

By Charles A. Volkert, Executive Director of [Robert Half Legal®](#), a legal staffing service specializing in the placement of attorneys, paralegals, legal administrators and other legal professionals with law firms and corporate legal departments.

Mastering the Finer Points of the Job Interview

Like many experienced legal professionals, you probably feel comfortable with the basics of interviewing for a new position. You're prepared to expand on your qualifications and to respond in an articulate manner to likely questions. But are you confident that you've mastered the art of making the best possible impression?

Even accomplished candidates have been known to make gaffes during the interview stage. According to a survey commissioned by our company, 32 percent of executives polled said the interview is where professionals make the most mistakes.

Sometimes anxiety is to blame for interview missteps; in other cases, candidates simply exercise poor judgment in behavior or dress. Whatever the reason, committing an interview *faux pas* can cause your job aspirations to blow up on the spot. To avoid becoming an interview casualty, take note of these important but sometimes overlooked rules:

Turn off the technology. In today's hyper-connected world, many people think they should always be reachable. But an interview is one time when you shouldn't be available to the outside world. Some hiring managers and recruiters have reported experiences with candidates who glance at incoming e-mails during an interview or ask to be excused to take a phone call. Needless to say, these candidates don't get very far. The hiring manager expects – and deserves – your full attention. If you carry a cell phone or portable e-mail device into an interview, be sure to turn it off – not just to the vibrate setting, which can also cause a distraction.

Don't be too candid. Although interviewers are looking for candor and a glimpse into your personality, be careful not to go overboard, especially in offering personal details. Anxiety or the opposite emotion – feeling extremely comfortable with the interviewer – can lead a candidate to become too chatty, especially about issues outside the scope of the interview. Maybe your desire to find a job in a new city stems from your recent divorce, but it's unwise to share this information. Not only do you risk making the interviewer feel uncomfortable, but divulging such personal information could raise doubts about your judgment and ability to concentrate on work if hired.

Keep the conversation focused on your work history and qualifications, but don't let your guard down in discussing on-the-job experiences either. Criticizing or gossiping about the last firm you worked for or former colleagues is more likely to hurt than help your chances of receiving an offer, even if the interviewer seems interested in hearing such details. It's also smart to tread carefully in making small talk, especially about any

potentially controversial topic. Even an offhand comment about a current news event could be misinterpreted and cause offense.

Look the part. Having the right professional look is crucial to landing a job in a legal setting, where the dress is often more formal and conservative than in other business environments. Even if you have been in the workforce for awhile and especially if you're making a transition from another field or interviewing for a position at a larger firm, it may be time to update your appearance. How you present yourself is a reflection of your judgment, so it's important to make the effort to look your best.

Both men and women can usually benefit from new wardrobe pieces that reflect current styles without being too trendy. Don't be reluctant to ask others – a trusted friend, your spouse or a knowledgeable salesperson – for advice about what to wear to make the most favorable impression. Women, in particular, should also consider whether their hair style or make-up might need updating. Maybe a “make-under” – that is, a less flashy look – is in order? As a general rule, always dress up a little more than you may think may be necessary and be conservative with clothing and grooming. Avoid clingy or revealing wardrobe items, worn-looking shoes and excessive jewelry or fragrance. Keep in mind that you rarely hear of someone losing out on a job for looking too professional or conservative.

Don't be too full of yourself. Although your qualifications may be exceptional, take care to strike the right balance between presenting your accomplishments in a positive light and coming across as overconfident. In another survey conducted by our company, 50 percent of executives polled said that being arrogant was the worst mistake a candidate can make when interviewing. Job applicants can come across in a negative light by claiming all the credit for past accomplishments, belittling former employers or co-workers or conveying a “you'd be lucky to have me” attitude. Remember that the interviewer is not just trying to ascertain your qualifications but also evaluating what you'd be like as a colleague, and no one wants to work with someone with an over-inflated sense of importance.

By increasing your awareness of the finer points of interview etiquette, you should be able to improve your odds of getting the job you want. Although a good interview alone is not usually enough to land a desirable position, violating one of these subtle rules of professional engagement can easily dash your prospects.

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