

Eight Common Myths About Interviewing

And how to use references to your benefit

BY TAUNEE S. BESSON

Editor's Note: This month columnist Taunee Besson answers questions about common job hunting and career problems. If you have a question about your job search or career, send it to our monthly advice column, National Business Employment Weekly, Box 300, Princeton, N.J. 08543-0300. All names are kept confidential.

Q: For the past 10 years I've been in data processing with one company. While I'm a loyal employee, I've finally realized that my career path with this firm is very limited. It's obviously time to change jobs.

Since my current position is the only one I've ever had, the thought of conducting a job search is pretty scary. Usually, when I'm moving into uncharted waters, I get all the information I can. True to form, I've been reading books on job search techniques and talking to my friends about the best way to approach and interview for a new position. Unfortunately, much of what I hear and read seems to conflict.

Can you give me some concrete pointers on interviewing that I can be sure will work?

A: If you have been talking to your friends, you've probably heard a mix of erroneous and reliable information, both presented with equal conviction. Books are sometimes less than accurate because their authors are biased. They present ideas that may work well in specialized situations, but don't hold true in general. Below are a number of myths that I'm sure you've heard or read in your research. They aren't true, but our culture tends to perpetuate them.

- **Potential employers "have all the aces."** Many people assume that because the employer pays the salary and benefits, the hiring manager has clout and leverage in an interview. Actually, both employer and applicant have something of value to offer. You have skills and experience. Your interviewer has salary and benefits. In any interview, both of you are exploring the viability of making a mutually beneficial exchange.
- **The individual with the closest experience fit always gets the job.** The hiring manager is looking for someone with whom he can work comfortably. He needs a competent staff, but he also wants people with complementary personalities and values. Consequently, a less experienced person who's good at building rapport may be se-

Ms. Besson is president of Career Dimensions, a Dallas-based firm specializing in career development and job search programs for professionals and corporations.

lected over a rival who seemingly "should" get the job.

- **In any interview concentrate on selling yourself.** While it's important to tell an interviewer what you can do for his department and company, that isn't your only objective. You also want to be sure that his opening meets your requirements. Asking intelligent questions helps you make informed decisions while demonstrating your research and problem solving techniques. Good questions will sell you as much as good answers.
- **Admit to no weaknesses.** No one is perfect. We all have areas where we would like to improve. Recognizing the need for change and growth

Never negotiate. Always negotiate. These represent two poles of a spectrum where the mid-point, 'sometimes negotiate,' makes the most sense.

shows maturity and self-knowledge. Any savvy employer is wary of an applicant who hasn't discovered some areas where he can use a little improvement.

- **Never negotiate. Always negotiate.** These represent two poles of a spectrum where the mid-point, "sometimes negotiate," makes the most sense. If a firm offers you a job, you have a good deal of leverage. The company has said, "We want you." Their decision represents a good deal of time and money spent. Usually they would rather give you what you want (within reason) than risk losing you. If their offer falls short of your expectations, negotiate to increase it. If you're happy with it, accept it with enthusiasm. Negotiating for the sake of negotiating is not a game worth playing.
- **Play a little hard to get. Your mystique will make the employer more eager to hire you.** This technique may work in singles bars, but it has no place in interviews. Companies want people who are genuinely interested in being a part of their team. Enthusiasm is contagious. If you show some excitement over the possibility of working with him, your interviewer is likely to feel the same way about you.

- **Assume that if you take the job, any misgivings you have will prove unfounded.** A cardinal rule in choosing a position is: Trust your instincts. If you are concerned that the job description, compensation, coworkers, training or opportunities for growth are lacking, they probably are. Don't intellectualize yourself into taking something that doesn't feel right. You'll regret it.
- **The company will be annoyed if I call to check on the status of the opening after I've been interviewed.** Waiting by the phone for that all-important call can be extremely nerve-racking and depressing. The tendency is to assume the worst. Before you leave the interview discuss how the interview process will proceed. Call for an update if you haven't heard anything by the anticipated decision date.

Q: After 6 years in my current position, I've decided it's time for a career move and a new challenge. I have a good working relationship with my manager and peers, and I've consistently had excellent performance appraisals. However, I don't want to tip off my boss that I'm looking before I have an offer in hand. Who, then, should I approach for references?

In the last few years, I've been active in the Boy Scouts and my church and have developed close working relationships with several other committed volunteers. Therefore, my questions to you about references are:

- Can I use these non-work people as references?
- Should I put their names at the end of my resume?
- Should I obtain letters of recommendation from them?
- What's the best way to ask people if they will be a reference?

While these questions don't seem complicated compared to many you receive, I'm sure I'm not the only person who is uninformed about reference protocol.

A: You're right. Confusion about references is common to many job seekers. Here are some guidelines for their effective use.

While many people assume work references are the best (or only) ones to get, this isn't necessarily true. Many large companies have policies to divulge only job title and length of service. For job seekers who have left positions under less than ideal circumstances, this is good news. But for people like you, with excellent work records and relationships, it poses a problem.

Discreetly find out from your managers or personnel department whether your company has such

Continued on Next Page

Your turn to ask

Cont. from Preceding Page

a policy. If it doesn't, use respected colleagues as a reference who will keep your job hunt secret. If it does, you will have to rely on people inside your company who are free to discuss your work. Your fellow volunteers in the Boy Scouts and your church are excellent additions to your reference pool. They have seen your work and commitment over several years and should be both able and delighted to discuss it with a potential employer. One added advantage to including them is that you can ask them to be references at the outset of your job search, an option you don't usually have with your current manager.

Other sources of recommendations include neighbors, your banker or attorney, an old friend

There's no need to list references on your resume. They take valuable space and their names are meaningless to potential employers.

and even former teachers (if you've kept in contact). As you can see, there are a variety of people who can serve as excellent references.

There's no need to list references on your resume. They take valuable space and, unless they are universally well known and respected, their names are meaningless to potential employers.

Letters of recommendation can be useful in long distance moves, but usually aren't necessary. In fact, writing a general letter is difficult for your reference and not particularly effective for you because it is unlikely to cover the specific points a potential employer may want to discuss. Telephone calls are better.

Of course you must ask before you give names as references. Fortunately, most people consider such a request a compliment. Usually the few who might be uncomfortable, for whatever reason, will diplomatically refuse. The tricky part of communicating with references comes after they agree to recommend you. For them to be of greatest benefit, you need to tell them the specific areas they will probably be discussing with your potential employer. This will necessitate your calling them to relate the experience, skills and personality traits your prospective manager is looking for. With this information they can tailor their comments to highlight your most important attributes.

When you have accepted your new position, be sure to thank them for their help by phone or in writing. After all, your references may have provided the final important boost to being hired. ■
