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CAREER COUCH

Lining Up Interviews Is Just the Beginning

By PHYLLIS KORRKKI

Q. You have had several job interviews at different companies, but still no job offers. Are you doing something wrong?

A. You may not be doing anything wrong. This is a highly competitive job market, and even if you have 9 out of 10 qualifications for a position, an employer may be in a position to find 10 out of 10, said Paul Powers, a management psychologist in Wellesley, Mass., and the author of “Winning Job Interviews.”

Remember that “the essential nature of an active job hunt, while you’re unemployed, is rejection,” Dr. Powers said. “If you’re not getting rejected enough, you’re not working hard enough.”

In fact, your ability to obtain interviews is a sign that you are doing something right — sending out a résumé and cover letter that appeal to hiring managers. And that’s no small feat when hundreds and even thousands of people may be applying for the same job.

That said, you should conduct your own “post-interview review” to see whether there is room for improvement, Dr. Powers said.

(First, of course, make sure that you are washing and combing your hair, dressing appropriately, arriving on time, turning off your cellphone and performing all the other basics of making a good impression.)

Most companies interview the same candidate more than once — sometimes many times. If, on numerous occasions, you have never made it past the first interview, “there’s probably something going on in your interview strategy that’s not leading to that second interview,” said Barbara Safani, owner of Career Solvers, a career management firm in New York.

Q. What could be wrong with your interview strategy?

A. For one thing, you may be sending out brilliant applications for jobs that aren’t a good fit for you, Dr. Powers said. Don’t let a sense of panic cause you to cast your net too wide — it wastes time on both ends.

Even if you are a wonderful candidate, you may be answering questions in a less-than-ideal way. Some people “believe that talking in generalities is the way to go,” Ms. Safani said, but hiring managers usually prefer specifics — especially examples of how you executed a project or solved a problem. Otherwise, you don’t differentiate yourself and you become a mere blur, she said.

In addition to these “stories of success,” candidates need to be able “to communicate in 30 seconds what they’re all about and how they’re going to add value to that organization,” Ms. Safani said.

If you are questioned about your weaknesses, “be authentic without being damaging,” Ms. Safani said. Be ready with an example of a weakness that is not centered on the core competencies of the job you are seeking, she said.

And, of course, be prepared to ask questions yourself — ones that show you have done research about the company. Ms. Safani recommends asking some questions that go beyond the particular job you are applying for, and that cover the direction of the company as a whole.

Q. Looking back, you know that you gave stupid answers to some interview questions. What now?

A. View it as a learning experience and move on, Dr. Powers said. Eventually, it becomes clear that the same 20 or 30 questions tend to be asked, he said, and you can practice your answers to them — perhaps in mock interviews with family, friends or members of a networking group.

It may be a mistake to start out by applying for a job at the company you most want to work for, he said; you may want to practice your interviewing skills at a less-desirable company first.

Q. What if your interviewer is unprepared?

A. First, never assume that the interviewer has read your résumé or even has a copy of it. Always bring extra copies with you.

“If the person’s not prepared, that’s actually an advantage, because it allows you to take control of the interview” and showcase your stories of success, Ms. Safani said.

Take the opportunity to ask questions about the job and the company, and answer even poorly formed questions with enthusiasm and specificity, drawing on the extensive research you have done.

Q. What should you do at the end of the interview?

A. Use the close of the interview to reaffirm that you are interested in the job and are highly qualified for it, Dr. Powers said.

Then ask what the next steps are. Unfortunately, it is common for companies to delay or even halt their hiring plans without letting candidates know, Ms. Safani said; if you don’t hear anything within the time frame specified in your interview, you have a legitimate reason to call the hiring manager. But don’t leave multiple messages; just try to get the person on the phone once — you don’t want to be a pest.

Q. Should you send a thank-you note?

A. Generally, yes. If your main communications have been via e-mail, an e-mailed thank-you note of a few paragraphs — reiterating your qualifications and your interest — is fine, Dr. Powers said. You can also send a thank-you note via regular mail — on better than copy-quality paper, he said. But don’t send a handwritten note unless you have perfect penmanship, he advised.