

Business & Careers

The perils of overconfidence in job interviews

Bravado is no substitute for being unprepared and asking the wrong questions



David Namkung
The Headhunter

Candidates often rely too much on confidence alone to impress employers at interview, leading them to underprepare and fall into several avoidable pitfalls.

Rising Canadian comedian Nathan Fielder disagrees, suggesting that confidence is all it takes to land any job. He tests his theory on the hit reality television show *Nathan for You*, in which he acts as a satirical “business coach” and provides ridiculous advice to companies seeking consultation.

In one episode, he resolutely declares that the one key to nailing an interview is confidence, and arranges an interview with a law firm to attempt to prove his theory. Fielder confidently carries out his end by speaking aloud whatever is fed to him through a hidden earpiece by a seven-year-old boy. Questions such as, “What kind of experience do you have in this field?” are met with uncomfortably awkward and bold responses like, “Do you like skateboards?” and “What that means?”

While this makes for a hilarious skit, it’s no surprise Fielder does not win over the employer and it becomes clear that confidence without substance is not enough. Clearly, most lawyers have the wherewithal to present themselves with more professionalism than he does—however, what is surprising is how often lawyers fall into several avoidable interview pitfalls based on overconfidence and under-preparation. Here are three of the most common pitfalls you can avoid in your next interview.

Being duplicitous

Most often, candidates don’t actively intend on being duplicitous. However, it’s not uncommon for interviewees to direct a disproportionate amount of attention to the ostensible hiring partners. Be cognizant that clients receive feedback from a range of parties, including support staff, non-partner interviewers, and recruiters.

For instance, we previously received client feedback on a candidate explaining that he was fantastic at the formal panel interview, but fell flat with the junior partners afterwards and



BARTEKSEWCZYK / ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

also failed to acknowledge females throughout the course of his meetings. Another candidate, again following an excellent formal interview with the partners, frequently checked her smartphone while meeting with the firm’s associates.

Be equally courteous to everyone—any inkling of duplicity is a big red flag for discerning employers. Treat everyone as well as you would treat a managing partner. Even if the interviewer adopts a casual or even crass demeanour, it is always safer to lean towards professionalism balanced with being relatable; some employers will intentionally create a casual interview environment to try to gain any additional insight into the candidate’s “true” personality.

Disparaging former employers

One of our clients opens his interviews with a request to “tell me the three worst qualities of your former employer.” This is intentionally tricky—it’s designed to test the interviewee’s judgment while seeking insight into what they value in a prospective employer. Sometimes, it’s what you don’t say in such circumstances which can leave the most favourable impression with a potential employer.

Interviewers get concerned when they hear candidates bashing past (or current) employers,

“

Be equally courteous to everyone—any inkling of duplicity is a big red flag for discerning employers. Treat everyone as well as you would treat a managing partner.

David Namkung
The Counsel Network

particularly when they divulge confidential or highly personal details, in part because they recognize they could be the candidate’s next gossip victim. What is required is a fine balance between maintaining professionalism while convincing the prospective employer that your struggles with your former

organization are not indicative of your shortcomings.

One of the benefits of the legal market is that the reputations of many partners are already well known: if one of your colleagues or bosses is notoriously unreasonable, the market likely knows of this already, so you don’t have to take up the burden of spelling it out for anyone. Instead, focus on how you developed in the environment, and how it can serve as a base of experience which will benefit your next employer.

Asking dumb questions

Don’t let the saying fool you: there are, in fact, dumb questions. Do your homework—any question that can easily be answered by a cursory review of a firm’s website is generally regarded as a poor question at interview (how many lawyers are in your practice group, for example). More importantly, associates underutilize the opportunity to ask meaningful questions, leaving the employer with the impression that the candidate has not prepared enough for the interview, lacks maturity, or is not keenly interested in the position.

Focus your interview preparation on forming probative and behavioural questions instead of generic or yes/no questions. Think through the functional

elements which actually create a firm’s culture and build your questions around them. How does the firm deal with client ownership? How does the firm tend to staff its files? Can you describe how your star performers have distinguished themselves?

Questions which elicit concrete examples will assist you in gaining better insights into the firm while facilitating more substantive discussions. Remember that the interview is a two-way street and the opportunity you’re given to ask questions is crucial to your own due diligence regarding the position and a chance to shine with the employer.

At the end of the day, like the practice of law, thorough preparation is the key to gaining the type of balanced and impressive confidence that wins over employers. Make sure you set aside adequate time to prepare for your next interview; think of it as the most important file on your desk. In many ways, it probably is.

David Namkung is a director with The Counsel Network in Vancouver, vice-president of the Federation of Asian Canadian Lawyers (B.C. chapter) and a board member/volunteer of WorkingGear.ca. Follow him on Twitter @DNamkung.

Visit
**THE LAWYERS
WEEKLY**



www.lawyersweekly.ca

LexisNexis