6 Common Job Search Mistakes: Can You Recover?

By Rachel Zupek, CareerBuilder.com writer

In 20 years of career consulting, Karen Masullo has seen more job search mistakes than she can remember. There is one mistake, however, that she still chuckles about today:

"My most memorable experience with a résumé mistake was a young woman who insisted she did not need my help with the development, review or editing of her résumé," Masullo recalls. "She was angry she had been downsized and this refusal to accept help was part of her loss process."

After about two months, when her résumé hadn't generated any response, the woman finally contacted Masullo for help.

"It was easy to see why her résumé had been a flop," Masullo says. "She had been a shift supervisor a number of times. However, when you leave the 'f' out of 'shift'..."

Masullo's client is one in a sea of millions who make mistakes in their job searches every day. After all, no one is perfect. Even still, it's a cringe-worthy realization when you recognize that you've flubbed any part of the job-seeking process. Thankfully, experts say you can bounce back from most slip-ups, as long as you act quickly and sincerely.

"When you do make a mistake, don't panic and don't stick your head in the sand," says Steve Davies, founder of PerfectJob Software. "It *might* be a lost cause, but if you do nothing, it's *definitely* a lost cause. Some managers will give you high marks if you can recover gracefully from a mistake, because we all make them."

Here are several gaffes you might encounter in your job search and how (or if) you can recover from them:

Blunder No. 1: Arriving late to the interview -- or missing it altogether

Traffic is bad, the subway is slow, your cab driver got lost, your flight was delayed -- there are many reasons why you might be late to an interview, most of which the hiring manager will understand if you give him a heads up. Libby Kopp, a recruiting manager for SALO, a financial recruitment company, says she's even had someone miss an

interview entirely. "She went for the interview at the right time, just a day late," Kopp says. "The hiring manager was not in the office, so she interviewed instead with the HR manager ... Luckily, she did end up getting the job."

How to recover: If you're going to be late for a legitimate reason, call, offer to reschedule and apologize. Though running late isn't a good thing, most hiring managers will note your consideration in calling. If you simply ran out of time, however, or didn't take the time beforehand to find out where you were going, don't expect employers to be as forgiving.

Blunder No. 2: Acting rude to other employees

Tracy Cashman, partner at staffing firm Winter, Wyman, remembers one professional who was late to an interview due to bad traffic. He was stressed out when he arrived and as a result, he was short with the firm's receptionist. "The feedback to me from the client was that they liked his experience and thought his skills would be a good match for the position, but that they weren't going to hire him because based on his interaction with the receptionist, they were concerned about his ability to 'get along in the organization,'" Cashman says.

How to recover: If someone catches you in a bad mood on the day of your interview, your best bet is to write a letter of apology and explain the situation. "[The candidate] and I crafted a letter to the hiring manager explaining the situation that morning, apologizing for any unintended behavior and asking for a second chance," Cashman says. "They ended up bringing him back and he got the job. The moral to the story is that everyone at a company is involved in the hiring process and is often asked for feedback. It's important to make sure you make the right first impression with everyone you see."

Blunder No. 3: Calling someone by wrong name

After researching a company for days and memorizing the entire staff's names and job titles, you find yourself face-to-face with the president of the organization and call him by the wrong name.

How to recover: There are a few ways to bounce back from this one. First and foremost, sincerely apologize (just once -- don't expound) and address him correctly. Bonnie Russell suggests using humor by saying something like, "I can't believe I just did that, Mr. So-and-So. Especially because you have no idea how long I practiced saying it in the mirror!" "This all but eliminates the gaffe because you've just confessed to thinking the person was important enough to prep for," says Russell, founder of 1st-Pick.com, a media relations Web site that focuses on crisis management and disaster recovery. (Plus, it makes the victim of your blunder feel more important than they might be.)

Blunder No. 4: There's an error in your résumé or cover letter

It's the easiest mistake to make and the hardest to catch. Whether it's a transposed letter, a missing word or an extra period, typos in a résumé are easy to miss. Julie Cohen, a career coach, remembers one client who was applying for a position in public policy. She realized (after the fact) that instead of "public policy," she had written "pubic policy" in her cover letter. Oops.

How to recover: Typos are definitely not something you want to make a habit of, but your chances aren't blown if you do. One thing you have going for you is that many employers have online application tracking systems, which automatically discard "bad" (read error-filled) applications. In this case, your chances of being able to re-submit an

error-free application are good and no one will be the wiser. If you can't re-apply under the radar, however, your best bet is to repackage another version as an update, with a short note acknowledging your mistake and explaining that, in your excitement, you hit send too soon, says Laurie Kahn, founder and president of Media Staffing Network. Admitting your mistake will prove that you paid enough attention to see the mistake, you want to correct it and you will probably never let it happen again, she says.

Blunder No. 5: Referencing a potential employer's competitor

Rachel Weingarten, president of GTK Marketing Group, was pitching a new marketing strategy to a nonprofit group, which she repeatedly called by its competitor's name. (The same competitor with which the group was in a dead heat for new business.) "After I sat down, their [chief marketing officer] pointedly corrected my error," Weingarten says.

How to recover: If you call a company by its competitor in an interview, you should not only apologize, but also use it to your advantage. In Weingarten's situation, she says, "I quickly countered by saying that if I had made this mistake after weeks and months of research and interaction with them, they were doing something seriously wrong with their marketing and branding since they still hadn't distinguished themselves from their competitor." She vowed to change that fact and landed the account.

Blunder No. 6: Spilling or spitting on the interviewer

It might sound strange, but it's easy to get overexcited or passionate in an interview. As a result, you might spit in the interviewer's face or spill your coffee across the table.

How to recover: While this situation is uncomfortable, it's not deadly, says Amy Kopelan, co-creator of thegurunation.com, a career guidance Web site. She suggests sending a thank-you note the following day, accompanied by a gift certificate to a dry cleaner.

The most important thing is not to let your mistake ruin your composure. If you can bounce back through candor, self-deprecating humor and sincerity, many hiring managers will note your ability to recognize your mistakes and recover from them, versus the gaffe itself.

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