
- Don't smoke in the parking lot or on company property at all!!!!

### **Job Fair No No's - What our experts say**

- "Dressing unprofessionally when attending the job fair and not bringing any resumes."
- "Can you watch my kid while I go talk to that recruiter at that other hospital?" OK, I did watch the kid because it allowed me to look like a good guy, I got the last say in recruiting this gal (got to ask her what the other recruiter was offering) and the kid was really good but my impression of this gal was two-fold. If she can't find someone to watch her child for a 30-minute job fair, how could she work full-time? This one seemingly harmless action demonstrates poor judgment, a lack of respect for me and my facility, and a total lack of professionalism. Leave the kids at home when you're seriously investigating employers at career fairs."
- "Improper clothing; just coming by for the give a ways; not knowing what position the company is recruiting for."

### **Job Fair Tips**

- Be prepared. Each company has a different approach to job fairs. Some use the opportunity to complete an initial screening of applicants, and some just collect resumes. Assume you are going to an interview and proceed accordingly.
- Don't just grab information. If you are not interested just pass by.

- Dress professionally! First impressions are lasting ones. The students who give a good impression are the ones passed on to hiring managers. The way you present yourself goes a long way towards your success.
- Know something about the company and have a sense as to why you are interested in the company before you approach the booth. Employers don't want to hire people that know nothing about a company. You don't have to know everything just be able to hold a fairly intelligent conversation about the company and use that opportunity to ask good questions if you don't know too much about the industry.
- Don't start off the conversation by saying something like, "So what are you guys hiring for..." it's an immediate turn-off. A better method is to start the conversation stating what you are looking for in a position and what skills you bring to the table.

### **E-mail No No's - What our experts say**

- "Sending latest email joke you received."
- "E-mail addresses that have inappropriate connotations i.e. sexygal, 2stoned"
- "E-mail addresses such as "[sexy1@hotmail.com](mailto:sexy1@hotmail.com), <mailto:keghead@hotmail.com>> [eghead@hotmail.com](mailto:eghead@hotmail.com), fratboy....etc....these are all turn offs in my opinion and the applicant is sometimes seen as not serious or professional."
- "Have received thank you emails with other employers names still appearing in the body of the email. Not a good thing."
- "Sending a Halloween card with a dancing vampire showing you its "blue moon."

### **E-mail Tips**

- Keep them brief and to the point. I like a thank you email after an interview, but again, keep it short.
- E-mails are fine.
- Some companies do not use e-mails during the hiring process. Astute candidates will find out the best way to communicate with the interviewers, and use their preferred methods very professionally.
- Make sure your e-mail address is professional, appropriate and easy to remember. Setting up an account with your name in the "handle" is always a good idea so that employers are reminded (subliminally) of your name and interview

- Also, always check grammar carefully-email spell checks and grammar checks aren't always 100% accurate...
- Thank you notes via e-mail are fine but the e-mail thank should be followed up with a card in the mail...again, you are looking to have your name remembered as much as possible.
- No animation!
- Keep e-mails professional and precise.
- Use sparingly in the interview process unless it utilized by the company.
- Make sure you use spell check and appropriate grammar....no chat room habits :) !!!
- Never send multiple emails or make a bunch of phone calls to check on the status of the job. Professionals have better things to do than to respond to fifty or one hundred e-mails and phone calls per day.

### **Reference No No's - What our experts say**

- "I have seen students who have used only a large number of 'friends' as references. That really is not going to cut it for a company ready to commit to a student."
- "Don't use ex-in laws"
- "Don't use a disgruntled relative"
- "Don't use the prior employer you haven't spoken to in over 3 years."

### **Reference Tips**

- For students or someone just out of college, two references from college (professors, etc.); two from past positions either work related or internships and two personal references such as pastor/priest, etc. or someone from the community that knows you personally should be adequate.
- Be sure each person listed knows they are being used as a reference. Ask their permission and let them know when you secure a position. Share the good news!
- Best are those you've worked for/with, don't list a person/relative who hasn't seen/spoken to you in a year.

- Most employers prefer professional references. Neighbors, friends, and family members aren't always the most objective.
- Make sure you ask people to be your references prior to using their name and contact information. When you ask someone to be a reference, make sure that they have a favorable impression of you. So many times students use people as references and the feedback given are negative responses. In some situations, the reference has no idea who the person is or they may decline to give a reference altogether.

Secondly, make sure the telephone or e-mail addresses you give for your references are accurate. It's annoying to have to track down someone with the wrong phone number. If you are using a professor, indicate the office hours the professor holds so that the employer knows the best time to reach them.

