



Should I Tell the Truth?

And 99 Other Questions
about Succeeding at Interviews
and Job Hunting

Dr Rob Yeung

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CYAN

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Preface

Ever had a question about finding the perfect job? Maybe you want to understand how other people seem to get headhunted from one job to the next or how they get offered every job they interview for. Perhaps you're wondering how best to organize your CV or what to say to impress interviewers. Or, as the title of the book suggests, you want to know how far you can stretch the truth or even if you can tell a great big lie without getting found out.

There are other books on job hunting. But this book is different. Because I'm different. I interview candidates for a living. I train interviewers for a living. I help employers decide what questions they should be asking and the answers they should listen out for. I've sifted through mountains of CVs and decided which ones to discard and which ones to save. I've worked with some of the world's leading headhunters and observed how the very best candidates make themselves stand out from the crowd. So trust me when I tell you I know how to find the right job for you. In fact, I'm probably going to get into a bit of trouble with employers for giving the game away.

Finding the perfect job really is a game. And, like any other game, it has rules. If you follow the rules, you will have a good chance of getting a good job. But, as any school kid can tell you, the best way to win at a game is to cheat. Yes, you read that right. Stack the deck, have an ace hidden up your sleeve, move the goalposts. Employers



set rules that they hope job hunters will follow, but the very best candidates know which rules to follow without question, which ones to flex a little bit, and which ones to ignore entirely. The people who get hired are not always the best ones for the job; more often than not, they simply know the most about how to get hired. It's that simple.

This book is about how to get hired. So read on if you want to find answers to the questions that you have always wanted to ask. But read on also as you will find answers to questions that you *should* be asking. Read on to learn how to get the job that will make you both successful and happy.

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The

Questions

1

I want a new job – where should I start?

Finding the right job can seem fairly mysterious at times. There are some people who seem to get offered jobs without even having to put together a new CV; others might spend months or even years looking for a new job without success. But, before you start, here are the essential truths about finding a great job that every job hunter must know:

- ✓ *It's called job "hunting" for a reason.* It's not called job "sitting around and waiting for one to come your way." If you put your job search in the hands of recruitment consultants or other people, that's not hunting, it's hoping. To succeed, you must hunt down potential employers. You must discover the right people within organizations to talk to for information, tips, and referrals. You must track down decision makers and pierce them through the heart with good reasons why they need to have you on their team. If that sounds like hard work, you'd be right – it is.
- ✓ *Persistence pays off.* Your chances of finding the right job are in direct proportion to the amount of time and effort you put into your job hunt. Assuming you're doing the right stuff, spend ten hours a week on your job hunt and you will likely

find a job twice as quickly as someone who only spends five hours a week on it. Forgive me if that sounds blindingly obvious, but so many job hunters see being unemployed as an opportunity to slack off. If you're unemployed, think of finding employment as your new full-time job, requiring five ten-hour days a week. If you're currently employed, look at finding employment as your more important job, albeit one you have to do on the side.

- ✓ *People are your biggest resource.* Employers, careers services, and recruitment consultants estimate that between 50 and 85 per cent of all jobs are filled by word of mouth. Far fewer candidates are successful simply by responding to job adverts in newspapers or online. So it stands to reason that you should spend the bulk of your time with people, not sat at your computer poring over job adverts and sending CVs and application forms off. Ask your people resources to critique your CV and help you prepare for interviews. Use people for information and leads to unadvertised opportunities. Spend time reminding people you exist and they might just point you in the direction of the right job.

Spend the bulk of
your time with people,
not sat at your computer.

2

What does the perfect CV look like?

There's no such thing as the perfect CV, because what works for anyone else won't necessarily work for you. Having said that though, here are five key principles for creating a *near*-perfect CV:

- ✓ *Show off your strengths and hide your flaws.* The beauty of writing a CV rather than filling in a standard application form is that you can *choose* what to write about. You can decide which particular skills and achievements to highlight or bury, or even omit entirely any information that you might not want the employer to know straightaway (see, for example, Q25 on an alternative CV format).
- ✓ *Think of the top half of the first page of your CV as prime selling space.* Put your key achievements and key skills into the prime selling space on your CV. Given that a recruiter may only scan the average CV for a handful of seconds, you need to maximize your chances of catching that person's attention. Hiding some key achievement or piece of information deep within the body of your CV isn't the smartest thing to do. Hit the reader with your key content straightaway.
- ✓ *Limit yourself to only two pages.* Short and sweet beats lengthy

and rambling every time. Any more than two pages tells the recruiter that you're verbose and can't prioritize what's important. Are those the messages you want to send to recruiters? If you must include more material, think about attaching an appendix (see Q14).

- ✓ *Use bold or capital letters selectively to highlight key words and phrases.* If the employer is looking for someone who has a “degree in molecular biology” or experience of “supervising a busy grocery counter” and you have that precise experience, why not flag up those phrases with **bold font** or **CAPITAL LETTERS** to ensure a recruiter doesn't overlook it?
- ✓ *Allow your content to speak louder than your style.* Avoid at all costs colored paper, scented paper, attaching photos or certificates or other documents (unless you are asked to do so), and all gimmicks and tricks. Sure, you'll get the recruiter's attention, but for all the wrong reasons (see Q33).

Choose what to write about. Decide which skills and achievements to highlight or bury.

3

Do I *have* to tailor my CV?

Sure, it used to be traditional to create one standard CV to send off with different covering letters. But it used to be traditional to treat illnesses with leeches too – although I bet you wouldn't want to attach a blood-sucking annelid to your body the next time you get sick. So don't rely on using only the one CV either.

A standard CV is pretty much just junk mail – it's focused on the product (you) rather than the buyer (the employer). Sending a standard CV rather than tailoring one for each employer is like learning by rote interview responses and deciding to repeat them in the order you learned them no matter what questions the interviewer actually asks.

Of course it's more time-consuming to tailor your CV, but understanding how organizations screen CVs should convince you never to send the same CV to different employers ever again. Increasingly, large companies use computer scanners and optical character recognition software to search for key words. If your skills and experience do not match word-for-word with what they are looking for, you will probably get dumped. Even when organizations don't use software, they may employ relatively junior people to look at CVs and tell them only to look for key words.

If an employer advertises for candidates who are “flexible,” mentioning that you're “adaptable” isn't close enough. If they want a manager with experience of “leading complex transformation

Nothing beats repeating back to recruiters what they want to hear.

projects” and “handling both internal and external stakeholders,” don’t assume that mentioning on your CV that you “managed large change projects” and “dealt with a wide variety of employees, customers, and suppliers” is near enough.

Go through the original job advert and highlight all of the key skills, qualities, and experiences they want, and incorporate them word-for-word into your CV. Spell it out. If they talk about wanting someone to hit “aggressive sales targets” then damn well write in your CV how you exceeded “aggressive sales targets.” Better to be safe than sorry. Don’t leave it to software or a junior paper shuffler to work out whether you’re right for the job or not.

Nothing beats repeating back to recruiters what they want to hear. Whether you’re getting in touch with two organizations or a hundred, tailor each CV. Even two practically identical organizations competing in the same sector with similar numbers of employees means two individually tailored CVs. A hundred organizations? I think you’ve got it.

4 How can I get headhunted?

There seem to be a few lucky people who never need to apply for jobs. Bigger and better jobs just seem to come their way, courtesy of executive search firms and recruitment consultants.

But the truth is that getting a call from one of these firms doesn't just "happen"; people get approached by search firms for jobs because those people have *made* it happen. Sure, the ultimate result may be that employers come to them, but there's a lot of effort and preparatory work that goes into getting headhunted. And here's how you can make it happen for you too:

- ✓ *Initiate contact.* Yes, that's right. You don't have to wait for headhunters to get in touch. But bear in mind that firms often specialize in different roles, different industries, or candidates with different levels of experience. The top firm for placing fresh MBA candidates may have little interest in, say, finance or human resources specialists. Ask people in your network (see Q41) to tell you which recruitment consultants or executive search firms are the most appropriate for job seekers *with your experience and skills*, and send them your CV. As the top firms are typically inundated with CVs, you should ideally find a contact within your network who can introduce you to a named individual within one of those firms if you're serious about making contact.

- ✓ *Network, network, network.* Search firms often employ researchers to help them identify possible candidates to fill vacancies. The more people you tell about your skills and availability, the greater your chances of a researcher calling one of your contacts and being given your name.
- ✓ *Raise your profile.* Present papers at conferences and speak at industry events. Write in a trade publication or even your internal company newsletter. Especially in the era of the Internet, even providing a one line quote to a journalist for some obscure industry website (and making sure that the journalist spells your name correctly and mentions your job title and organization!) could be enough for you to appear on the radar of a search firm.
- ✓ *Check for openings on firms' websites.* “Headhunting” is an increasingly inappropriate term for what job broking firms do – it’s no longer the cloak-and-dagger industry that it used to be. Many firms post details of current vacancies on their websites and invite candidates to submit their details.

People get approached
by search firms for jobs
because those people
have *made* it happen.

5

Should I lie about being unemployed?

There used to be much more of a stigma attached to being out of work, but most employers accept that even the most talented of people can sometimes find themselves out of work through no fault of their own. Smart employers know that it's no longer fair to discriminate automatically against people who are out of work.

Whether you are networking or being interviewed, honesty may be the best policy. Of course, mentioning that you had a blazing row with your boss or that you were fired for incompetence won't make you sound like a great candidate. However, good reasons to give include:

- ✓ Your department was restructured or the work done by your team was outsourced or moved offshore to another country, therefore eliminating your job.
- ✓ You had moral or ethical issues with the way your team was being run and, having weighed up the consequences, you decided to leave.
- ✓ You considered your options and made a decision to take time away from work, for instance to nurse a sick family member, study a course, follow a personal interest, or even take time out

for yourself after a particularly exhausting phase of your career.

You may be tempted to lie about your employment status and pretend you are still in work. “Adjust” the dates on your CV. Talk about your job in the present tense rather than the past tense at an interview or while networking. The chances are that you could get away with it too. But if you get found out, even if that’s many months down the line, you are almost certain to be dismissed automatically. Employers take a dim view of lies and an even worse view of liars. Ultimately, the choice and risk is yours – how lucky do you feel?

Even if you were fired for dubious reasons, it’s probably better to own up to being out of work and allude to differences of opinion rather than tell an outright lie that you are still in work.

Employers take a dim
view of lies and an even
worse view of liars.

6

How long will it take me to find a job?

You may have heard other people say that they went from putting a CV together to starting a new job within a matter of weeks, but I'd say that you can't always believe what you hear. People can be quite wary about broadcasting the fact that they're looking for a job, so they may have been looking for months before they decided to tell people about their job search.

I'm tempted to say that the length of time it takes job hunters to find new jobs can vary – and to leave the answer at that. Because of course it can depend on factors ranging from the state of the economy to the scarcity of skills in your particular field and industry.

But saying only that it “can vary” isn't very helpful. So here's a rule of thumb instead: finding a new job generally takes *at least* two to three weeks for every £10,000 of salary that you are looking for.

As you can imagine, there are far greater numbers of positions available for entry-level job seekers than there are for senior managers. A candidate on the lookout for a position as a highly paid chief executive of an international business could reasonably expect to wait well over a year; a candidate looking for a role as a

junior administrator should secure a new job within months or even weeks.

But the rule of thumb assumes that you're investing time equivalent to a full-time job (i.e. 30 to 40 hours a week) in looking for employment: that you're networking, reading up on employers, sending off applications, and so on rather than sitting around waiting for opportunities to fall into your lap (see also Q1).

Of course I hope your job search will take much less time, but you should gear yourself up both financially and psychologically to be looking for a minimum of that length of time – and you should consider anything less than that to be a bonus.

7

How can I ensure that my next job will be the right job?

The reality is that many of us stumble into the jobs that we do. For one reason or another, we end up following one path rather than another, even though there may be other career paths that could suit us better. You may be tempted to apply for the same kind of job in similar organizations to the one you have been working for. But the right job is the one that will make you both successful *and* happy.

What are your goals in life? What are your unfulfilled dreams and aspirations? *What do you want to do with your life before you die?* There's no time like the present to consider your career options – to check that your next job will move you closer to the kind of work you really want to be doing.

A great exercise to help you consider what you want out of your next job is to imagine that you have died. I know it's a little macabre, but project yourself many years into the future and imagine that you have led a long and happy life. Your friends and family have gathered to mourn you and pay tribute to you. What

would you *like* them to say about you? What would you ideally like to be remembered for?

Treat the eulogy exercise as an experiment in asking: “What if?” The sky is the limit. What would you like from your life and career? Once you have an idea of how you would like to be remembered, you can work back to the here and now. If you have ambitions for your future life, what does that mean for your next job move? It’s a cliché to say that no one on their deathbed ever wished they had spent more time in the office – so how might you change the direction of your career to ensure you will never have any regrets?

I realize that these are big questions to ask. But jot even just a few of your thoughts on paper and I guarantee you will have a smoother job search. Because having a good idea of the kinds of jobs and organizations that are right for you means that you can focus your job search. You can invest your energies targeting only organizations and roles that are right for you rather than exhausting yourself approaching companies or looking into roles that don’t sit with your aspirations and values.

The right job is the one
that will make you both
successful *and* happy.

8

What kind of organization should I be working for?

Even if you already know what your calling in life is – whether it’s as a research scientist or a financial consultant, a teacher or a sales executive – it’s worth considering the kind of organization you want to be working for. Because for most people, the priority isn’t just to find *a* job, but the *right* job.

Take a few moments to brainstorm the characteristics of your dream employer. If you get stuck, here are a few prompts:

- ✓ *Mission or purpose.* Do you want to work for a charitable cause or a moneymaking enterprise? Would you be as happy working for a company that sells beer or telecommunication equipment as one that sells children’s clothes or groceries?
- ✓ *Culture and values.* How did people behave toward each other in previous organizations that you have enjoyed or hated working for? What sort of culture and values does that imply you should look for in your next role?
- ✓ *Size and prospects.* Do you want to work for a tiny local,

perhaps even family-run, firm that offers a sense of belonging, or for a large national or international business that offers career progression?

- ✓ *Location and travel.* Where do you want to work? How much travel are you willing to do?
- ✓ *Brand and reputation.* Is it important for you to work for a household name organization? Or would you be equally happy working for an organization that few people outside of your field may have heard of?

For most people,
the priority isn't just
to find *a* job, but
the *right* job.

9

Do I really have to network?

No, of course you don't *have* to do anything. However, deciding not to network will greatly reduce your chances of finding a great job. I've already mentioned (see Q1) that between 50 to 85 per cent of all positions are filled by word of mouth – perhaps through employee recommendations, referrals from trusted associates, tip-offs, or direct contact. Deciding not to network could slash your chances of finding the right job by up to 85 per cent. How do those odds sound to you?

There's a huge “hidden market” of jobs because many employers find that the payback simply isn't good enough for advertising in the press or online. Many employers prefer not to advertise because they find that candidates who come to them by way of referral tend to be of a higher caliber than those who respond to job adverts.

But it's not just about the quantity of job opportunities that may come your way – it's about the quality too. It's usually the best jobs that are filled by someone who knows someone who knows someone. People are much more likely to recommend a job to their friends and contacts when the role is sexy and the pay is good, so it's often the less desirable ones that get advertised. Deciding not to network could not only mean that you may have to spend much, much longer waiting for an opportunity to pop up, but also leave you to pick amongst only the rather less palatable jobs that have already been rejected by networkers.

I can understand that you may feel a bit shy or embarrassed about having to get in touch with people, because many people – myself included – feel the same way too. But let’s get this clear right away: networking is *not* about begging for a job. In fact, the secret of networking is *never* to ask for a job, as that’s a guaranteed way to make people feel uncomfortable and to suddenly get too busy and “forget” to return your calls or emails.

My final argument for networking is that it allows you to take charge and feel in control of your job search. When you send a CV in response to an advertised position, they may not even bother to acknowledge receipt of your application. Being rejected but not even knowing that you’ve been rejected can get you down after a while. Networking empowers you to chase people (politely) until you get an answer.

Networking is *not* about
begging for a job.

10

What is networking exactly?

Networking is simply a fancy word for getting in touch with people and enlisting their support (see also Q46 on what networking is not). Networking is a way of reaching out and getting to know more people. It works on the principle that it's easier to get help and information from someone who knows you or at least knows someone who knows you.

“Hi, Sam Jones gave me your name and said that you might be able to help.”

Could you do that? Could you pick up the phone or send an email mentioning the name of someone you know? If you can do that, you can network.

More specifically, networking to find a job tends to be used for two reasons:

1. Information and referral gathering.
2. Profile raising.

Let's consider information and referral gathering first. You may want to find out about:

- ✓ *An organization.* For example, “I’ve got an interview with Max Enterprises next week and Janet Chung told me that you used to work there and might be able to share some tips,” or “I’d like to work for Johnson & Lang. Janet Chung suggested that you might be able to tell me what it’s like to work there.”
- ✓ *An industry.* For example, “I’m considering making a move into the retail sector – would you have a few minutes to talk me through your experience of what it’s like to work in retail?”
- ✓ *A career choice.* For example, “I’m thinking of switching careers and becoming a nurse – could you spare ten minutes to tell me how you became one?”
- ✓ *Referrals to further people.* For example, “I’m interested in working for Archon Enterprises. Do you know anyone who might be able to tell me a bit more about the company?” or “Who else, doing this kind of work, could you recommend I could speak with?”

Networking for the purposes of raising your profile basically boils down to one question: “Could you please let me know if you come across anyone who is looking for someone with my skills and experience?” Of course the approach is a little more sophisticated in practice (see Q55) and you only ever ask people to let you know about opportunities they come across rather than ask if they have a job for you.

A proactive job search should incorporate networking both to raise your profile *and* gather information about specific opportunities.

11

How can I network when I don't know anyone important?

You don't need to know anyone "important" to be able to network. The whole point of networking is to reach out and make contact with people you don't *yet* know.

Let's say for the sake of argument that you only know ten people in the whole wide world. If you could ask each of those people for the names of just two people to talk to, suddenly you would have 20 more people in your network and a total of 30. And if you asked each of those 20 people for the names of just two people each, again your network would grow in size by another 40 people to 70 in total. As you can see, a network can grow very quickly.

As long as you are on speaking terms with people, you will find that they are willing to help. All you are asking for is a few minutes of their time. If you show your respect for their experience and knowledge, you will find that most people would be pleased to help.

You do not need to
know a single so-called
important person
to start networking.

Think about it this way. If someone called you and mentioned the name of someone you knew, you'd at least listen to what they had to say, right? If the caller explained that your mutual acquaintance had said that you were an expert in your field, you might even feel slightly pleased. And if the caller asked you for just 15 minutes of your time to share some of your thoughts and ideas, would that be so outrageous? Especially if the caller was conscious that you might be busy but was willing to either call back later or arrange to meet with you at a time and place that would fit into your busy schedule. How does that sound?

You do not need to know a single so-called important person to start networking. In fact, job hunters often say that it is their so-called "weak ties" – people that they came to know through their networking rather than the ones they were acquainted with personally – that provide most of their job leads. As you speak to more and more people, you will eventually come across individuals who may have job openings, know of possible job opportunities, or have insider advice about landing a job.


12

Is it worth paying for career advice?

I would strongly advise you to think twice about paying for career advice.

Firstly, be extremely wary of firms that advertise their services as career management specialists. They say that they will write a CV for you and use their database of vacancies to guarantee you a position within a matter of mere months. But think about it: if they were really so successful, don't you think more people would use these kinds of services?

Many job seekers worry about finding the right job. And whenever there are worried people, there will be vultures that are willing to take advantage of them. Of course they say that they guarantee to deliver results. But generally the only guarantee is that you will end up paying a hefty fee upfront. If you are considering using the services of any such firm, I would urge you to talk to people in your network to get an opinion about them. I'd put money on the fact that most of them have never heard of the firm or know anyone who has dealt with even a similar firm. Yes, many recruitment consultants and headhunters give very good careers advice, but they get paid by the employers – *they do not charge you* (see Q13).



Then there are the firms that offer to create the right CV for you. They may say that they have learned over the years how to write CVs that make you stand out. Unfortunately, these firms are being disingenuous. You are the only person who knows the precise ins and outs of your career. How could they possibly know how to best showcase your strengths and disguise your weaknesses? Whatever they tell you won't be much better than the advice you get from any book on CVs. Given that any CV they put together will only be as good as the information you provide them, why not write it yourself?

But my biggest concern about having someone else write your CV is that a successful CV must always be tailored to every single job you apply for (see Q3 for a reminder). Using the same CV – even for very similar jobs – will always be less effective than rewriting each CV to show each employer that you understand perfectly what they are looking for. So unless you are going to ask a CV expert to rewrite your CV for each and every job you apply for, I would urge you to do it yourself.

13

Are career consultants all frauds and con artists?

First of all, I should make clear the distinction between career consultants and recruitment consultants. Career consultants want money from you. Recruitment consultants are paid for by employers. Some devious career consultants may *claim* to be recruitment consultants – but if they ask for a fee, you should treat them as career consultants (and heed the advice in this question and Q12) rather than as recruitment consultants (see Q28).

My response to Q12 should not be taken as implying that I think *all* career consultants are liars and con artists. My answer simply makes two key points. One, that you should never pay a large fee upfront. Two, that the task of writing your CV is so vital that I would strongly encourage you to do it yourself.

There are firms of reputable outplacement consultants, careers advisors, and psychologists who offer useful support and advice. For example, you might wish to speak to a careers advisor to get ideas for completely new career paths that you had never considered before. An outplacement consultant might be able to make

suggestions about your generic CV, but ultimately leave it up to you to decide how best to tailor the CV that goes to any particular employer. Psychologists could use psychometric tests to help uncover strengths and weaknesses, preferences and values of which you may not have been aware. Or they could run through mock interviews with you and give you feedback on how you come across.

Buy career support on a strictly per-session basis.

Career consultants *can* add value. But before you decide to enlist their support, ask yourself whether anyone in your network could potentially provide that same service for you – for free. For example, would anyone in your network have the background (e.g. people who work in human resources or actually interview candidates as part of their job) to look over your CV or help with practice interviews?

Finally, before you engage the services of any particular consultant, make sure you know what you are buying. Ask them to explain what you get for the fee. Then buy career support on a strictly per-session basis. That way you can pay for an hour or two of their time and evaluate the results before deciding if you want more of their support.

14

Why must a CV be no longer than two pages?

The key point to remember is that your CV is likely to be one of many, many dozens, if not hundreds and hundreds that the employer is likely to receive. As such, your CV may only receive a scant few seconds' attention.

If you have five or six pages, the really important information that you want to convey to the recruiter may be buried in reams of text. If you have only two pages, the really important information is more likely to stand out. Okay, having perhaps three pages isn't going to kill recruiters, but would you rather they spent ten seconds glancing at a three-page document and pray that they spot the important stuff, or ten seconds glancing at a two-page document in which you know you have included only the content that counts?

Even when your CV is only one of very few applications being considered and the recruiters are likely to spend more time reading each one – for example you are applying for a very specialist technical job or you are so senior and experienced that there are very few people in the world like you – it pays dividends to keep your CV short. Top executive search firms have told me that they see a CV as reflection of a candidate's personality. A lengthy CV

says that you're long-winded, can't prioritize, and enjoy writing for its own sake. Is that the message you want to put across?

Just because you have many years of experience does not mean that you need write about every single facet about every single job. Employers are rarely interested in what you did more than seven or eight years ago. An employer is likely to want to know in detail only about your most recent two or three jobs – or four at most. Any previous jobs should be condensed and summarized. If you feel that you simply must include details of those previous jobs, then provide them in the form of an appendix that supplements your two-page CV. Be sure to label these pages clearly as an appendix so the recruiter knows that the important stuff is in your first two pages.

To recap, focus on your most recent handful of roles. The rest is mere distraction.

A lengthy CV says
that you're long-winded,
can't prioritize, and enjoy
writing for its own sake.

15

Why shouldn't I include hobbies and interests on my CV?

Employers sometimes get odd ideas into their heads. What one employer thinks is an interesting and worthy pursuit could equally be what another employer thinks is strange or downright laughable. Think carefully about including your hobbies and non-work interests at all.

Certainly, don't bother saying that you read books, watch television, go to the movies, or enjoy hill walking (which all imply that you have such a quiet life that you have nothing more exciting to mention). Don't mention that you play a musical instrument (yawn) unless you won prizes for it. Don't mention that you enjoy spending time with your children or try to be a good parent (again, yawn – surely nobody would ever write that they try to be a bad parent?).

By including boring and trivial hobbies, you waste the time of whoever is reading your CV. Rather than showing that you are a rounded individual, dull hobbies only confirm that you're, well, dull. I would recommend that you mention interests only if they

are recent *and* relevant – and you can demonstrate their relevance to the job. Saying you play football with a cross-company group of insurance brokers could be used as evidence that you network outside of your organization. Guiding your department’s quiz team to win the company championship could possibly be used to show your prowess as a leader.

Or, if you’re a recent graduate or school leaver, captaining the university rugby team or being part of a winning tennis partnership would count. So too would chairing a committee or having a lead role in a student body. But mere participation in any activity won’t make you stand out – too many candidates mention that they “play football regularly” or “enjoy visiting museums.”

Be careful not to mention overly spectacular achievements. Raising a five-figure sum for charity could indicate that you have significant influencing and persuasive skills. But raising a *six*-figure sum for charity could potentially lead to suspicions that you may be more passionate about your non-work interests than your work.

Don’t forget that achievements should be recent though. Avoid keeping non-work achievements on your CV if they are more than five years old. Keeping them on your CV implies that you have since achieved nothing else of note.

Mention your interests
only if they are recent *and*
relevant.

16

What personal information *must* I omit from my CV?

Include only your name, address, and contact telephone numbers. If you have a professional email address (e.g. “rob19800@hotmail.com” rather than “silly_body@yahoo.com”) you can include that too. No other personal information is necessary.

I know it has been traditional for many years to include your marital status and number of children. But recruiters don’t need to know it, and legislation actually prevents employers from asking about your home and family. You no longer even need to include your age on a CV (see also Q85).

Again, I can understand that you may want to show employers that you are a rounded person. But, to be honest, an employer’s key priority is to employ someone who can deliver results – someone with the right skills and qualities to do the job well. So don’t allow unnecessary information to clog up your CV and distract from your main skills and attributes. And in case a recruiter is unhappily single and hates all married people (or is unhappily married and envies all single people), why provide the recruiter with ammunition?

17

What's the best way to use the Internet when job hunting?

There are lots of jobs online, but the quality is often very, very suspect. Do peruse online vacancies in the same way that you might check the appointments section of a newspaper. By all means use the Internet to gather information and research industries, possible occupations, specific organizations, and even named individuals. But do not rely on the World Wide Web to find you your job.

I'm not a big fan of statistics, but this one caught my eye. It's estimated that only between 4 and 10 per cent of all vacancies get filled via the Internet. And even the higher end of that range probably applies mainly for technical or IT-related positions. For other roles, it's probably nearer to 4 per cent. Compare that to the between 50 and 85 per cent of jobs that get filled via word of mouth and networking. Hopefully that should tell you where you should be spending your time – less than 10 per cent online and up to 85 per cent in the real world of face-to-face meetings and telephone conversations. People are – and always will be – your biggest resource (see Q1).

The problem with relying on the Internet is that employers often don't even bother looking at online applications. So many candidates have put their details online and forgotten to take them off that many employers automatically assume that online details are out-of-date. Even if a website does miraculously manage to match you up with an opening, you will only be considered for jobs that are nearly identical to what you are currently doing or have done before. Website search bots are rarely sophisticated enough to pick up on alternative careers that you might be suited for. And neither will you have any control over the type of organization, industry, or culture you will be considered for. If you have an idea of your dream job (see Q8), that's just too bad, as the search bots relentlessly look only for a match-up between key words and phrases in your skills and experience.

Lazy job seekers love the Internet because they can submit their CVs or fill in online application forms and wait for website search bots to match them up to their jobs. But it's a false hope. It feels like job hunting, but it doesn't deliver results.

People are – and always
will be – your biggest
resource.

18 How can I draw the reader's attention to my CV?

In the same way that the blurb on the back of this book helped you to decide whether to buy this book or not, a profile statement allows the reader of your CV to decide at a glance whether to buy you.

Occasionally called a “personal profile” or an “asset statement,” a profile statement should announce who you are and tell the reader your key strengths or achievements in no more than three or four sentences – but without making wildly grandiose claims about yourself (see Q32). Here are a few examples:

- ✓ “I graduated with an upper second class degree in politics and economics. I have experience of working in several office environments and have spent three weeks on an internship at advertising firm Smith, Hicks, & Choy.”
- ✓ “An office manager with responsibility for the smooth running of an office of 14 lawyers and three support staff. I have an annual budget of £50,000 and oversee all office functions from

liaising with clients to managing the office IT systems and ensuring we comply with safety at work legislation.”

- ✓ “I am a sales director with over 14 years’ experience of growing sales revenues. In the last year alone I have exceeded my business targets and grown my team’s sales volumes by 15 per cent and profitability by 18 per cent in a challenging market.”
- ✓ “An experienced help desk supervisor with an excellent telephone manner and first-rate knowledge of the ITAC hardware.”

I believe that a profile statement performs a vital role, enabling employers to figure out immediately whether you may match what they are looking for. As such, your profile statement should be the first paragraph that a recruiter sees beneath your name. I would advise putting it above your contact details as I would argue that the summary of who you are is more important than where you can be contacted. However, some people do put it just beneath their address and telephone numbers. Wherever you decide to insert your profile statement, the point is to make sure you have one.

A profile statement allows
the reader of your CV to
decide at a glance whether
to buy you.

19

Should I tell the reader what I want on my CV?

Some experts advise including a “career objective” instead of a profile statement (see Q18) at the top of your CV. Here are some examples:

- ✓ “Objective: Executive assistant looking to manage the diary and office of a busy director or managing director.”
- ✓ “Career objective: Graduate looking for a challenging position within a media communications firm or marketing department.”
- ✓ “Objective: Experienced human resources manager seeks to add value through organizational development and recruitment & selection practices.”

Career objectives are difficult to pitch correctly. A narrow job objective (e.g. “I am seeking a role as an accounts payable administrator”) may keep you from being considered by the same employer for other related positions. Too broad an objective (e.g.

“I am a graduate looking for a challenging position that will test and develop my skills”) tells the reader nothing useful about what you really want.

However, I believe there is a much bigger problem about having a career objective on your CV. Employers aren't interested in what *you want*; they only care about what *they need*. By all means tell your friends what you would like to get from your next job, but don't waste your words telling an employer. Employers are not there to help you find your vocation in life – they want to find people who can fill their vacancies.

A career objective talks about what you want from an employer; a profile statement talks about what you can offer the employer. As such, a profile statement trumps a career objective pretty much every time.

Employers aren't
interested in what *you*
want; they only care
about what *they need*.

20

What section headings must I include on my CV?

A CV could *conceivably* contain a selection of the following sections:

- ✓ contact details (see Q16)
- ✓ profile statement (see Q18)
- ✓ career objective (although see Q19)
- ✓ key achievements
- ✓ skills or competencies (see Q31)
- ✓ education or qualifications
- ✓ work experience, career history, or employment
- ✓ memberships or professional affiliations
- ✓ honors or awards
- ✓ activities or hobbies and interests (although see Q15).

But, apart from your contact details, *none of these are compulsory*. In deciding which sections to include in any of your CVs, the 24-carat golden rule is to *think about what would make the greatest positive impression on the employer*. If you have several particularly noteworthy achievements that otherwise might get lost if you were

to include them as part of your career history, go ahead and break them out into a separate section entitled “Key achievements.” For example, you might have attained significant success in a previous role rather than your current job. Beware though: pointing to an achievement more than five years old says that your career has since stagnated – why haven’t you achieved anything of note in the last five years?

If you have any prizes or honors that would make a *genuine* difference to the strength of a particular application, then include those too. Winning a school science prize might be appealing for recruiters at a research institution, but perhaps of less interest to those at a bank or retailer. Coming top of your year in an exam might be an achievement if it was recent and relevant; mere attendance at training courses is not.

Similarly, include a section on professional memberships only if it is important to a particular employer. For example, I would state that I’m a chartered psychologist of the British Psychological Society if I were to apply for a job as a psychologist. But if I were to need a job as say a sales manager, mentioning it would only raise questions as to why I might be dropping out of psychology.

Pointing to an
achievement more
than five years old
says that your career
has since stagnated.

21

Education or experience: Which should come first?

Education or work experience – the answer *depends*. One of the absolute delights of writing a CV as opposed to filling out a standard application form is that you can order your CV however you like. However, the golden rule in deciding what should go first is (again, as with Q20) to think: What would most impress the *employer*?

You should always order the sections on your CV according to what you think is most likely to get you the job. For example, if you are a recent graduate with little work experience but first class honors from a top university, you might want to lead with your education first. If you have better work experience to showcase, lead with a section entitled “Employment”, “career history”, or “Work experience” instead – what you call it matters less than what you put in it.

The same goes for the other sections of your CV too. If you have certain key achievements that would grab the employer’s attention and guarantee you an interview, don’t bury that section towards

the bottom of your CV – give it pride of place at the top. If you have a particular award that could clinch an interview for you, place that in a prominent position too.

CVs have no universally accepted format, so choose whatever highlights your strengths best. Choose to list the sections of your CV in whatever order you think will make the biggest impact and get you the job.

You can order your CV
however you like.

22

What are the chances of getting caught if I lie about my qualifications?

Every year or so, a national newspaper manages to expose a public figure or high profile executive for having lied on a CV. Some claim to have left school with healthier grades or to have graduated from university with a better class of degree than they actually did. Others profess to having graduated when they had never completed their studies. I can recall a disgraced government minister who claimed to have graduated from a top university – when he had in fact graduated from a far less prestigious institution that happened to be in the same city.

Liars do get caught out. But the fact that these exposés are typically of people *already* in senior public or business roles indicates that they had previously managed to get away with their lies for several decades. So liars do not *always* get caught out.

The majority of employers make job offers contingent on the production of satisfactory references (see Q62 on ensuring that your references are positive). In practice, however, few organizations ask to see original school transcripts or examination certificates – perhaps because their human resources departments aren't that efficient or the employer is simply happy to have found a candidate to fill the vacancy.

So there's a good chance you won't get found out. Even if you did get caught, the likelihood is that the employer would simply retract the job offer. Unless you were applying for one of those aforementioned high profile roles – or were simply very unlucky – in which case the employer could potentially try to get you prosecuted for the offence of obtaining a pecuniary advantage through deception.

Of course, telling outright lies is morally contentious. A better solution might therefore be to omit your qualifications or education from your CV – or to give only scant information about them. Don't mention grades if they weren't good; don't mention dates if you dropped out. Once you have been working for more than a handful of years, most employers are more interested in your experience than your education anyway.

The difficulty is perhaps for very recent school leavers or graduates. If you have no work experience, you may be judged almost exclusively on your exam results. If you don't have the grades you won't get through the door. Some job seekers therefore argue that candidates with poor grades have nothing to lose by lying. I only hope that you make a decision that is in keeping with your personal moral compass.

Don't mention grades
if they weren't good;
don't mention dates
if you dropped out.

23 Can I get away with exaggerating my experience on my CV?

The short answer is: Yes, most likely you can. While employers can easily check “hard” facts such as job titles, salaries, length of employment, and qualifications (see Q22), they often struggle to verify “softer” facts such as quality of work experience, actual results achieved, or hobbies and interests.

It’s hard to get at statistics, but a quick perusal of online job forums reveals that many candidates quite openly admit to “embellishing” their responsibilities, “stretching” their experiences, and even telling outright lies.

The litany of “adjustments” includes: claiming to have led major projects (when the candidates had perhaps only had relatively minor roles on them), saying that they had met or exceeded targets (when they had not), maintaining that they had managed projects under budget and on time (again, when they had not), and talking

up their roles in terms of managing major clients or customers (even though they may only have had minor, administrative roles with those clients or customers). The list goes on.

You may get away
with exaggerating on
your CV, but can
you lie consistently
during an interview?

Graduates desperate to prove their worth seem particularly prone to making up extracurricular activities. Anonymous online admissions of guilt include having staked claims to “co-founding the university debating club” (even though the club technically never met for even a single debate) and “captaining the inter-departmental hockey team” (when the job seeker had in fact been the team’s bus driver).

Two little problems though. As with telling out-and-out lies about your qualifications (see Q22), lying or even exaggerating about your experience is between you and your conscience. Plus, you may get away with exaggerating on your CV, but can you lie consistently during an interview (see Q82)?

24 Should I bother completing application forms?

Most job hunters hate application forms. Application forms typically ask for precise dates and grades and much else that candidates may not want to reveal, so applicants can't bury their weaknesses. Plus application forms take much longer to complete than simply printing out a CV and cobbling together a quick covering letter. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many candidates either get scared off or can't be bothered to put in the extra effort to complete application forms.

Yes, lazy job hunters hate application forms; savvy job hunters learn to profit from them. Job adverts requesting application forms usually have a much lower response rate than those asking for CVs. Which means that you – and I'm assuming you are one of the savvy job hunters here – have much less competition for the job.

I almost hate to mention these tips, but if it has been a while since you have completed one, here are some essential tips for completing application forms:

- ✓ *Make a photocopy of the original form.* You can draft a version to check that everything you want to say will fit neatly into the little boxes provided. Plus you have a spare in case you suffer the indignity of a coffee spill.
- ✓ *Read the instructions carefully.* Some application forms allow you to attach additional sheets of paper or a copy of your CV – others do not.
- ✓ *Verify the details.* As you are typically asked to sign an application form (which is not necessary on CVs), an application form therefore becomes a legally binding document. Any error in dates of employment or salaries could potentially be used by an employer to dismiss you should you become surplus to requirements.
- ✓ *Write with a black pen.* Scanners do not always pick up blue ink as well as black.
- ✓ *Make a copy of what you have written.* Many application forms require you to give examples of particular situations you have been in. You may be questioned about these should you be invited to interview so keep a copy to refresh your memory.

Lazy job hunters hate
application forms;
savvy job hunters learn
to profit from them.

25 What's the best way to present my CV if I want to change careers?

Most CVs include a section on work experience or employment history. However, the disadvantage of listing your chronological work experience is that you may only be considered for jobs that are similar to what you have done in the past.

Say you are an administrator but want to become a veterinary nurse, or a teacher but want to become a bank manager. Listing your work experience in chronological order (or, more usually *reverse* chronological order so that you present your most recent experience to the reader first) may weaken your chances of getting considered for interview.

The solution may be to create a “functional” CV that highlights your transferable skills and accomplishments. By presenting your skills and mentioning only in passing your jobs and when you have held them, you can make a much stronger impact on recruiters (although see Q26 for the downsides too).

What you call this section matters less than what you put into it – although many candidates choose to use headings such as “Skills and achievements” or “Expertise and accomplishments.”

With regards to the content, the secret to writing a successful functional CV is to research and identify the top three or four skills that the particular employer is looking for. Once you have identified those key skills, you then need to pick achievements from your past that demonstrate that you have them – preferably by quantifying your results where possible (see Q30). Your functional section should broadly read as follows:

SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE

“Key skill 1” followed by a short paragraph of between three and five sentences explaining how you demonstrated this skill in your previous jobs.

“Key skill 2” followed by a second short paragraph of between three to five sentences detailing how you demonstrated this skill in your career.

“Key skill 3” followed by yet another short paragraph detailing how you demonstrated it.

(If required) “Key skill 4” followed by a final short paragraph detailing how you demonstrated it.

Always remember to research the key skills required within the job you are applying for and repeat those skills back to the employer. If you do that, you will significantly strengthen your chances of getting invited to interview.

26 Is there a downside to omitting dates from my CV?

You may be tempted to omit dates from your CV by using a “functional” format (see Q25). However, employers are much more accustomed to receiving CVs in the more standard reverse chronological format. Experienced recruiters may be somewhat suspicious of your motives in choosing a functional format – they may (possibly rightly) assume that you are trying to cover up issues such as lengthy periods of unemployment or other inadequacies in your career history (see Q38 for advice on covering up periods of unemployment).

As such, I would always advise you to include a short section at the end of your CV that lists your employment experience – but in a purely factual form. Simply list the dates, job title, and name of each employer. Don’t go into any detail about each job. Here’s an example of the sort of ultra-short dates-and-job-titles section you may want to include:

EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCE

2008 – present Marketing analyst, Hope & Fielding Partners

2006 – 2008 Marketing assistant, Armstrong Health

2005 – 2006 Executive assistant, The Style and Beauty Company

Like I said: really, really short. You want to direct your reader's attention as much as possible to the experience and transferable skills on Page 1 that would make you right for the job, and mention your job history almost in passing as a nearly inconsequential detail.

27 Why might I need to avoid a traditional chronological CV format?

Functional CVs are great for candidates who want to change career (see Q25). However, because functional CVs focus on skills rather than job titles and the industries in which you worked, they can also be useful for quite a few other types of candidate. Consider using a functional CV if you are:

- ✓ *A job seeker wanting to change industry.* For example, if you have worked as a human resources assistant for three law firms, this may not mean that you want to work for law firms forever in the future. Job seekers who want to leave military service to enter civilian life also find that functional CVs give them a better chance of getting noticed than if they simply list job titles (ranks) and organization (such as regiment or squadron names). Writing about your skills helps an employer to see past your previous industry and to focus on your skills.

-
- ✓ *A graduate, school leaver, or other candidate with little or no work experience.* Even if you have no work experience to speak of, you can still showcase your skills in an “Accomplishments and skills” section on a functional CV. You could talk about your teamworking skills (e.g. working with other students on projects), research skills (e.g. gathering information for essays or a dissertation), leadership skills (e.g. chairing even a very small committee), budgeting skills (even if your budget was only a few hundreds of pounds) and so on.
 - ✓ *A candidate with significant gaps in your career history* – for example you decided to take time out for personal reasons or were unable to find employment for a period of more than several months.
 - ✓ *A candidate who has changed jobs very frequently*, who might otherwise be perceived by employers as a “job hopper” who lacks commitment. By burying the many jobs you may have held towards the bottom of your CV, you have a better chance of impressing the reader with your skills rather than letting them dwell on the reasons you may have had to switch jobs so many times.

28 Why do I need to be wary of recruitment consultants and headhunters?

Recruitment consultants go by a variety of confusing names – calling themselves executive search firms, headhunters, employment agencies, and so on. They can play a useful role in a job hunt, pointing you in the direction of job openings, helping you to rework your CV, or even occasionally suggesting new career directions in which to apply your skills. But be wary of trusting their advice wholeheartedly. Regardless of how impressive their website or offices, first find out how they make their money.

A small proportion of the top firms are paid on a *retainer* basis. They agree with an employer a fee for pulling together a shortlist of candidates. And they get paid regardless of whether any candidate ends up taking the job or not.

The vast majority of recruitment consultants are paid on a *contingency* basis. They get paid a fee only for placing candidates: that is, when they persuade someone to sign on the dotted line with an

employer. Given that these fees can be up to a third of your annual salary, some of the less scrupulous firms may be tempted by the dollar signs in their eyes to do whatever it takes to get you to accept a job. They may downplay the negatives, say you how wonderful a role is, tell you how much you will enjoy the culture and how great the prospects are. But, as these firms effectively receive commission, take their advice with a pinch of salt. You are looking for the right job; they are looking to put someone – *anyone* – in the role to earn their fee. As such, you must always, always do your own research (see Q100) to ensure that the job really is as good as they say it is.

When you meet a recruitment consultant, ask: “Does your firm work on a contingency or retainer basis?” Retainer consultants will say that they *only* work on a retained basis. Contingency recruiters will typically respond that they do *both*. Asking that single question sends the message to the recruitment consultant that you are wise to their tricks.

Remember also that any particular recruitment consultant will only have certain employers as clients. If you want to find the very best job for yourself, you must at the very least work with several recruitment consultants at once or, ideally, do a fair amount of the research and applying for jobs yourself.

You have been warned.

As these firms effectively
receive commission,
take their advice
with a pinch of salt.

29

How can I handle objections that I'm “overqualified” for a job?

Typically, when employers say that you are “overqualified” for a job, they may be concerned that the role may be insufficiently challenging to keep you interested and motivated to do a good job. Either that or the recruiter thinks that the company probably won't be able to afford to pay whatever you've been earning elsewhere. Being older than the recruiter might expect of the ideal candidate could potentially be a concern too (see Q79).

To handle such concerns at the CV stage, you have two broad strategies:

1. *Omit some of your qualifications or experience.* This could make you appear to have a background that is more in keeping with

what the employer expects of the ideal candidate. Anecdotally, I have received feedback that this is a reasonably successful strategy. I know one candidate who describes his Ph.D. as “research work.” Another candidate talks about his technical skills and some of the smaller projects he has worked on, and “neglects” to mention that he was the IT Director. However, bear in mind you are effectively misleading the employer, which presents not only moral but also possibly legal issues (see Q22 on lying).

2. *Pre-empt their concerns with a positive statement.* Write a short paragraph either on your CV or more likely on your covering letter (see Q34) explaining the reasons you may be looking to step down in your career. Avoid talking about what you are trying to get away from – such as the stress of a high-flying job or that you were made redundant. Focus instead on positive reasons you would be highly motivated and committed to doing the new job well – for example that you want to focus on certain technical aspects of your work or that you most enjoy being part of a smaller team in which you can make a bigger contribution. You could even suggest that the organization would be getting a bargain by employing you!

30

What kind of achievements should I list on my CV?

Employers want to hire candidates who can help them reach their goals. So think about occasions in which you have delivered results that have helped your previous employers to reach their goals, such as when you:

- ✓ increased sales
- ✓ reduced overheads or other costs
- ✓ improved workplace safety
- ✓ identified problems
- ✓ came up with solutions
- ✓ created new products or services
- ✓ improved the efficiency or effectiveness of existing products, services, processes, or systems
- ✓ gained market share
- ✓ met difficult deadlines

- ✓ exceeded targets
- ✓ improved customer satisfaction or reduced numbers of customer complaints
- ✓ managed (and stayed within) a budget
- ✓ hired, coached, and developed outstanding employees.

Of course, to help your achievements stand out as strongly as possible, *quantify them*. Talk about exactly how much money you made or saved, the precise percentage market share you gained, the number of days or hours by which you sped a process up, and so on. Numbers give weight to words.

Finally, consider tailoring your achievements to different employers. Rather than putting the same achievements on every CV, consider which ones might make the greatest impact on different employers. Identical roles in different companies may have correspondingly different requirements. For example, one organization may be struggling to cut costs in the face of new competition while another organization may be fighting to get products out to customers more quickly. Choose the most appropriate achievements accordingly.

To help your
achievements stand
out as strongly as
possible, *quantify them*.

31

How can I make my achievements sound more impressive on a CV?

Employers increasingly want to read not only *what* your achievements were, but also *how* you achieved them. They want to understand the skills (sometimes also called “competencies,” see Q76 and Q78) you demonstrated in reaching organizational goals. As such, it’s a good idea to describe in a handful of sentences not only what you achieved, but also what you did to achieve it.

For example, don’t just write: “Increased net profits by 11.2 per cent, exceeding our sales target by 12.8 per cent.” Try saying: “Increased net profits by 11.2 per cent. Gathered data and identified our most profitable customers. I then communicated our new areas of focus to the team and motivated and coached them to exceed our existing sales target by 12.8 per cent.”

Rather than writing, “We came up with a solution to the technical problems,” try explaining: “When faced with the technical problem, I initiated and led a team brainstorming session to generate possible options. We prioritized possible solutions and identified the best one for resolving the problem.”

Explaining the steps you took to complete your achievements makes you sound more credible. Here are examples of the kinds of verbs you may want to scatter throughout your CV to explain how you achieved your achievements:

✓ *Working with data and ideas*

Synthesized	Analyzed	Compiled
Compared	Outlined	Explained
Programmed	Researched	Calculated
Edited	Evaluated	Communicated
Reviewed	Conceptualized	Interpreted

✓ *Working with people*

Motivated	Negotiated	Helped
Served	Taught	Instructed
Supervised	Advised	Persuaded
Influenced	Spoke (in public)	Discussed
Listened (to)	Mentored	Led

✓ *Working with projects and things*

Assembled	Built	Supervised
Constructed	Managed	Inspected
Repaired	Purchased	Sold
Bought	Delivered	Constructed
Handled	Solved (a problem)	Planned

What are the biggest mistakes candidates make on their CVs?

Recruiters are only human. And when they get together, they like to roll their eyes and laugh at some of the gaffes and blunders that candidates make when sending in their CVs. Here are four mistakes that crop up time and again:

- ✓ *Making pompous claims.* It's fine to talk about having analytical, influencing, or whatever other skills you want to mention. But steer clear of flowery language. Avoid at all costs describing yourself as “a confident self-motivator” or “an ambitious worker with an optimistic and positive attitude.” No matter how blithely you write them, such statements are no more than empty declarations. Be careful of how many empty adjectives you insert in your CV – in particular the profile statement at the beginning of it. Strong candidates prove they have those skills not by using adjectives but by giving brief examples of how they have demonstrated those skills (see Q31).

- ✓ *Submitting a CV with typos and other errors.* I apologize if this sounds obvious but I see far too many CVs – even managerial and professional ones – that lack attention to detail. Use a spell-checker but be careful as software cannot pick up grammatical mistakes – for example using “two” when you want to say “too.” A good tip is to print a physical copy to proof read as most people are better at spotting errors on paper than a computer screen.
- ✓ *Not including start and end dates on jobs.* You may be tempted to leave off dates of employment in order to cover up a lengthy period of unemployment, but unfortunately most employers have caught on to this trick. A better tactic would be to write a functional CV (see Q25) and bury your employment dates at the bottom of your CV.
- ✓ *Not including your current employer’s details.* Perhaps you don’t want to reveal the name of your current organization for fear that this information could get back to your current boss. Unfortunately, recruiters will struggle to judge the caliber of your experience if they don’t know the name of your employer. You would perhaps be right to be guarded about putting your details on the Internet (see Q17); in my experience, however, recruiters are extremely careful to protect the confidentiality of candidates, so not including your employer’s name on your CV is usually overkill.

33 Do gimmicks and CV tricks ever work?

I heard a story of a manager once being sent a pair of dice along with a note saying “Roll the dice and give me the chance.” I was personally once presented with a yoghurt pot that a candidate had written his CV across to persuade me to buy the product (i.e. him).

Gimmicks may grab the attention of recruiters but, 99 times in 100, for the wrong reasons. A plastic toy, a bag of peanuts with a clever note, a video clip, or an amusing photo collage might provide light relief before a recruiting team gets back to the task of trying to find the right candidates to invite to interview. But they are unlikely to get you invited to interviews.

However, that’s not to say that such tactics could never work. Such an approach could *potentially* work if you were applying to work in a creative industry such as advertising or entertainment. All I know is that far greater numbers of jobs are awarded to candidates who apply using more conventional methods, relying instead on the strength of their cleverly chosen words to win over recruiters.

It’s just conceivable that a clever trick might stir a manager into interviewing you. But then it’s also possible that a passing airplane might jettison a suitcase stuffed with bank notes at your very feet.

Gimmicks may grab the
attention of recruiters
but, 99 times in 100,
for the wrong reasons.

The problem is: I've never met a recruiter who has been sufficiently impressed by a gimmick to offer a candidate an interview, let alone a job. But if you wish to try it, good luck, let me know if you succeed – and I shall write about it in the next edition of this book!

34

How can I write a decent covering letter?

Of course all CVs should be sent with a covering letter to help the recruiter understand exactly why you are perfect for the job. The detail of your letter – such as whether you sign off “sincerely yours” or “yours faithfully” – is less important than getting the content right. Ignore these tips at your peril:

- ✓ *Write about your two (or at most three) strongest achievements.* Give brief examples to explain why you believe you are a perfect match for the requirements of the job. Remember that examples make the difference between a strong application and one that is full only of empty, pompous claims (see Q32).
- ✓ *Demonstrate your knowledge of the organization.* Show the recruiter that you are committed enough to have researched the organization (see also Q63) by working into the opening paragraph an important news item, fact, or other observation about them.
- ✓ *Use words and phrases that mirror the job advert.* Organizations spend a lot of time and money agonizing over the right words and phrases for their job adverts in an attempt to capture the values and spirit of their business. Just as you must include as

many of the words from a job advert in your CV as possible (see Q3), you should stuff your covering letter with them too. Paraphrase back to the employer the skills they're looking for and you might just get the job.

- ✓ *Keep your covering letter to a single page.* This shows that you can prioritize. And don't reduce the font size or shrink the margin to get more words in. The very best covering letters leave plenty of white space on the page to allow the enormity of the two or (at most) three achievements on them stand out.
- ✓ *Remember to focus on what you can offer.* Recruiters do not care what you want – they care only about identifying candidates who can fulfill their needs. Phrase your letter accordingly.
- ✓ *Mention salary only if specifically requested to do so.* Include only the information that is asked for and nothing else as, should you get the job, that could later compromise your ability to negotiate a better deal (see Q99). The only exception is if you are overqualified (Q29).

Paraphrase back to
them why you deserve
the job and you might
just get it.


35

Any tips for writing the perfect covering letter?

A strong covering letter can be more time-consuming to write than a great CV. But if you are willing to put the extra effort in, you can significantly increase your chances of being invited to interview.

If you can, use the name of someone specific to open your letter. Referring to the fact that you were told about this opportunity or even encouraged to apply for it by someone known to the recruiter (such as someone within the organization or perhaps a notable contact outside of it) is possibly the most powerful way of getting your application noticed. Of course that means that you have to establish contact with someone that the recruiter knows. Which involves lots of diligent networking first – but I only said this is a powerful way to get noticed, not an easy way. However, if it's a job you dearly want, surely it's worth the effort to do so.

The other way to stand out is by demonstrating some real insight into how the organization works. Many candidates will show that they did their homework by repeating back a couple of facts about



the organization. Most candidates simply repeat back facts they have gleaned from the organization's website or from reading about the organization in the press. However, the best candidates undertake in-depth research about the organization by visiting the organization's premises and talking to insiders such as suppliers, customers, competitors, employees, and ex-employees. They research long and hard to gather enough information to allow them to identify opportunities or issues facing the organization that even the organization itself may only be dimly aware of. And, if you can not only spot an opportunity or issue but also make a sensible suggestion about how you could realistically tackle it, you will stand out for all the right reasons (see also Q63).

36

How should I deal with awkward questions about salary requirements?

Some employers may ask pesky questions about salaries immediately at the CV or application form stage. No point inviting a dream candidate to interview if they want a salary that's twice as much as the employer can afford to pay.

The best advice is not to mention salary – either on your CV or covering letter – unless you are specifically asked to do so. Mentioning too high a salary makes you sound expensive; too low compromises your scope to ask for more (see Q99).

However, you may have no choice but to provide some salary information if an employer specifically requests it. Refusing to answer questions on salary could lead to your application being

dismissed straightaway for being incomplete. In considering how much to reveal, it's worth distinguishing between two types of salary request:

1. Salary *history* or *current* salary. The employer is asking for the precise figure that you currently earn. Depending on the wording of their request, you may also be asked what you earned in previous jobs.
2. Salary *requirements* or *expectations*. The employer wants to understand the approximate salary *range* (from X amount to Y amount) that you would consider working for.

Requests for your salary history or current salary must simply be answered. You earn what you earn – there's no way to deflect the question. However, requests for your requirements or expectations call for some thought on your part, so make sure that you first:

- ✓ Research the market rate for candidates with your skills and experience. Begin by checking the many salary comparison websites that are available. Check with recruitment consultants too and even ask people in your network who work in a similar role for advice. Consider not only the market sector but also factors such as geographic location. State whatever range you uncover on your covering letter or CV – especially if you are currently *underpaid*.
- ✓ Consider whether you are *overpriced* for the role you are interested in. If so, mention your current salary but also that you are willing to negotiate for the right role. Make a short, positive statement along the lines that you are willing to be flexible on salary should you find a challenging role with people you share common values with, or a role that will stretch you and provide future opportunities for career progression, and so on.

Too high a salary makes you sound expensive; too low compromises your scope to ask for more.


37 What's the single best way to find a job?

I have already mentioned that networking produces the best results (see Q9), which surprises many people. They point out that most newspapers and trade publications have hefty sections or even entire supplements devoted to jobs.

Yes, a casual perusal of appointments sections will throw up dozens of jobs. However, organizations sometimes advertise externally even when they already have a favored candidate in mind. The hiring manager (i.e. the manager who has the vacancy in their team to fill) may already have a good idea who he or she wants to hire – someone has already been recommended for the job. Organizational policy may require the company to advertise externally in the interests of “fairness.” But candidates who respond to the advert may in reality have an uphill struggle to beat the favored candidate.

The truth is that many successful candidates receive tip-offs from people within their networks. That's why networking matters. Whether you are applying to a large organization or a tiny one, networking is the single best way to get a job.

But – and there is a but – a job seeker who relies only on *any* one method – even networking – is being over-optimistic. Because the



truth is that there are no guarantees in seeking the right job. Yes, between 50 to 85 per cent of all job hunters get their jobs through some form of networking – receiving perhaps a recommendation, a tip-off, or simply a pointer in the direction of a job advert they hadn't seen. But that means that there are still candidates who find jobs by other means.

While networking pays the biggest dividends, don't get too blinkered in your approach. Do respond to selected advertised vacancies that match your skills and experience. Research some companies that you might want to work for, and write some speculative applications too. Get in touch with recruitment consultants. Tap an entirely different part of your network – the football team you play with, the parents of the kids your children play with, your church, your local neighborhood watch. Find a job hunting buddy, join a job seekers' support group – or even set one up yourself. Target smaller firms if you have been trying larger firms or vice versa.

When banging your head against a brick wall is only giving you a sore head, it's time to think of some other way to break down that wall between you and your dream job.

38 How can I cover up a period of unemployment on a CV?

First of all, being unemployed or having gone through a period of unemployment is no longer as damaging to your chances of finding a job as it used to be (see Q5). Increasing numbers of organizations are making job cuts and releasing hundreds or even thousands of highly talented and motivated candidates on the job market. Equally, increasing numbers of candidates are voluntarily deciding to take time out between jobs.

You have two broad strategies for dealing with a period of unemployment. If you have since found a job, you could potentially try leaving your CV open to interpretation by removing any mention of precise dates from it. For example, if you left one job in February 2006 and found a new one later that year in September, you could write:

2006 – present Technical Manager Shanks Engineering Services

2004 – 2006 Senior Technician Fox Consumer Products

2001 – 2004 Technician Garrett & Jones Home Supplies

You could take the risk and hope not to be quizzed about the precise dates if you were to be asked to interview. More often than not, you may get away with it too.

However, the more honest approach would be to put a positive slant on any period of unemployment. Could you say that you took time out to learn a new skill, deal with family obligations, write a novel, travel overseas, do some part-time volunteering work, or engage in some independent study?

To put any such period in the most positive light possible, explain in a single sentence on your CV how your time away from paid employment made you a better worker. Think about the skills you picked up or perhaps talk about how it allowed you to return to the workforce with a renewed sense of motivation, and so on.

Unscrupulous candidates might claim to have engaged in a period of independent study when they in fact did nothing but watch television. But they risk being found out if an interviewer were to ask them detailed questions about what they studied, why they chose the subject, and what they got out of it. There is a thin divide between putting a positive spin on your time and telling outright lies – but the ultimate choice and risks are yours to take.

Put a positive slant
on any period of
unemployment.

39 What can I avoid disclosing on my CV?

A CV differs from an employer's own application form in that you are free to include only whatever will make the most favorable impression. It is a *sales* document to push you, the product. You are not obliged to include any of the following (and in fact I would strongly recommend you do not include them):

- ✓ firings, demotions, or other forms of early contract termination
- ✓ personal differences – either with your manager or colleagues
- ✓ criminal convictions, arrests, or private legal issues
- ✓ bankruptcy or financial problems
- ✓ having dropped out of school or university
- ✓ needing to find a job because you were unable to make enough money from your own business venture
- ✓ illnesses from which you have now recovered
- ✓ disabilities that do not prevent you from doing the job
- ✓ previous problems with substance abuse.

Neither should you give reasons for leaving a job unless you are specifically asked for one. If you give the reasons you left one job, you would need to give reasons for every job for the sake of consistency – and that can distract the reader away from the achievements, skills, and experience that you want them to focus on.

40

What's the best way to kick off a campaign of networking?

The good news is that the first step is very easy. Simply make a list of everyone you know – yes *everyone*.

Take a piece of paper and scribble down the names of everyone you can think of down the left-hand side of the page. Consider the names of current and previous colleagues, customers and clients, suppliers, accountants, lawyers, advisors, and people you know through professional or voluntary associations. Think too about life outside of work by including people from social, community, sporting groups, or religious organizations. What about people from school or university, military service, and even neighbors with whom you are on friendly terms? Don't neglect family or other relatives too.

You may be tempted to shorten the brainstorming process of coming up with a thorough list of names. You may believe that your work colleagues are more likely to have contacts. But consider that your family and close friends are more likely to *want* to help you. And, until you ask, you simply cannot know who your

nearest and dearest may know. For example, I recently found out that my 90-year-old grandmother is a close friend of the mother of the CEO of one of Hong Kong's largest banks. You simply cannot tell who they know until you ask.

The next step is to prioritize your master list of names based on two criteria:

- ✓ *Likely importance.* For example, if you are looking for a job as a copy writer, then people in similar roles may have more relevant contacts and information than people who are working in other roles or industries.
- ✓ *Strength of your relationship.* A close friend is more likely to have time and enthusiasm to listen to your request and perhaps agree to multiple phone calls and meetings with you than someone you would describe more as an acquaintance.

To prioritize your list of names, draw up a simple table and allocate between one and three stars to each name depending on importance. Then allocate between one and three ticks to each name for relationship strength. Here's an example:

<i>Name</i>	<i>Importance</i>	<i>Relationship</i>
John Bond	★	✓✓
Narinder Ali	★★	✓
Mary Maxwell	★	✓✓✓
Alex Tsoi	★★★	✓

Once you've done that, you're ready to pick up the telephone.

41 What's the best way to introduce myself when I'm networking?

Once you have decided whom to approach (see Q40), you must prepare to introduce yourself in a precise and articulate, yet friendly manner. It's worth writing out what you plan to say in the form of a script, which may need to include:

1. A single sentence description of your profession or the type of work you do.
2. Mention of how you got this person's name. For instance: "I got your name from Erica Marsh, from your days back at Paragon Consulting."
3. Your current situation, for example whether you are looking for a job or merely considering a career change.
4. What you would like this person to do for you in terms of providing perhaps information or referrals to other people.

Putting it together, your outline script might read as follows:

“My name is _____ and I currently work as a _____ . I got your name from _____ who knows you from _____. S/he suggested that I talk to you because I am currently _____. Would you have a few minutes to help either now or at a more convenient time?”

Hopefully they will say “Yes”. Either now or at a later date, your goal is to secure a few minutes with them either over the telephone or in person. But what do you then ask?

In considering what you would like from the other person, remember that networking is broadly used for two reasons – either to gather information and referrals to other people or to raise your profile (see Q10). Whatever you are trying to achieve, you must have a goal in mind and be able to turn it into a short and specific question to kick off your discussion. Here are some examples:

- ✓ “I’ve got a job interview with Hanover Technologies next week. Would you be able to refer me to anyone (e.g. supplier, competitor, distributor, ex-employee, current manager) who knows either about the firm or the energy sector in general?”
- ✓ “I’m thinking about changing career direction and becoming a social worker – would you have a half-hour to talk me through your experiences of it and what you like or dislike about the job?”

-
- ✓ “I’m looking for a new role as a manufacturing project manager. Do you have any suggestions of the right recruitment consultants to approach?”

Prepare to introduce
yourself in a precise
and articulate,
yet friendly manner.

42 How can I ensure networking conversations go smoothly?

Once you have written out your introductory script, there's really nothing to stop you from picking up the telephone and making that call. Here are some tips for making the most from your networking conversations:

- ✓ *Ask a person you know to get in touch with their contact first.* Rather than simply phoning a new contact out of the blue, you might ask the person you know to phone or send an email to the person you would like to speak to. Alternatively, ask your contact for the new contact's email address and send an email notifying them that you will call.
- ✓ *Establish when would be a good time to talk.* Your call may have interrupted some important or urgent task of theirs. After introducing yourself, check when would be a good time to talk.

- ✓ *Say something positive about each person.* Ask the people you know to tell you something positive about each new contact you wish to approach. You can then truthfully paraphrase that feedback and hopefully make any new contacts feel valued and useful. “Sam said that you’re incredibly well connected in the world of merchandising and that I’d be foolish not to speak to you first.”
- ✓ *Help your contact to consider your request in broad terms.* While having a single, clear question is a good start in approaching a new contact, be ready with further questions in case your contact should draw a blank. For example, if someone says “I don’t know of any such vacancies,” be ready with two or three suggestions to illustrate different ways he or she could be helpful, such as asking for the names of other people you could approach.
- ✓ *Forestall negative responses.* Many people’s first response to your questions may be: “I don’t know.” Suggest that you get back in touch at a later date once they have had time to ponder your request. Don’t end the conversation suggesting that they call or email you – you must suggest when you will call them so you remain in control and can chase them up when necessary.
- ✓ *Express your genuine appreciation.* Always remember that no one is *obliged* to help you. Thank your contact sincerely for their help (see also Q55 on writing thank-you notes).

Always remember that no one is *obliged* to help you.

43 I want to get started networking – who should I call first?

When you start to make your phone calls, you only get one chance with each person in your network. Ultimately you want every one of the people in your network to become an advocate for you – to point you in the direction of possible job openings, contact you with insider tips, and even recommend you for jobs.

Don't start by calling the most influential person on your list. Begin more gently and hone your networking skills with some of the people who might be less important, but with whom you have strong relationships. To put it another way: practice on friends who won't mind if you mess up. That way, even if you aren't as articulate and persuasive as you could be, you will not be closing any doors. If you have prioritized the contacts within your network (see Q40), pick a half-dozen people with whom you have "three tick" relationships that rate as only either "one star" or "two stars" on the importance scale. These "three tick" people are your friends – they will

forgive you if you don't quite get your introduction and conversation right straightaway.

Once you have spoken to this initial batch of people, spend a few moments reflecting on what you did well and what you could have done better. How well did your introductory spiel go down? Did you manage to get any referrals? Be tough with yourself so that when you do approach your most important "three star" contacts, you can present yourself in the very best light possible.

Practice on friends
who won't mind if
you mess up.

44 Telephone or face-to-face – which is better when networking?

The telephone was invented barely 130 years ago. People have been meeting up face-to-face and exchanging ideas in person for thousands and thousands of years. Doesn't take the smartest kid in the class to figure out which delivers better results when networking.

Recall that networking can be used primarily either for *information and referral gathering* or for *profile raising* (see Q10). As such, use the telephone when you need only to make fairly straightforward information requests (e.g. “Do you know the name of the hiring manager within the finance function?”).

If you are asking for complex or more detailed information, you won't get very good results over the telephone alone. The people you contact are much more likely to want to help when they can see you face-to-face and decide whether they trust you and feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and possibly referrals to other people with you.

Hi-touch beats hi-tech every time.

When it comes to raising your profile too, you can't expect to impress people with your enthusiasm and humor and professionalism over the telephone anywhere near as well as you could by spending even as little as ten minutes with them in person. If you want them to remember and recommend you, they need a face to go with the name. Hi-touch beats hi-tech every time.

As such, pursue face-to-face meetings with your more important contacts – definitely your “three star” contacts and perhaps some of your “two star” ones too (see Q40). Call and ask: “Would you have ten minutes to meet up?” And you should literally ask for only ten minutes. A busy person could legitimately decline your offer to meet if you wanted a half-hour of their time. But hardly anyone could reasonably refuse to meet when you only want a mere ten minutes of their time.

Suggest too that you could meet them for a coffee before work or a drink in the evening. Say that you would be willing to visit their offices or to meet near their home. Find a way to make it as convenient for your contacts as possible. The more choices you give them, the harder you make it for them to turn you down.

45 What are the “rules of engagement” for face-to-face networking meetings?

Don't be taken in by the seeming informality of networking meetings. Even if the contact you are meeting is a close friend of a very close friend of yours, you must still make an effort to impress. Hold fast to these pointers:

- ✓ *Dress in business attire.* Even if you know that the person you are meeting will be dressed casually, make an effort to dress at least moderately smartly. If you want people to remember you and possibly recommend you to their contacts when they hear of job opportunities, you must present yourself as hireable in every respect.
- ✓ *Research and prepare before each meeting.* Remember that people are meeting with you at *your* request; you must set the agenda for the meeting. Prepare broad, open-ended questions to encourage

your contact to talk openly, come up with suggestions, and propose further people to speak to who may recommend you if they come across suitable job openings. Be certain you have enough questions to avoid awkward silences in which the contact might start to think that you're wasting his or her time.

- ✓ *Respect the time limit that you agreed for the meeting.* Watching the time and offering to finish the meeting when you have had your allotted minutes demonstrates that you're the kind of person who keeps to agreements. If you said ten minutes, you must offer to stop at ten minutes. In practice, many contacts will give you a bit more of their time. However, whether the discussion goes beyond whatever you agreed initially is up to the contact, not you.
- ✓ *Thank contacts for their time and effort.* To show that you have taken on board what they have said, paraphrase back one of the key insights they have shared with you – for example, “I’ll look into those three companies you suggested” or “I’ll give your contact at that company a call next week and let you know how I get on.”

Preparation is key. But remember also to think about conveying your enthusiasm, professionalism, and likeability. Your goal must be as much to leave a positive impression on each contact as to mine them for information.

Remember people are meeting with you at *your* request; you must set the agenda for the meeting.

46

How can I overcome nerves and shyness when networking?

For starters, let's be clear on what networking is *not*. For many people, the notion of networking conjures up images of cocktail parties and conferences, of “working the room,” of walking into a crowded space and having to interrupt conversations to introduce yourself. Thankfully, you can rest assured that networking for job seekers (as opposed to, say, for entrepreneurs trying to sell a business concept or product) is done either over the telephone or by pre-arranged meetings on a one-to-one basis. Schmoozing at cocktail parties is not necessary!

Here are some pointers on overcoming any initial anxiety or shyness when networking:

- ✓ *Begin networking with people you know well.* Hone your networking skills with friends and close acquaintances first (see also Q43).

- ✓ *Focus on telephone networking at first.* The advantage of networking over the telephone as opposed to face-to-face is that you don't need to worry about eye contact and body language. You can read your initial introductory script (see Q43) to people verbatim and prepare the questions you may wish to ask – again to be read out almost verbatim. However, you must monitor the tone of your voice to sound calm and friendly. No matter how nervous you may feel, force your face into a smile as smiling changes the tone of your voice and makes you sound more enthusiastic than you may feel. Many job seekers also report feeling more confident when they stand up rather than sit when making calls.
- ✓ *Take a supporter to initial face-to-face meetings.* Before meeting your more important (“three star”) contacts, set up some practice meetings with marginally important (“one star”) contacts (see Q40). At these practice meetings, tell your contacts that you will be bringing an acquaintance who is also interested in the same topic. Let your friend lead the first few meetings and simply soak up the atmosphere until you feel more comfortable with the notion of meeting new contacts alone.
- ✓ *Suggest informal settings for initial face-to-face meetings.* Formal meetings in people's offices can be considerably more daunting than conversations over a morning muffin or an afternoon coffee.
- ✓ *Practice, practice, practice.* Honestly, I used to be so worried about speaking to strangers when I was at school that I would sometimes go hide in the locker rooms to avoid doing it. But the more people you meet, the less it will continue to bother you.

47

What are good questions to ask when networking?

If you are contemplating a *change of career* and wish to learn more about what that new career is like, consider some of these questions:

- ✓ What is the day-to-day work like? What do you most enjoy about it? What do you dislike? What are your frustrations? To what extent do you work alone or with a team? What kind of pressures do you experience?
- ✓ How did you get into this field? How easy or difficult is it to break into this career? How tough is the competition for jobs? How often do people in this field tend to move around?
- ✓ What are typical working patterns within this field? What is the lifestyle like? How much travel is required?
- ✓ What are the financial prospects to begin with? What are the typical financial rewards for people in this field three, five, and ten years after they start in it?
- ✓ Who are the main employers in this field? What are the

must-have skills, qualifications, or experience that employers look for – and are there ever exceptions? Who else could you suggest that I talk to in order to learn more about this career?

No matter how desperate
your need, this is a
conversation, not an
interrogation.

If you are *seeking help in pursuit of jobs* either within an industry or a specific, named company see also Q63 for further questions to ask. Whether you are considering a career change or seeking help to land a particular job, be aware that there are many questions you *could* ask. However, be sure to get the tone of your questioning right. You should sound interested and professional, asking questions and allowing the other person time to think about their answers if necessary, but at the same time being ready to veer into chit-chat if the other person drives the conversation that way. No matter how desperate your need, this is a conversation, not an interrogation – remember that.

48 What are the worst mistakes to make when networking?

Networking delivers job results. Meet with more people and you will either hear of more tip-offs for vacancies or even be recommended to hiring managers for positions. Plus, speak to more people and you will learn more about your chosen field, which will help you to answer subsequent interview questions with greater aplomb.

However, here are four sure-fire ways to go wrong when networking:

1. *Overstepping personal boundaries.* Never call people you do not know at home unless you have specifically been instructed to. Never use the name of someone to make a connection unless you have been given permission to do so. Make either mistake and bang goes the relationship.
2. *Failing to manage your impact.* No matter how despondent or desperate you may feel about your job search, ensure you do not convey this to anyone you meet. You need your contacts to see you at your best so that they feel able to recommend

you to other people for information or even possible job opportunities. By all means vent your frustrations with close friends and family, but always project an enthusiastic, positive, and professional demeanor to the people who may be able to get you a job.

3. *Giving up the initiative.* At the end of any conversation, always say how *you* will follow up. If you send an email, state that *you* will follow up with a telephone call. Similarly, if you leave a message on voicemail, always say that you will call back. The problem with putting the onus of responsibility on your contacts to call or email you back is that if they forget (and they will forget), you risk provoking them by chasing them. Telling your contacts what *you* will do allows you to chase them as and when necessary.
4. *Forgetting that you are not entitled to anyone's help.* No one is obliged to help you. People will only help you if they want to. Make people feel guilty and they'll simply put the phone down on you. Remember to be considerate, show respect, and tell people how grateful you are for their generosity.

Always project an
enthusiastic, positive,
and professional
demeanor.

49

How else can I increase the number of people I have in my network?

While networking over the telephone and selectively face-to-face with important people usually generates sufficient numbers of referrals to keep most job seekers busy, you may wish to vary how you spend your time. You might also wish to try some of these suggestions:

- ✓ *Become active in associations.* People are much more open to being approached when they are not dealing with the urgent demands of their daily work. Have a pocketful of calling cards (see Q50) at the ready and mingle with random people – you never can tell who might be useful (see Q51).
- ✓ *Write to new contacts directly.* Surprisingly, many people are amenable to being contacted directly. If you write to someone and beg for a job, you are unlikely to find anyone willing to take your call. However, if you can find a good reason for

getting in touch – perhaps you heard a speech they gave at a conference, read a quote of theirs in an article that interested you, or have simply heard of their reputation – you may find that a few carefully constructed paragraphs praising them may be enough to persuade people to take a short phone call from you.

- ✓ *Use the Internet selectively.* The amount of information on the Internet is immense and can be quite overwhelming. However, bloggers who write about their target industries can be surprisingly helpful if you decide to get in touch. There may also be industry-specific forums in which current, past, and prospective employees often congregate to discuss their work. Joining such forums to eavesdrop or even leave messages yourself may allow you to pick up useful information too.
- ✓ *Do voluntary work.* Volunteering can be a good way to meet people who share similar values. Do not volunteer with the sole aim of networking for a job, as the other volunteers you meet are likely to feel used. However, if you *genuinely* share the same passion for a cause, you may find that, as you meet people and tell your fellow volunteers your story, they may offer to help you anyway.

Should I get a personal calling card?

I would say that every job seeker should have a personalized calling card. If you plan to network and meet people in person, you have no excuse for not having one. There are now machines in shopping malls that allow you to print a batch of reasonable quality cards for little more than the price of a couple of coffees. Many websites also allow you to order surprisingly inexpensive, professional-quality cards too – simply enter the words “business card home print” into your favorite search engine to find them.

Such a card should at minimum include your name, *personal* contact telephone numbers (home and mobile), and a *personal* email address – by *personal* I mean the contact numbers and email address that belong to you rather than a current or previous employer. Your home address is not necessary – women candidates leery of strangers, for example, often prefer not to give addresses out.

If you are currently employed and have a business card given to you by your employer, chances are that the card will contain your work number and work email address. Imagine the trouble that could cause if a contact or potential employer were to ring you. And remember that many organizations routinely monitor work

emails to make sure employees are not sending or receiving inappropriate messages. Your employer could easily decide that using your company's computer and resources to send out copies of your CV and conduct your job hunt constitute a dismissible offence.

Finally, consider whether to add a phrase that describes your experience or field of expertise. For example, if you are certain that you only want to be considered for jobs within the hospitality sector, feel free to say so. Or if you are only willing to work as an executive assistant, add a phrase that states what you can offer. However, be very clear of what you want from your next job as you could otherwise limit your opportunities.

51 What's the best way to network at conferences and cocktail parties?

While networking at events such as trade fairs, conferences, seminars, and even social events such as cocktail parties is not *essential* (see Q46), it can be helpful. Here are some tips for making the most from your mingling:

- ✓ Prepare your “spoken logo.” “Hello, I’m Chris, I _____.” Think about how you plan to describe yourself. Do you want to describe yourself by way of your job title (e.g. “I’m an accountant”) or your broader work (e.g. “I work in finance”) or your aspirations (e.g. “I’m here to learn more about the publishing industry”) or something else entirely? Consider how you can capture what you do in a *single sentence*.
- ✓ Prepare icebreaking questions to ask. Before attending any event, prepare a handful of broad, opening questions that you can use to start a conversation with anyone. Perhaps mention

either the event (e.g. “how did you come to hear about this event?” and “what brings you to this conference?”) or the hosts (e.g. “how do you know Richard and Sarah?”)

- ✓ Show a genuine interest in others. Spend *at least* five minutes with each person you meet. Take the time to learn about their interests, challenges at work, and views on life. Look for common points of interest – perhaps through your work or interests outside of work. Your aim when networking at any event is to focus on quality, not quantity – on having a few genuine discussions that will allow you to follow up rather than many superficial conversations with people who will forget you immediately.
- ✓ Greet people by name. If a name is unfamiliar to you, ask how to pronounce it and repeat it back until you get it right. People appreciate it and will warm to you if you take the time to understand how to pronounce their names correctly. And then use their name at least twice in the first few minutes and again when you say good-bye to leave them with a positive impression of you.
- ✓ Ask other people for their cards. Giving your card out cedes control to the people you meet. If they do not contact you and you do not have their contact details, how are you going to get in touch with them?

Your aim when
networking at any
event is to focus on
quality, not quantity.

52 How else can I use people within my network as a resource?

Your network is an invaluable resource for gathering information and raising your profile. However, you should also approach select members of your network to act as sounding boards in your job search.

Many experts agree that running a job-seeking campaign is like running a business. It requires a professional, planned approach. You need to analyze the market (through networking and online data gathering), understand the strengths and weaknesses of the product (i.e. look at your personal strengths and limitations), write some sales literature (your CV) and get it in front of customers (employers) in the hope that one will offer you the right price (salary) for your product (you).

If you are the boss or CEO of your career, consider asking a couple of people to become your non-executive advisors. Such people

may be able to keep you motivated to put in the hours; they may ask questions to ensure you are spending your time on the right tasks. Perhaps they can act as sounding boards on any difficult decisions you need to make and provide practical assistance by running mock interviews with you too.

Consider not only close friends but also work acquaintances whose judgment and opinions you respect. When weighing up whom to approach, consider two essential questions:

- ✓ Is this someone whose views I trust and take seriously?
- ✓ Do I believe this person will give me honest feedback and advice even though at times I may not want to hear it?

Approach the people you are considering (see Q41 on drafting a networking script) and explain why you have approached them. Suggest the time commitment you would like from them – one advisor may only be able to spare ten minutes by telephone once a week while another might be willing to meet with you once a month over dinner. You may be pleasantly surprised how delighted most people are to be asked and how often they say yes.

I cannot stress the importance of having advisors too much. You may pride yourself on your independence and smarts; perhaps you feel uncomfortable about asking for help. But having good advisors who get to know you deeply can provide you with insights and feedback that others in your network cannot. Trust me on this one. Please.

53

How can I ensure my CV isn't rubbish?

Your “non-executive advisors” (see Q52) should be able to make some suggestions on improving your core CV (i.e. the one you develop prior to tailoring it for specific vacancies). Testing your core CV on friends and colleagues can help, but the problem is that they already know you and may be reluctant to be as critical about it as you need them to be. The only way to test the readability and impact of your core CV is therefore to have it read by someone who actually recruits in your field.

I would suggest working through the following steps to get a credible second opinion:

1. Ask friends within your network for the names of contacts who recruit people with a similar level of experience to you. Rather than getting in touch directly with each recruiter, ask your friends to forward your CV on to them.
2. Get your friends to ask the recruiters to read your CV and provide a description of what they see as both the strengths and shortcomings of the CV. Ask your friends to tell their contacts to be totally frank in assessing it. The recruiters should be encouraged to look for more negatives than positives and tear

the CV to pieces if necessary – after all, you can get positive strokes from your mother.

3. Ask your friends for feedback and persuade them to be brutally honest in relaying all of the comments – especially the negative ones – to you.
4. Repeat the process several times with different recruiters to get a wide range of opinions on how to improve your CV.

It's time consuming to get feedback in this way – indirectly through your contacts' contacts rather than dealing directly with them yourself. But the key point here is to get feedback from people who can judge you only from what they can read about you. But, above all, listen to the feedback that you get and revamp your CV accordingly.

Have your CV read by
someone who actually
recruits in your field.

54 What should I do if my networking is not generating referrals?

Networking is a tried and tested method for finding a job. Thousands of people do it all the time and find that it works. If you find that your networking efforts are not generating results, consider Q48 on some of the commonest mistakes that job seekers make when networking.

However, if you are still unsure about what you're doing wrong, consider setting up a role play scenario with one of your "non-executive advisors" (see Q52) or any other person who might be willing to practice with you. Consider whether the blockage seems to be with your telephone or face-to-face networking, and set up an appropriate role play.

If you have strong relationships with some of the contacts you have spoken to, consider also approaching them for feedback too. However, in approaching real people for feedback on how you

came across when networking with them, you have to encourage them to give you candid feedback. Emphasize that you are trying to understand what's not working and reassure them that you will not argue with their opinions. Whether you are gathering feedback from one of your advisors after a role play or a real contact about how you came across in a previous phone call or meeting, ask questions such as:

- ✓ To what extent did you feel comfortable with my overall approach? What could I have done differently to have made it easier for you to help me?
- ✓ To what extent did I introduce myself and explain what I was looking for in an easy-to-understand and professional manner?
- ✓ How appropriate was my tone (and body language, if you met in person)? What impression did I leave you with?
- ✓ What could I have done differently to make you feel comfortable enough to give me referrals to other people?

The tricky bit is not asking the questions but impressing upon the other person that you really do want their uncensored views – the harsher the better. Of course, if they do tell you what you did wrong, be certain you do not argue back or become defensive. Bite your tongue, accept that you must have done something wrong to have left the wrong impression on them, and express only your thanks for their time and honesty. And then learn from what they have said.

55

How can I raise my profile within my network?

Remember that networking has two purposes (see Q10) – not only to gather information but also to raise your profile. The point of raising your profile is to ensure that as many people as possible keep you in mind should they come across suitable job opportunities.

Every single conversation or meeting you have will raise your profile briefly. However, people have short memories. No matter how enthusiastically they say that they will look out for any opportunities, they may well forget. They have their own jobs to do too, remember. As such, you need to *maintain* your visibility within your network.

Three tips for maintaining your profile:

- ✓ *Start by handwriting a thank-you note.* Yes, you read that right. Pick up a pen and write a personal, not perfunctory message. Buy some elegant stationery and thank each person you telephone or meet, mentioning a memorable fact about your meeting, or say how they specifically helped you. Given the enormous volume of emails and business correspondence that most people get bombarded with, your handwritten letter will

be so much more impactful. Include your personal calling card (see Q50) and, if you have used that person's name in a letter or email to someone else, include a copy of that too.

- ✓ *Keep track of your contacts.* Write up notes after each phone call or meeting to capture any details about both your contacts' work and lives outside of work. Keep track of the fact that their family is moving house or that their daughter has just won the science prize at school. Doing so will allow you to refer to such details seamlessly in the future, facilitating future discussions when you speak again.
- ✓ *Look for reasons to initiate contact.* Look out for mentions of an individual's company in the news and get back in touch if it seems appropriate. Post articles or clippings that may be of interest. Perhaps even just send an email if you come across someone with a similar background or who somehow reminds you of another contact. In practice, you may not have time to maintain a high level of visibility with all of your contacts, in which case prioritize your time to put more effort into keeping in touch with the people who may be of more importance to you.

The results you achieve with networking are in direct proportion to both the size and depth of your network. The more people you encounter that warm to you and remember you, the more likely you will be to find a job that is right for you.

Pick up a pen and thank
each person you
telephone or meet.

56 Is it worth sending speculative applications?

For the most part, speculative applications are junk mail by another name. I received one the other day, which I kept just to be able to answer this question. The envelope was addressed to “The manager at Talentspace” and the covering letter began with “To whom it may concern.”

The first problem of sending a letter to an organization without even having the name of a person to address it to is that your letter may not end up in the right hands. If there is more than one manager, the letter could easily get passed to a manager who is not involved in hiring. And of course they will throw it in a bin straightaway.

The other problem is that anything addressed to “the managing director” or opening with “Dear Sir/Madam” says that you can’t be bothered. Such letters try to tell the reader what the candidate can offer. But employers are too busy to care what you can offer. Employers only care about what you can do for them.

But let’s assume you manage to get the name of the right person to

send your application to. I'm afraid that's not good enough either. Each employer wants to understand why you want to work for them rather than anyone else. Every single organization in the world believes itself to be unique. Even if two organizations have identical numbers of employees, compete for the same customers in the same town, and even work out of the same office building, each will *believe* itself to be different. Unless you pander to those differences, you will not catch their attention.

Neither is finishing by saying "I look forward to hearing from you soon" good enough. That assumes that an employer will take the time to call you. Assume that the person you have written to has a hundred different, more important tasks to do that week and you won't go far wrong. Remember that you should always finish by mentioning that *you* will call the employer.

For the most part,
speculative applications
are junk mail by
another name.

57

So how do I make an *effective* speculative application?

The best way to write a decent speculative application is by having a worthwhile point to make – either a comment that will show your appreciation for the named individual you are writing to or show them how you could make a difference to their organization. Force the named individual to read the entire letter because your letter is tailored entirely to their particular interests and concerns.

For example, I know plenty of people who have got jobs in the ultra-competitive worlds of film and television by writing to individual producers and having something to say about features they made.

I once wrote to the chairman of a firm about an article he'd written for a newspaper – I ended up being invited in for a conversation and ended up getting a job.

If you don't have any insight or comment to offer, don't bother

getting in touch. Go back to your online or desk research; talk to people in your network until you uncover something to say.

The strongest speculative applications mention names of people you both have in common, e.g. “*NAME* and I were talking about *TOPIC* and she suggested that I contact you because *REASON*.” Then call a few days later to speak to the person’s secretary to schedule a time to make an official follow-up call.

Here are the essential steps for making effective speculative applications:

1. Research an organization until you have something worth saying (see Q64).
2. Find the name of an appropriate, named individual to write to.
3. Compose a letter stating your point of view. Say something controversial, pique their interest, make a suggestion that could benefit the organization, and mention that you will call to seek their *advice*, rather than ask for a job.
4. Follow up with a phone call and aim to set up a meeting to ask for information and advice. Treat the meeting as an information gathering meeting rather than an interview.
5. Afterwards, send a thank-you note and a CV tailored to this target organization. Mention how much you enjoyed the meeting and how much you would like to work for the organization. And then call again to see if you’ve made enough of an impact to get offered a job or at least to be able to add this person to your growing network.

58 Should I send speculative applications to line managers or HR?

Definitely, definitely send speculative applications directly to line managers. If line managers are sufficiently impressed by the ideas you raise in a letter, they may agree to meet with you out of curiosity. If they like you enough, they will find a way to give you a job.

Avoid at all costs being routed through the personnel or human resources department. They are gatekeepers, paid to keep junk CVs and covering letters off the desks of busy line managers. They may say that they will “keep you on file,” which usually means filing your details along with the remains of a sandwich packet and an empty Coke can in their waste paper basket. Even if you do somehow, miraculously manage to strike up a rapport with someone in human resources, it won’t get you very far. No matter how much human resources like you, they do not have the power to force a line manager into giving you a job. Human resources are there to serve line managers – not the other way around.

Oh, it *almost* goes without saying that you need to have the name of someone specific to send your application to rather than just hoping that “the Managing Director,” “the branch manager,” “the duty manager” or whoever will be sufficiently intrigued to read your letter – without a name, they won’t (see also Q56).

59 How can I get the job I want when I don't have the right qualifications?

Employers are often swamped by far more applications than they would like. As such, their job adverts may stipulate certain conditions, such as that candidates must have a particular qualification or level of educational attainment. They may occasionally even insist on certain grades if they need to cut down the number of applicants.

This can be problematic if you're a job seeker who can do the job but have learnt how to do it through a less-conventional career route. For example, you may work in an accounting department but never have taken the accounting exams. I once worked with a candidate who had taught himself programming languages and how to use the software to design complex websites, but was being held back in his job hunt because he didn't have the paper qualifications proving his competence that some employers required.

However, all is not lost. Employers frequently give jobs to people they trust – people they know in person. In such cases, your first action should be to talk to the people in your network. Describe your situation and pose the question: “Can you think of anyone who is doing the job I’d like who got in without the _____?” Insert into the blank the particular qualification or requisite numbers of years’ experience or other factor that employers seem to be demanding.

Employers frequently give
jobs to people they trust –
people they know
in person.

For a small number of jobs – for example if you want to become a chartered accountant, a medical doctor, or a surveyor, to name but a few – you may find it nearly impossible to get in without the right qualifications. However, in many other professions, you may find that the qualifications are important, but not always necessary, especially if you can find someone who can put in a good word for you. So pursue the networking route and use targeted speculative applications (see Q57) to get in front of line managers. It is often human resources departments who lay down tough rules with regards to qualifications and/or experience. Line managers are more concerned with finding candidates who can do the job rather than whether they have the right pieces of paper to their names.

60

Should I bother applying to small organizations?

At least half of all the job opportunities available to you will be in small and medium-sized businesses with fewer than 250 employees. Of course, the precise statistics will vary from region to region, country to country, industry sector to industry sector. But whatever the precise numbers, consider that around *half of the job market lies in organizations you may never have heard of.*

Here are four good reasons to spend at least some of your time targeting smaller organizations:

- ✓ Smaller organizations tend not to have HR departments that could otherwise screen you out.
- ✓ It's easy to identify the line manager with the authority to hire – it's the boss. Which makes it much easier for you to find the name of the right person to get in touch with.
- ✓ Smaller organizations rarely advertise. When they need to fill a vacancy, they are much more likely to consider candidates that have been referred or recommended to them.

-
- ✓ Smaller organizations are much more flexible than larger ones. If you can convince the boss that you are a strong candidate, the organization may be willing to *create* a role for you.

In addition, surveys of the top companies to work for are often disproportionately represented by small firms. Small firms often have more of a “family feel” to them; everyone knows everyone else’s name and the people are often happier. So consider whether a smaller firm might be right for you too.

61 What can I do if I need to provide a reference but my boss and I don't get on?

If you had a difference of opinion with your boss or ex-boss, you may be worried that he or she may decide to settle the score by writing either a slightly unsympathetic reference or a downright damning one on you.

The good news is that you may never be asked to provide a reference. Unless you're applying for a job in a sensitive field (e.g. education, care work, security, and so on), many smaller organizations simply don't get around to checking references (see also Q60 for other reasons to target small organizations). Even some larger organizations may not check references.

But if you do need a reference, you could talk to your boss. Pick up

the telephone and defuse the situation by apologizing or appealing to their sense of fair play or guilt – whatever it takes to ensure they will write at least a neutral reference for you.

Alternatively, seek a reference from someone who was not your immediate boss. Consider other senior individuals within your organization who might be able to speak about your work in a positive fashion. If you can't think of a more senior person within your organization, perhaps seek a reference from a key client or supplier you had considerable dealings with. This is not *strictly* misleading so long as you are not asked directly by an employer to provide a reference from your last boss – although perhaps it is entering a morally grey area. So long as the instructions regarding your references stipulate only that you seek a reference from someone who knows your work well, you are on safe ground. Of course, you could lie – but that's not only immoral but illegal, and I wouldn't wish to be you should you be found out. But I'm not here to judge and I leave the ultimate choice (and risk) to you.

Okay, so what does all this mean? To spell it out, you have four broad options to choose from:

- ✓ Focus your efforts on smaller organizations that tend not check references.
- ✓ Avoid applying for jobs of a sensitive nature.
- ✓ Defuse your boss by saying you're sorry or whatever else it might take.
- ✓ Ask another manager for a reference.

62 Is it dishonest to influence my referees?

I think there's an important difference between *influencing* your referees and merely *briefing* them. The former implies a somewhat morally suspect attempt to encourage them to speak more positively about you than they might otherwise want to. However, briefing your referees is simply good practice. Prompting them about some of the genuinely positive situations in which they have observed you is an essential part of maximizing your chances of securing a good job.

Here are some thoughts on how to prepare your referees effectively:

1. *Make a list of possible referees.* While one referee might be able to verify employment dates and/or salary, another might be better placed to talk about your responsibilities, performance, and character. You may need to approach different referees depending on what each employer asks you for.
2. *Ask for permission.* Always speak to each prospective referee and ask whether he or she would feel comfortable providing you with an unconditionally positive reference. You need to be certain that your referees are willing to support you without reservation.

3. *Send your referees a copy of your CV.* Make sure that they are clear on key dates, your job title, responsibilities, and so on.
4. *Suggest notable facts or examples you wish to have included in your reference.* Remind your referees of any outstanding achievements you may need them to confirm. This isn't dishonest – you're merely prompting them about facts they may otherwise have forgotten. Chat to them over the telephone or jot some notes in an email (or do both) to ensure your referees can talk or write about whatever you need them to.
5. *Thank your referees for their help.* Bear in mind that providing you with a reference is a favor rather than an obligation. If your job search takes longer than you expected, it would be a good idea to get in touch occasionally to keep them primed and ready to speak on your behalf.

Finally, if you are at all worried about what a referee might say about you, ask one of your advisors (see Q52) to pretend to be an employer and call your referees to hear exactly what they have to say about you. Of course, asking one of your advisors to lie for you is more than a little naughty, but tough times may call for tough measures. I'd feel a bit insulted if someone did that to me – but the ultimate choice on whether to check up on your referees is between you and your conscience.

Briefing your referees is
simply good practice.

63 What's the minimum amount of research I have to do before an interview?

Just as doing your homework used to make your teacher happy, doing your research will make an employer happy – possibly happy enough to give you the job. Even if you have been recommended or approached for a position, the employer is almost certainly interviewing other candidates as well. And you must demonstrate your interest over and above that of the other candidates by showing you have an intimate knowledge about the employer and their industry.

At the very least you must be able to answer the following questions:

- ✓ What are the main products or services of the organization?

- ✓ How does the organization see itself in terms of its reputation, values, and culture?
- ✓ What are the names of the key executives or managers? What are their roles and why are they important?
- ✓ Who are the main competitors in this field? What are their strengths and weaknesses?
- ✓ What is happening in this industry? What are its main challenges and successes?

Do your research with the aim of showing you are committed to helping this organization to succeed. Show not only that you can fulfill the minimum requirements of the job, but also that you have thoughts and ideas that could make a tangible contribution. Whether you are being interviewed for a job in the post room or the boardroom, demonstrate that you understand the organization and have its best interests at heart.

Thankfully, in the age of the Internet, the majority of employers have websites that will provide you with many of the answers you seek. Not even looking at an organization's website is plain lazy – candidates who do not check an organization's website frankly deserve not to get hired.

However, you may not be able to find all of the answers on just the one website. Check also other industry websites as well as trade publications and industry magazines – although be aware that you may need to make a journey to your local university or business library for access to some of those. And don't forget that the people within your network may also be able to provide further answers too (see Q41).

64 How can I impress an employer I *desperately* want to work for?

Perhaps you have a handful of dream organizations you would do anything to work for. Maybe you only have one such target organization. Whether you are crafting the perfect covering letter (see Q35), writing to an organization speculatively (see Q57), or preparing for that all-important interview, you owe it to yourself to do enough research to be able to amaze and astonish the employer.

Desk and Internet research have a role to play (see Q63). So too does networking (see Q10). However, consider these other methods of researching your dream employer too:

- ✓ *Attend job fairs, trade shows, courses, and seminars.* Even if your target organization is not attending a job fair, you can learn more about the sector in general. And at trade shows or other events, companies are usually there to promote what they do, so will be very amenable to answering questions.

- ✓ *Pursue temporary or contract work in your field.* Don't turn your nose up at temporary opportunities. While the pay may not be as good as you are used to and the work less exciting, see it as an opportunity to soak up information about your chosen profession or sector.
- ✓ *Read appropriate biographies and autobiographies.* Broaden your horizons so you can converse knowledgeably about the history of your chosen field and the people who matter in it.
- ✓ *Visit your target organizations (if you can).* Visit the stores, branches, showrooms, salons, or other premises of each organization you want to work for. Browse and learn about your would-be employer's products and services. Talk to the employees and sales people and learn what they do. Buy some of the product if that's feasible and affordable. Try the service and see what you like and don't like.
- ✓ *Visit your target organization's competitors too.* Browse, observe, try, buy, and talk to their staff. Evaluate critically their offering and look to identify how your dream employer could improve what it does.

Yes, it's time consuming to be so thorough, but if you *truly* want to work for a particular organization – we're talking about your *dream* employer here – isn't it worth doing? If you can show an employer how you would help them sell more of their products or reduce their costs or improve the quality of their customer service or reduce the number of complaints or any other genuine benefit, how could the employer possibly not hire you?

65 Is it true most interviewers make their minds up within minutes?

Interviewers may deny it, but it's true. Most interviewers make up their minds within the first ten, five, or even two minutes of an interview. There's a huge body of evidence that proves what we've always known: First impressions count – big-time.

I apologize if the following pointers seem patronizing, but in my experience, too many candidates overestimate the strength of their first impressions. Follow these essential steps to make those initial minutes go smoothly:

1. *Pre-plan fragments of small talk.* Arrive at reception early and look around you for features you could *genuinely* praise, such as the excitable buzz of activity within the building, any pieces of art, plaques commemorating prizes the organization has won, a friendly receptionist, and so on.
2. *Make sure your hand is sweat-free.* If you are prone to

nervousness, keep your hand clasped around a handkerchief in your pocket – or even wipe your hand discreetly on the back of your trouser leg or skirt before shaking hands.

3. *Smile and offer a strong handshake as you introduce yourself.* Greet the interviewer with a broad smile and extend your hand making sure the webbed part of your hand – the bit between your index finger and thumb – connects with the webbed bit of the interviewer’s hand. Pump your hand at most three times. “I’m Tony Collins – pleased to meet you.”
4. *Follow the interviewer’s lead with respect to small talk.* Engage in as much chit-chat as the interviewer seems to need. If the interviewer is talkative, engage in more small talk; if not, stay quiet. Focus firmly on the positive items of small talk you pre-planned and avoid making any negative comments even if you had a terrible journey and the receptionist was rude.
5. *Project your confidence through word **and** action.* Be positive and behave as if you are confident even if you don’t necessarily feel it (see Q80).
6. *Double-check your personal hygiene.* Get a haircut, polish your shoes, deodorize thoroughly, avoid perfume. And, *especially* if you smoke, suck on a breath mint too.

Most interviewers make up their minds within the first ten, five, or even two minutes of an interview.

66 What are interviewers really looking for?

Interviewers do not want a candidate who has the skills and knowledge to do the job but is too lazy to apply them. Neither do they want a candidate who has the expertise but is too arrogant to listen to criticism. And, given the choice between two equally able candidates, most interviewers would rather choose to work with the one they like and warm to than the one they don't.

In a sentence, interviewers are looking not only for *competence* (i.e. the capacity to do the job) but also *chemistry* (i.e. someone they like).

In terms of competence, they want to hire a candidate who:

- ✓ has the skills and know-how to do the essential tasks of the job
- ✓ possesses the attitude and motivation to apply those skills and knowledge
- ✓ is willing to take on board training and feedback to learn how to do the job better

- ✓ is independent enough to take the initiative when problems arise – but at the same time seek advice and instruction when those problems are too great
- ✓ can become better at the job with time and help the team and organization to thrive
- ✓ shows a readiness to work hard and make a contribution rather than sitting around seeing how little work he or she can get away with.

Competence *and*
chemistry – you can't
succeed without both.

In terms of chemistry, interviewers want to find a candidate who:

- ✓ is likeable and pleasant company
- ✓ has personal warmth and demonstrates appropriate humor and enthusiasm
- ✓ has sufficient social skills and personality for the interviewers to want to spend time with them, perhaps spending long hours working into the night on a big project, or sharing a coffee, lunch in the canteen, or a drink after work
- ✓ will blend into the team without causing any trouble or conflict

-
- ✓ shows a genuine interest in working for their organization as opposed to any other
 - ✓ has similar values to the people who already work there.

Bear these two very different qualities in mind for every interview you attend. Competence *and* chemistry – you can't succeed without both. So consider not only *what* you say but also *how* you say it. Prove that you can not only do the job, but be likeable with it too.

67 Should I memorize answers to interview questions?

There are books around entitled *Brilliant Answers to Every Interview Question* and *Astounding Answers to Tough Interview Questions*. Such books imply that you should prepare and learn by rote answers to the many questions you could be asked.

Sure, there may be certain interview questions that get asked over and over again. But interviewers have a nasty habit of asking their own variations on popular questions, which means that the responses you have memorized may not answer the questions the interviewers are actually asking.

A far better approach is simply to remember that an employer most wants to know whether you can make a difference, add value, deliver results. If you keep that single principle in mind, you can prepare broad examples that demonstrate how you have made a difference to other employers in the past:

1. Look at the original job advert and work out the dozen or so skills and qualities you need for the job. Perhaps you need to manage a busy managing director's diary, work to challenging deadlines, and liaise with clients and suppliers. Maybe you need to slash costs within an expensive department, inspire a team of technicians to develop better products, and improve relationships with other departments within the organization.
2. Next, write a description of how you will sell yourself against each of the skills and qualities that the employer needs. Then recall from the depths of your memory examples of situations in which you demonstrated each of those skills and attributes. Write those examples down.
3. Once have written each example down, take a separate sheet of paper and extract the key points you wish to convey to an interviewer. It's easier to remember key points and to use them as a prompt to your memory than to learn lengthy responses off by heart. And yes, write them down. Effective pre-planning is not something you can do while ironing, having a bath, listening to the radio, or driving the kids to school.

An employer most wants
to know whether you can
make a difference, add
value, deliver results.

68 Is it true my body language matters more than what I say?

A candidate who avoids eye contact, shakes visibly, and fidgets repeatedly is never going to get the job, no matter how technically proficient he or she is. So yes, body language matters.

One famous and oft-cited piece of research estimated that over 50 per cent of the impact that people have on each other is derived from the dance of non-verbal cues more commonly known as body language. As a result, *what* you say can matter less than *how* you say it – particularly within those key first few minutes of the interview (see Q65). Consider the following pointers:

- ✓ *Watch your posture.* Sitting upright makes a better impression than sitting slumped in your chair. Avoid letting either tiredness or nerves cause your shoulders to hunch. Use your posture to emphasize key points by leaning forwards occasionally.
- ✓ *Use facial expressions appropriately.* Smile when talking about your strengths and achievements. Convey your positive attitude by making sure you appear outwardly as enthusiastic as you feel.

- ✓ *Maintain appropriate eye contact.* Look intently at interviewers whenever they speak. But feel free to look away occasionally when you are answering.
- ✓ *Demonstrate “active listening.”* When the interviewer is speaking, nod your head and “flash” your eyes by raising your eyebrows occasionally to send non-verbal signals that you are paying rapt attention.
- ✓ *Avoid fidgeting.* Nervous candidates often tap their fingers, jingle keys in their pockets or fiddle with pieces of jewelry. Rest your hands gently on the table or keep them clasped lightly in your lap.
- ✓ *Use your hands to emphasize key points.* Hand movements make people more visually appealing and can enhance their credibility. For example, think about counting key points off on your fingers or moving your hands a little more to indicate excitement. Watch other people in all sorts of situations and observe their gestures as they speak; adopt some of their mannerisms to suit your own style.
- ✓ *Avoid crossing your arms or legs.* Some interviewers believe that crossed arms or legs are signs of defensiveness or even deceit. Avoid moving your feet excessively too.

*What you say can
matter less than
how you say it.*

Again (as with Q65), I apologize if this seems obvious. However, just as most people overestimate their driving skill, sense of humor, and ability to please a lover in bed, most candidates overestimate their ability to create rapport with interviewers. Don't let that be the case for you. Make sure you do not overestimate your non-verbal impact.

69 How can I sound more compelling during an interview?

Interviewers sometimes talk of candidates who are convincing and persuasive or who possess presence, gravitas, even star quality. Often, such characteristics are conveyed by vocal qualities such as:

- ✓ *The pitch of your voice.* A high-pitched or squeaky voice is often considered less convincing than a deeper tone of voice. If you want to convey charisma, think about lowering the tone of your voice. However, do vary the pitch of your voice occasionally to keep interviewers entertained, for example lowering it further when talking about serious or sensitive issues, and raising it to convey excitement.
- ✓ *The speed of your words.* Speaking slowly could be seen as a sign of gravitas, but speaking *too* slowly could be interpreted as weariness. Speaking slightly more quickly on occasion could suggest your enthusiasm, but speaking too quickly all of the

time is likely to come across as nervousness. Think about modulating the speed with which you speak throughout the interview to create the right impression as necessary – for example when talking about how much you really, truly, sincerely want the job (quicker) versus when describing a difficult situation you had to deal with at work (slower).

- ✓ *Your volume.* Speaking too quietly is almost always seen as a sign of under-confidence. Speaking too loudly could denote arrogance. However, think about varying the volume of your voice – perhaps emphasizing key words and phrases with the auditory equivalent of typing words in a bold typeface.
- ✓ *Your use of pauses.* Bear in mind that sentences should finish with a full stop. Ensure that you do not let all of your sentences run together into a continuous jumble.

I'm afraid I can't give you hard and fast rules about how to sound more compelling because it often depends on the situation. For example, one candidate who knows he is much older than the others may need to portray more energy by speaking quicker and slightly louder; another considerably younger candidate might have to work on conveying her maturity and gravitas by slowing down. I can only advise that you think about your vocal qualities and perhaps get feedback on how you use them to best effect (see Q70 and Q93).

70

How can I ensure I make a great impact during an interview?

You can do all the mental preparation you like, but nothing beats practicing out loud to ensure you make the very best impact during an interview. Actors preparing to perform on stage do not simply sit quietly reading through their scripts again and again. They practice saying their lines out loud.

However, think of yourself as more of an improvisation artiste than an actor. An actor has lines to be learned verbatim. You instead have key points (see Q67) and must be ready to express yourself succinctly while demonstrating appropriate body language (see Q68) and vocal cues (see Q69) too.

Try these tips on for size:

- ✓ *Rehearse under interview conditions.* They say that practice makes perfect, but I would say that *perfect* practice makes perfect. The more closely you can mimic interview conditions,

the more effective will be your practice. For example, sit yourself in a hard-backed chair rather than a sofa. Speak your responses out loud, at the right volume, focusing on your tone of voice. Sit in front of a mirror so you can watch your body language too.

- ✓ *Record your performance.* Use a camcorder. Or, if you don't have one, buy an inexpensive webcam to record your rehearsals. Watch your performance back and critique your posture, your facial expressions, and your use of hands. Pay attention to the quality of your voice – would you hire yourself? Listen to the number of “ums” and “ers” you utter and keep practicing until you have eliminated them.
- ✓ *Role play with people who can give you feedback.* Friends and family can help by firing interview questions at you, but don't rely on them to give you candid feedback that exposes your weaknesses and helps you to learn. Instead, turn to work acquaintances or your job hunting advisors (see Q52). Ideally, give them the job advert and a copy of your CV. Then give them permission to ask you *any* questions they can think of that might be relevant to the job. Remember here that your purpose in rehearsing and role playing is not to learn responses off-by-heart but to practice adapting your answers and style to different interviews.


You can do all the mental preparation you like, but nothing beats practicing out loud.

71 Do I need to bring a shiny briefcase full of toys to interviews?

Okay, maybe you don't need a shiny briefcase, but do bring along a smart bag carrying whatever you need to impress an interviewer.

For some occupations, you may want to show the interviewers what you can do rather than just tell them about it. Think of a way to let an interviewer see, smell, taste, and touch whatever you can craft with your own two hands. Bring with you a portfolio of photographs you have taken, create a full-page advert demonstrating your artistic flair or copywriting skills, play a minute-long clip of a music promo you directed. Bring along blueprints of a building you helped to design, showcase items from a clothing line you have created, carry with you a diagram of a process you helped to invent. Choose whatever is *appropriate* for your role – baking a cake for a finance job is not what I'm talking about.

If you are applying for a job in a more conventional, administrative,



professional, or executive environment, bring with you copies of your CV. Line managers often get harangued into interviewing at the last minute. If they do not have a copy of your CV, you can immediately produce a crisp, clean copy for them.

Enter an interview room with no other clutter. Do not waste time getting out a folio with copies of your certificates or other documents. Do not get out a notepad and pen – and that goes double for a laptop. You are not a reporter who needs to take verbatim notes. An interview is designed to help the interviewer decide whether to hire you or not. Whether by pen and paper or laptop, you should not need to take notes.

Some candidates like to show interviewers their certificates or copies of research papers or other documents they are proud of. If you do so, your interviewers may glance at them and nod in approval. But unless they *asked* to see them first, they're just feigning interest to avoid being rude – secretly they see you as pushy and a bit too desperate to show off. So take everything you need with you, but only display them if you are specifically asked to.

72

To what extent should I “be myself” during an interview?

There are two schools of thought on this topic. One school argues that if you pretend to be someone that you are not, you could end up being offered a job that will make you deeply unhappy. People in this camp suggest that if you behave exactly as you do normally, you are certain to be offered only jobs in which the employer will value you for who you truly are.

The other school of thought argues that you should present yourself as the person you think the employer is looking for – that you should be a little more energetic or a bit more introspective, perhaps more assertive or less talkative than you normally are – in order to get offered the job. People in this camp suggest that doing so gives you the luxury of choice to decide whether to accept the job or not.

I tend to side with the latter argument, that you should reflect on the kind of person the employer is looking for. We all, to some extent, bring different aspects of ourselves to the fore when we interact with different people. I would wager that you behave

slightly differently with your parents than you do with your partner, or with your mother-in-law than you do with your best friend. You will present different facets of yourself at work too – you probably behave differently with your peers from the way you do with your clients or customers. And would you talk to your boss in exactly the same way that you would to your team mates?

Think of an interview as a first date – be on your best behavior even if you can't yet tell if you want to get married. Use an interview as an opportunity to present the part of you that is more conservative or talkative, analytical or entrepreneurial if that is what the interviewers are looking for.

Supporters of “being yourself” argue that pretending to be someone you are not is a guaranteed recipe for an unhappy career. Fans of “being your *best* self” argue that you should get the job and *then* decide whether to take it or not. Once you've been offered a job, you can go and meet the rest of the team, ask more questions, and assuage any doubts you may have before deciding if the job is right for you. Be yourself or be your best self – you decide.

Think of an interview as a first date – be on your best behavior even if you can't yet tell if you want to get married.

73

When is the right time to shut up during an interview?

Short and to the point. That's how your interview answers should be. The problem of talking for too long when answering interview questions is that you can't know if what you are saying is impressive or boring the interviewer. An interview should be a dialogue, not a series of monologues punctuated only occasionally by interview questions.

When an interviewer asks you a question, answer the question *briefly* but *fully*. Listen to the question and assemble a response from your pre-prepared list of points you wanted to cover (see Q67). Talk for around 30 to 60 seconds and then stop. Read the body language of interviewers – are they nodding intently, leaning forwards, and taking notes, or has their expression glazed over as if they are pondering what to have for dinner that evening?

A good tip is to check occasionally that your response is what the interviewer needs. Perhaps a handful of times throughout the interview, gauge whether your answers are on the right track by asking questions such as:

- ✓ “Is this the kind of answer you were looking for?”
- ✓ “I can tell you more about exactly what I did if that’s useful?”
- ✓ “Did I understand the question correctly?”
- ✓ “Is what I’m telling you useful?”

If the interviewer wants to hear more, they will tell you so.

Once you have delivered your full response, shut up. Stop talking. Avoid straying from the point, throwing in further anecdotes, or tossing in additional selling points. Shut up. And wait for the interviewer to ask the next question.

Talk for around 30
to 60 seconds and
then stop.

74 What color tie or blouse should I wear to an interview?

Popular magazines have a lot to be blamed for. They have instilled in the minds of some interviewers that colors of ties or blouses or shirts or suits can tell them something about the personality of a candidate – red is bold, blue is cold, that sort of thing.

As a psychologist, trust me when I say that colors do *not* reliably tell an interviewer anything about your personality. Rather than trying to project your personality through your clothes, you should be aiming to blend in – your clothes and appearance should make you look as if you belong.

It would be very wrong of me to insist on any particular dress code. What an aggressive investment bank deems professional might be considered dull in the office of a fashion retailer. What a hip creative agency considers *de rigueur* might be seen as trying too hard in an established technology business.

Depending on how concerned you are about making the perfect impression, you could:

✓ *Telephone ahead and speak to the receptionist.* Explain that you

are coming for interview and would like guidance on the dress code. But be careful to get explicit details. For example, “smart casual” in an investment bank could mean a suit with no tie, but in a television production company mean smarter than normal jeans and slightly less battered sneakers.

- ✓ *Go to the offices of your prospective employer.* Wait outside unobtrusively and watch the employees as they go in and out. Look particularly at what the majority of people your age are wearing. But remember also that managers may dress more formally when they are interviewing than when they are not meeting outsiders.
- ✓ *Err on the side of caution.* If in doubt, aim to dress slightly *more* smartly than you think you need to. You can always take off a tie or jacket if appropriate.

However, remember also to think about your overall appearance. Scuffed shoes may not do for a firm of actuaries, while flat shoes may not do for a women’s high-end fashion retailer. What you think is the right side of sexy might be construed as inappropriately provocative. Think of your hair, make-up, jewelry, and all parts of the outfit upon which you may be evaluated.

I can’t list all of the elements of your appearance you should consider – all I can do is warn you that personal grooming often matters more than it should.

Your clothes and
appearance should make
you look as if you belong.

75 What are the commonest interview question pitfalls?

Over the years, I've observed a lot of interview candidates. And I've noticed that what sometimes appear to be straightforward questions can contain traps for the unwary. Think about your answers to these four questions:

- ✓ *“Tell us a bit about yourself.”* While this question may imply you could legitimately talk about any aspect of your entire life, remember that you are here to sell your work-related skills and impress the interviewer. As such, answer this question as if the interviewer had asked: “Tell us in under a minute about your recent career and give us a compelling reason why we should hire you.”
- ✓ *“What do you know about our organization?”* Rather than simply listing some attributes of the organization, weave into your response a reason how you could help the organization to

thrive and reach its goals. For example, rather than merely pointing out that the firm has a market share of 28.5 percent, use it as an opportunity to segue seamlessly into sharing an example about how you helped a past employer to improve its market share.

- ✓ “*What are your weaknesses?*” Never reply that you don’t have any or that “I haven’t really thought about it.” Neither should you say that you are a “perfectionist” or “don’t tolerate fools gladly” as those sound too rehearsed. Instead, pick in advance one or two weaknesses that you know would have absolutely no bearing on your ability to do the job. For example, as a psychologist, I could legitimately answer that I’m not very good with numbers without worrying the interviewers that I can’t do the job.
- ✓ “*Where do you see yourself in five years’ time?*” – consider carefully the growth prospects of the overall organization as well as the career track for the role. For example, if the organization is an established business in a mature market, there may be very limited prospects for promotion – and saying that you intend to be promoted might only demonstrate that you are too

What appear to be
straightforward questions
can contain traps
for the unwary.

ambitious compared with what they can offer. On the other hand, if the organization is growing quickly or states openly on its website how it encourages career growth, don't say that you're looking for a job that will allow you to spend more time with your family. Always think about what career goals the employer might ideally wish for you to have.

76

So what's the big deal about “competency-based” interviews?

You need to know about competency-based interviewing because it's a technique designed to identify only the very best candidates and reject the rest. Incidentally, it's an interviewing system that frequently exposes liars and frauds too. Plus, it's an interview technique that is gaining in popularity.

To cut a long story short, there's good research to show that one of the best predictors of future job success is past performance. Imagine for a moment that you are hiring, and that you are looking for a candidate to join your organization to be a customer service advisor. Wouldn't you rather hire someone who *has* experience of handling customers than someone who can only talk about how he *would* in theory handle customers? Or, if you were looking for a researcher, wouldn't you feel more confident hiring someone who could tell you how she had gathered data from multiple

sources and put together a report than someone who says that she could probably pick it up?

Competencies are merely a technical word for skills. You can spot competency-based questions because they often sound more like requests than questions. Rather than asking you *what, when, how, or why*, competency-based questions instruct you to tell the interviewers about specific situations you have been in. Look out for openers such as:

- ✓ “Tell me about a time when you ...”
- ✓ “Give me an example of a situation in which you ...”
- ✓ “Can you tell me about an occasion when you ...”
- ✓ “Can you talk me through an instance in which you ...”

For example, you might get asked questions such as:

- ✓ “Tell me about a time you had to deal with a difficult colleague.”
- ✓ “Could you talk me through an occasion when you had to persuade a colleague to change his or her mind?”
- ✓ “Can you talk me through a time you faced a particularly difficult problem and how you dealt with it please?”

It’s an interviewing system that frequently exposes liars and frauds.

77 What's the best way to answer competency-based questions?

The key to answering competency-based questions is to talk about a *specific* situation that you experienced. Don't talk about how you *generally* deal with such situations. Think back to a specific incident and be prepared to talk about it in as much detail as the interviewer wants.

Use the CAR(L) acronym to structure your responses:

- ✓ *Challenge.* Explain the problem or opportunity you had to tackle. Set the scene briefly in only a couple of sentences to describe what you had to do. Many candidates fall into the trap of spending too long describing the background and context and therefore leaving insufficient time to talk about their actions.
- ✓ *Actions.* Talk about the actions you took to resolve the problem

or opportunity. Talk in the first person singular (“I analyzed ...” “I said ...”) rather than the first person plural (“we negotiated ...” “we decided ...”). This is an interview in which *you* are being evaluated, not your entire team. The bulk of your story should be about your actions. Use “action verbs” such as those listed in Q31 to make clear to the interviewers your role in dealing with the challenge. And, because you are talking about a situation you faced in the past, make sure you talk in the past tense. If you find yourself straying into the present (“I try to ...” “Generally I handle this by ...”), snap out of it – you’re not answering the question you were asked.

- ✓ *Result*. Describe briefly the outcome that you achieved and *quantify* the results if you can (see Q30). Ideally, pick situations to talk about that ended in a positive outcome.
- ✓ (*Lesson*). Sometimes, an interviewer may also ask you about the lesson you learned from the situation – what did that particular incident teach you to do differently?

So what kind of competency areas could I be tested on?

As you can imagine, there is an almost unlimited number of competency-based questions that interviewers could ask. In practice, however, many of the different questions are merely variations on common themes. As part of your research and preparation for an interview, examine the job advert to pick out the skills and qualities you may be asked to talk about. For example, if a job advert mentions that the employer is looking for a “proactive” candidate, be ready to give an example of how you demonstrated your proactivity using the CAR(L) acronym (see Q77).

Here are examples of the most common competency areas that interviewers like to probe:

- ✓ *Analytical skills.* Gathering data, evaluating options, and arriving at conclusions.
- ✓ *Problem solving skills.* Breaking down complex problems into a number of smaller issues, initiating or participating in brainstorming sessions, and weighing up the pros and cons of different options.

- ✓ *Communication skills.* Listening to the needs of colleagues and customers, conveying information to other people both on a one-to-one basis and also in groups, handling conflict and difficult people situations.
- ✓ *Influence and persuasion.* Using a range of tactics (e.g. presenting a logical argument, appealing to someone's better nature, negotiating a compromise, etc.) to change the minds of colleagues and customers.
- ✓ *Teamworking.* Putting the needs of the team above those of your own, offering practical assistance to other people, and offering emotional support too.
- ✓ *Organization skills.* Creating plans and completing projects, prioritizing tasks in order to meet tough deadlines, and leading or communicating with other people to ensure they complete their pieces of a project or task.
- ✓ *Demonstrating flexibility and adaptability.* Changing your approach when your initial method was not working, listening to constructive criticism and changing your behavior, and showing a willingness to help out even when it was not a part of your job.

Examine the job advert to
pick out the skills and
qualities you may be
asked to talk about.

When preparing for an interview, it makes sense to prepare examples you could talk through in response to competency-based questions. A warning though! Competency-based interviewers may ask more than one question on the same competency. If they ask: “Tell us about a time you persuaded a customer to change their mind,” they could easily ask: “Tell us about a different time you persuaded a customer to change their mind.” So always be ready with *at least* two examples per competency.

Is age really an issue?

Let's consider the issue of age both on CVs and in person.

First, on a CV: You are *not* required to put your age on your CV. Yes, it used to be traditional, but 21st-century legislation means employers aren't allowed to ask for it anymore. You can even get away with removing the dates that you left school or university. True, you may be asked to provide dates of employment so a determined recruiter could still work out approximately how old you are. If you're older than what the employer may be looking for, you could sneakily omit some of your earliest work experience. But if you're younger than what they may be looking for, your only tactic may be to highlight the skills and experience you've already picked up in your career.

Once you get to an interview, no one is going to tell you to your face that you're too young or too old. Interviewers aren't going to risk discriminating against you openly and inviting a lawsuit. You may have to rely on your instinct to decide whether to bring up the subject of your maturity (or lack of it – at least in the employer's eyes) by making a pre-emptive statement of some sort.

If you believe that you may be too young, broach the subject respectfully. Explain to the interviewers how you have the necessary experience and maturity to handle whatever situations the role might require. Be prepared to quote examples from your career history that show how you can fulfill the

essential requirements of the role – that your wisdom exceeds your years.

If you feel the interviewers believe you to be too old, again, raise the subject preventatively. Reassure them that, while you may be somewhat older than the other candidates, you have a young frame of mind, that you are still keen to learn and up for a challenge. Politely but firmly give the interviewers a tangible example to counter the notion that older people are either stubborn and unwilling to learn or lacking in energy and motivation.

Any tips for dealing with interview nerves?

Surveys show that more people get anxious about interviews than are frightened of snakes or spiders! Here are some pointers for getting a grip on any interview jitters:

- ✓ *Remember that practice makes perfect.* The more research (see Q63) and rehearsal (see Q70) you do before an interview, the more confident you will feel.
- ✓ *Breathe correctly.* When we get nervous, we tend to breathe shallowly from the top part of our lungs. Instead, focus on breathing slowly through your diaphragm – the muscle beneath your lungs. Place one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach. Inhale to a slow count of three, hold for a moment, then exhale to another slow three-count, checking that only the hand on your stomach rises and falls. Arrive early at an interview so you can sit and breathe diaphragmatically for a few minutes.
- ✓ *Practice positive affirmations.* Positive affirmations are

constructive statements about yourself or what you want to achieve. We often worry and focus about what *could* go wrong, but repeating positive affirmations can banish that negative voice at the back of our heads and help us to feel more confident. Prepare a couple of constructive statements about yourself (e.g. “I have done my research and I know my material” or “I will smile and show the interviewers that I am confident”) and repeat your positive affirmations, perhaps while sitting in reception prior to your interview. To be effective, phrase your positive affirmations in terms of what you want (e.g. “I am calm and confident”) rather than what you want to avoid (e.g. “I am not worried”).

- ✓ *Focus on **appearing** confident.* Interviewers can’t tell what is going on inside your head – they judge you on what they see. Focus on controlling your body language (see Q68) and voice (see Q69) to appear and sound confident. For example, avoid fidgeting and make a concerted effort to speak slowly – especially during those vital first few minutes (see Q65) of meeting your interviewer.

Interviewers can’t tell
what is going on inside
your head – they judge
you on what they see.

81

Should I tell the truth?

At last we come to the title of the book. Many candidates have secrets they would rather not reveal to the interviewers, such as having been fired or having suffered other work or personal problems (see Q39 for further examples). You may have got away with it at the CV stage, but what if you should be asked direct questions about such issues at interview?

I think you basically have two broad options to consider. Either prepare a (true) position statement in advance or prepare a lie that is so carefully thought-through that an interviewer will not be able to distinguish it from the truth.

Of course, you're naughty if you decide to tell a lie or evade the question. But you're an adult and I certainly can't stop you. My preferred tactic is to carefully construct a position statement that puts the best spin on the situation:

- ✓ Begin by listing all of the possible issues that could derail your interview chances (see Q39 for some of the possible issues).
- ✓ Take each issue in turn and bring to mind the precise details of the situation. Choose words that confirm the basic facts of the situation in as neutral a way as possible, for example “yes, my boss did ask me to leave” rather than “yes, I was fired.”
- ✓ Prepare several more sentences to explain or justify the factual

situation. Consider different options on how to present the situation positively. Perhaps talk about your motivations at the time or any mitigating circumstances that may have affected you at the time. “I went through a difficult time because I was getting divorced” or “I didn’t really understand the nature of that job when I accepted it, but I won’t make that mistake again” – that kind of thing.

Carefully construct a
position statement
that puts the best
spin on the situation.

Work out the precise words you would use to explain your situation. I normally advise candidates not to memorize answers to interview questions (see Q67). However, for such problem areas, it is worth preparing in detail and perhaps even writing out the words that you would feel comfortable repeating. Once you are happy with how your position statement reads, practice saying it out loud until it sounds natural and unrehearsed. Your aim in preparing a short position statement should be to deflect the question and make the problem sound as insignificant as possible.

What are the chances of getting caught if I lie?

Apart from the obvious naughtiness of lying, I would draw your attention to the difference between lying about “hard” facts such as the number of days you were absent from work versus “soft” facts such as your precise responsibilities.

Hard facts are easily verifiable – although smaller organizations without human resources departments tend to be less systematic in checking references (see also Q61).

When it comes to soft facts, some candidates do get away with even quite blatant lies. However, remember that you must be able to answer interview questions in sufficient detail not to arouse suspicions. Yes, you may answer that you did work on a particular project or passed an exam. But what if the interviewer were to ask you about your project plan, budget, major milestones and timescales? What if the interviewer were to ask about the modules you studied and the questions you chose to answer in the exam?

Think about your body language and voice too. Interviewers often believe that they can spot liars, e.g. through the avoidance of eye

Rehearse lies and you probably won't get caught; whether you can look yourself in the mirror is another matter.

contact, stuttering, or fidgeting. Interestingly though, research by eminent psychologists shows that even people who are trained to detect lying, such as FBI agents and the police, tend not to be very good at it. The problem is that many of the characteristics that are associated with lying also appear when candidates are simply nervous about being interviewed. Liars who can control their body language and tone of voice are in practice almost impossible to spot.

In addition, the people who are most able to get away with their deceptions are the ones who do it regularly and practice those lies until they become second nature. Rather than making up a lie on the spot during an interview, they integrate their lies into their lives. They do not only list them on the CV but also talk about them and lie to their friends about it; from the moment they got fired or failed an exam, they started to lie about it. Eventually, such lies become legends of their own creation. These people lie until even they can't quite remember what's real or a lie.

Rehearsing your answers to interview questions pays dividends in allowing you to appear more confident and compelling (see Q69). Rehearse lies and you probably won't get caught either – although whether you can look yourself in the mirror is another matter.

Should I admit why I want to quit my current job?

Trust me, I can sympathize with you if you are working for a nightmare boss or have bullying colleagues or suffer from a lack of IT support or have whatever other reasons to want to get away. However, if you criticize a previous employer, an interviewer may worry about what you could one day say about their organization.

So the answer to the question is no. Avoid talking about why you want to leave.

In much the same way as politicians often deflect questions they do not want to answer, I would strongly suggest that you focus on the positive reasons why you want to join this new organization rather than the negative reasons why you want to leave your old one. Doing so makes you sound positive and happy – someone who would be a cheery addition to any team – rather than someone who is frustrated or disgruntled. If you were interviewing, would you willingly choose a moaner to join your team?

In your research, look for positive reasons you may want to join an organization such as:

- ✓ the reputation of the organization
- ✓ the challenge of the role
- ✓ the opportunity to learn and develop new skills
- ✓ the prospects for future promotion or career growth
- ✓ the quality of the products or services made by the organization.

And make sure you are able to talk about why you want to join this new organization with a smile on your face. Show yourself as cheerful and happy to convince the interviewer you'd be a star addition to the team.

Focus on the positive reasons why you want to join rather than the negative reasons why you want to leave.

84 Why are manhole covers round?!?

Interviewers occasionally ask unusual questions to put candidates under pressure and see how quickly they can think on their feet. Some of the many strange questions I've heard interviewers ask candidates include:

- ✓ “If you were a cartoon character, who would you be and why?”
- ✓ “If you could choose to have dinner with either Michael Jackson or Albert Einstein, who would you choose – and why?”
- ✓ “See this pen I'm holding? Sell it to me.”
- ✓ “How many cartons of orange juice are consumed in New York City every day?”
- ✓ “Why are manhole covers round?”

Yes, I agree, they're stupid questions. But unfortunately, the interviewer may think that their question is a clever one so you have little choice but to play along. Here are some tips on dealing with those more weird and wonderful questions:

1. Ask the interviewer whether there are any rules on answering the question. The interviewer may give you guidance as to what he or she is looking for.
2. Pause and think before you answer the question. Don't allow yourself to be pressurized into blurting out an answer. Ask "Can I think about that for a few seconds?" and then allow yourself 20 or 30 seconds if you need. If you come up with a couple of possible answers, discuss them both with the interviewer. There is rarely a "right" answer to such questions; the interviewer may consider that your thought process is often as interesting as your eventual answer. And make sure to give some kind of response – almost any answer is better than saying, "I don't know."
3. Bear in mind you are being evaluated as much for your emotional response as your answer. Remain calm and collected and try to look as if you are enjoying the mental challenge that is being thrown at you.

Your thought process is
often as interesting as
your eventual answer.

Oh, and if you get asked "Why are manhole covers round?" what would you say?

How should I respond if the interviewer asks me an offensive question?

Increasingly, employers are being discouraged or even prohibited by law from asking questions about the personal lives of candidates. You should not expect to be asked questions about your marital status, ethnicity, children or childcare arrangements, religious beliefs, sexuality, partner's occupation, parents' occupations or nationalities, birthplace, or age.

While human resources managers are usually well acquainted with the questions they should not ask, many line managers either do not know any better or choose to flout the rules. If you are asked an illegal or offensive question, you have three broad strategies for dealing with it:

- ✓ *Decline to answer the question.* In theory you could politely tell the interviewer that it is an inappropriate question that has no bearing on your ability to do the job. However, doing so is

effectively snubbing the interviewer and, although of course the interviewer will give other reasons for doing so, they could decide to reject you just because they can. You could try to take the employer to court on a count of discrimination, but could you really prove it and are you prepared to go through the stress of pursuing legal proceedings?

- ✓ *Point out the controversial nature of the question.* A second approach would be to inform the interviewer politely that the question is somewhat contentious, but then answer the question anyway. By doing so, you indicate that you know your rights, but have nothing to hide.
- ✓ *Answer the question regardless.* A third approach would be to answer the question as if the question were perfectly respectable. Simply answer the question but find some way to refocus the discussion on your strengths, achievements, and suitability for the job.

I'm afraid there is no right or wrong, black or white rule on dealing with illegal or offensive questions. Pointing out to some interviewer that a question is illegal might embarrass them sufficiently that they decide they just don't like you enough to want to work with you. On the other hand, standing up to other interviewers in a respectful fashion could possibly impress them and boost their opinion of you. It's a judgment call on your part – all I can recommend is that you be ready for such questions, consider each situation on its merits and stay calm and unfazed.

86 Is it true that I should “mirror” the interviewer to build a greater rapport?

Here’s a thought for you: people like people like themselves. To put it another way, interviewers tend to warm to (and rate more highly) candidates who seem to possess similar values, traits, and characteristics to their own. Fans of a technique called neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) therefore argue that matching your mannerisms, body language, vocal qualities, and even choice of words can enhance the process of building rapport with an interviewer.

While there are some broad principles for appearing alert and confident (see Q68, Q69), I would suggest that you may benefit from behaving in a similar way to your interviewer too. Think about:

- ✓ *The pace of the interviewer’s speech.* Listen to the vocal qualities of your interviewer. Do they speak slowly and softly, or quickly and loudly? Speed up or slow down, quieten down or speak up, depending on whether your interviewer is a lively fast-talker or more thoughtful and considered.

- ✓ *The interviewer's use of hands and body movement.* If the interviewer is very expressive and gesticulates passionately with his or her hands, allow yourself to use your hands more too. The key is not to copy exactly an interviewer's precise movements, but to use your hands and body movement to a similar extent.
- ✓ *The interviewer's use of humor and facial expressions.* Notice whether the interviewer is informal and light-hearted or formal and thoughtful. Relax and allow more of your personality to shine through if you think it appropriate. Or be business-like and professional if that seems more fitting.

Matching is good;
mimicking is bad.

The point of mirroring is not to mimic interviewers so precisely that they think you are mocking them. Don't for one moment imagine that I am recommending you lift your hand when an interviewer lifts his, or scratch your head as another interviewer scratches hers. That's not matching, that's copying to such an extent that the interviewers are likely to think you are laughing at them.

A better way to think about matching is to imagine that you have a number of dials or controls for different aspects of your behavior. A volume control – turn it up to speak more loudly and down to be quieter. An animation control to turn up or down for your body language and a separate humour dial too. Simply choose to nudge turn the dials up or down *slightly* to appear more similar, rather than identical, to different interviewers. Broad matching is good; being a copycat is bad.

87 What's the best way to deal with interview questions about salary?

Most candidates are smart enough not to talk about salary during an interview – candidates who raise the grubby issue of money can come across as greedy and more interested in the money than the job. Employers rarely warm to candidates who appear to want to work for them only for the money. Employers like to feel that their organizations are special, that you *want* to work for them, that you are attracted to some aspects of the organization rather than being lured merely by the money.

But what if the interviewers bring up the issue first? The best advice is to deflect questions about money until you have been offered the job. Discussing it in depth could make you appear too expensive (if you earn more than they are expecting to pay) or compromise your ability to negotiate for more (if you're currently earning less than they could pay). As such, your tactic should be to redirect questions about money. Tell the interviewer that money is

not your sole motivator in life, even if it is. (Having said that though, many sales managers believe that greed is good – so feel free to disregard this rule if you are applying for a job in sales.)

You should by now have done your research (see Q36) in order to understand your approximate worth. If you believe that you may be expensive for the interviewer, say that you are more interested in finding a role that is challenging than in necessarily looking for the biggest pay packet.

Try vague statements such as: “The key for me is to find an environment in which I can grow and feel challenged. I’d rather not dwell on the salary for now.” Or “Until both you and I are sure I’m the right candidate to fulfill the needs of the role, I feel that any discussion about salary may be premature.” But if pressed, state merely a broad range (e.g. “in the region of 30 to 40 thousand”) rather than a specific figure (e.g. “more than 33 thousand”) to avoid reducing your options to negotiate at a later date.

An alternative strategy if you are a high-earning senior manager with a complex salary, benefits and bonus scheme is to draft a one-page document outlining your current remuneration package. Tell the interviewer that the document represents what you are currently (or were previously) earning, and reiterate that you may be willing to negotiate, once you have found out more about the job.

Deflect questions about money until you have been offered the job.

Is it worth practicing for psychometric tests?

It depends. Firstly, phone the employer and check whether you are going to be asked to complete any psychometric tests. Most organizations will warn candidates whether they will need to or not. But occasionally, organizations can forget – which isn't a problem for them, but might be a bit of a shock for you when you turn up for the interview!

Secondly, ask what kind of psychometric tests you are going to be asked to complete. If you are going to be asked to complete a *personality* test, there's no point practicing (although see Q89 for advice on answering those to your best advantage). If, however, you are asked to take an *aptitude* test – and other key words to listen out for include *verbal*, *numerical*, or *logical reasoning*, *critical thinking*, and *spatial awareness* – then it is very much in your interests to get some practice in.

By far the commonest aptitude tests measure verbal reasoning (i.e. how good you are with words and written concepts) or numerical reasoning (i.e. your ability to deal with numbers, and possibly charts or diagrams too).

While you won't be able to predict the precise questions that may come up in any particular employer's aptitude test, it's still worth getting some sample tests to practice on. Even completing a few unrelated and totally different tests can help to prime you for the big day. You can at least get used to the discipline of reading a set of instructions carefully, working against the clock, and focusing your concentration intently on a problem for 20 to 40 minutes without pause.

There are plenty of books on the market that allow you to practice aptitude tests. Or type the words "free aptitude test" into your favorite search engine. That one book or handful of free online tests plus two to three hours of practice could be the difference between a score that gets you rejected and a score that gets you the job.

89 Should I fake my responses on personality tests?

You've probably heard the hoary old line about there being "no right or wrong answers" on a personality test. Unfortunately, I have to puncture that myth.

You may be asked to complete a personality test to help the employer decide whether to invite you to an interview. Or they may ask you to complete a personality test at the interview itself. In either case, the results of the test will almost certainly be used to screen undesirable candidates out. The employer is likely to look at the results and decide whether your personality will fit into their team. So there is very much a "right" answer to the test in the sense that giving the wrong answers will not get you the job.

Now, I am not suggesting that you go out of your way to fake your answers. For a start, many personality tests have built-in "social desirability" measures that check how much you may be trying to second-guess what the interviewer is looking for. Altering your responses too much could flag you up as a cheat who is deliberately trying to beat the system.

Think of yourself the way your mother or best friend might.

However, the following tips will allow you to present yourself in the best light:

- ✓ *Answer the questions with reference to your work persona.* Think about how you behave at work rather than at home. You may be a lazy slob at home, but probably try to be more organized at work. You get the idea. So answer with a firm image of your behavior at work rather than at home.
- ✓ *Give yourself the benefit of the doubt.* Avoid being overly critical of yourself. We all have good days and bad days. When deciding to tick yes or no to a particular box, think of yourself on a good day rather than an average day. If you waver between which box to tick, select the more positive response. Think of yourself the way your mother or best friend might.

If you simply *must* cheat, then at least don't make it too obvious. Remember those pesky social desirability measures. Rather than altering every single one of your answers, perhaps just alter one in every three or four. But don't tell anyone I told you that!

90

What are the best questions to ask the interviewers?

When asked whether you have any questions, you may be tempted to reply: “No, because you’ve already answered all of my questions in our discussion so far.” But that would be a mistake.

Asking intelligent questions signals intelligence. Questions demonstrate your interest in the job. Appropriate questions can show off the research you have done to prepare for the interview. However, check the organization’s website and other literature to make sure you should not already have gleaned the answers to your questions from elsewhere.

I’ve listed a variety of questions here, but watch your tone – your goal should be to sound interested as opposed to intrusive or prying. Choose from some of the following questions about the day-to-day work:

- ✓ “If I were hired, what would a typical day look like?”
- ✓ “What kind of training would I get initially?”
- ✓ “Why has this vacancy arisen?”

- ✓ “How would my performance be evaluated?”
- ✓ “How do you see this role developing?”
- ✓ “What kinds of career paths do people take within the organization?”

Perhaps ask a few questions about the culture of the organization too:

- ✓ “What kinds of people do well within the organization? Why?”
- ✓ “When other people have joined and not worked out, what did they do wrong?”
- ✓ “Would you mind if I asked why you decided to join the organization?”

However, be aware that a senior manager should perhaps ask different questions from an entry-level candidate. A senior manager would be expected to be more strategic and interested in the broader organization; a more junior candidate may be expected to show more of an interest in the job itself. If you are up for a more senior position, perhaps select a few questions that demonstrate your ability to consider the “bigger picture”:

- ✓ “Are you able to talk about the organization’s plans for the future?”
- ✓ “What new products or services are in the pipeline?”
- ✓ “What are the key priorities for the organization in the next 12 to 18 months?”
- ✓ “How has _____ affected the strategy for the business?” (Insert an appropriate news item into the gap)

Asking intelligent
questions signals
intelligence.

91 What questions must I never ask at an interview?

I've already suggested that you should avoid asking about the salary and benefits until after you have been offered the job (see Q87) in order not to appear greedy and too focused on the money.

But there are also other topics that you should not ask about:

- ✓ *The working hours.* Avoid asking about the likely hours or how often people in the team need to do overtime or work weekends. Such questions effectively scream that you're more worried about getting home on time than doing a good job. Given the choice between you and an equally talented candidate, of course the employer would pick the one who seems more willing to work harder without quibbling about it.
- ✓ *The amount of travel involved in the job.* Again, interviewers could read this question as meaning that you are worried about being away from home and would be reluctant to travel as part of the job.
- ✓ *The possibility of working from home.* Many employers still

secretly believe that employees who “work from home” are doing the laundry and watching TV rather than putting in a full day’s hard graft. Even if you have successfully worked from home in previous jobs, never bring it up.

- ✓ *Childcare provision (especially if you are a woman)*. Unfortunately, some interviewers – typically the older, male ones – have out-dated attitudes towards parents (and especially mothers) in the workplace. They worry that a child who needs to be collected from school or cared for when occasionally ill could reduce your willingness to meet the demands of the job.

Deal with worries you have about the job only *after* you have been offered it. Until then, ask only questions that demonstrate how much you want the role.

Deal with worries you
have about the job
only *after* you have
been offered it.

Should I send a thank-you letter or is that rather old-fashioned?

Simply because a practice is old-fashioned doesn't mean you shouldn't do it. In fact, candidates so rarely send thank-you letters that the ones who do are much more likely to make an impact on the interviewers.

You will read this advice in just about any book on job hunting, but I guarantee you that at least nine in ten readers will think: "No, I'll skip this piece of advice." If you've spent hours getting your application together, researching the organization, and traveling to attend an interview or even several rounds of interviewing, why wouldn't you spend an extra *five minutes* crafting a personalized thank-you note?

Unlike writing thank-you notes to people within your network who have helped you (see Q55), consider carefully whether to use email or a more traditional letter. If you know for certain that you were the last candidate to be seen, you may need to send an email for your missive to reach the interviewers in time to influence their decision. In all other circumstances, however, write a snail-mail as emails are so much more easily deleted or ignored.

In your thank-you note, state in your own words the following points:

- ✓ That you enjoyed meeting the interviewers and hearing about their organization. Talk about how much you were impressed with the interviewers' candor, their new description of a new product that is about to be launched, a particular challenge or opportunity they mentioned, whatever.
- ✓ That you formed a positive impression of the role and the organization and are very keen to be offered the job.
- ✓ That you have the right skills and qualities for the job. Refer in particular to some benefit you could bring to the employer that helps the organization to be more successful.

Why wouldn't you spend
an extra five minutes
crafting a personalized
thank-you note?

The other way to think about thank-you letters is that you can then add the interviewer into your network. Not being offered the job does not mean that the interviewers do not rate you. It's possible that you are a strong candidate but that there was a stronger one, or perhaps a favored internal candidate who was picked for political reasons. Sending a thank-you letter and calling for feedback (see Q93) allows you to add the interviewer's eyes and ears to your ongoing job hunt.

93 Are interviewers likely to give me any useful feedback after interviews?

Interviewers hate giving negative feedback. They say that candidates get argumentative and, increasingly, they are also worried that what they say could be used to sue them as well. Unsurprisingly, many interviewers have decided it's simply easier not to give feedback.

However, that's not to say that no interviewer will give you feedback. Certainly, you will not get any useful feedback on your interview performance if you don't phone them up, ask for it, and chase the interviewer down. Here are some guidelines for seeking effective post-interview feedback:

- ✓ *Don't let interviewers fob you off with a generalized comment.* Interviewers often say, "There was another candidate with more experience." While that may be true, persist in asking how you came across until you get some comments on what *you* could have done better.

-
- ✓ *Assure interviewers that you will not argue back.* Tell the interviewers that they are entitled to their opinions and that you will not contradict them, justify yourself, or try to change their minds. This is often the biggest worry in the mind of an interviewer, so use your charm to reassure them that you will *not* become defensive.
 - ✓ *Ask specific questions about your weaknesses.* Interviewers will naturally want to focus on what you did well. Persist gently in asking for any negative feedback and encourage them to share with you even the smallest piece of constructive criticism.
 - ✓ *Don't get defensive or argue with feedback.* If you say that you will not argue, be certain to keep to your word no matter how unexpected or offensive the interviewers' impressions of you. And manage your tone of voice too. Even the slightest hint of irritation or aggression in your voice could put interviewers off from telling you what they really think.
 - ✓ *Do use phone feedback sessions as an opportunity to add interviewers to your network.* Thank interviewers for their time and, if you get the sense that they genuinely believed you were a strong candidate, ask if they would be willing to keep a look out for other similar opportunities in the future.

Don't get defensive or
argue with feedback.

Help! Why am I getting interviews but not offers?

Roughly speaking, by the time you get invited to interview, you should have around a one in four chance of being offered the job. If you are not receiving at least one offer after every four interviews, you may need to rethink your interview technique.

Consider some of the following options:

- ✓ *Ask your advisors to interview you for the job.* If you have not already done so, ask your advisors (Q52) to interview you (see Q70) against an actual job advert that you were interviewed for but failed to get. Afterwards, ask the advisor to evaluate not only the content of what you said but also your manner in how you said it.
- ✓ *Seek further business acquaintances to interview you.* Seek out further acquaintances (rather than friends who know you well) within your network to interview you. Look for people who actually interview candidates as part of their jobs. Perhaps offer to meet with them towards the end of the day for a mock

interview and buy them dinner afterwards. A meal and a glass of wine could be just the encouragement they need to put the time into interviewing you and giving you feedback.

- ✓ *Seek professional advice.* A career consultant may have more objectivity about how you come across. Plus they are paid to give you the unvarnished truth, no matter how hard-hitting those messages might be (see Q13). However, only pay on a per-hour basis, and be sure to seek help from someone who has actually recruited and interviewed candidates. There are coaches who try to advise candidates despite never having interviewed from the perspective of an employer.
- ✓ *Contact one of the interviewers and ask for **further** feedback.* Choose the interviewer who you had the best rapport with, the one who seemed most helpful and friendly. Explain that you have been rejected from several interviews and ask for any suggestions or observations, no matter how trivial they might seem to the interviewer. Reiterate that you seek only their honest observations and will not get defensive or try to change their mind (see Q93).

95

What should I do if I'm not getting invited to interviews at all?

If you are not being invited to *any* interviews, you should consider all of the following options:

- ✓ *Ask for feedback on the effectiveness of your applications.* Show your advisors (Q52) and acquaintances the actual CVs and covering letters you sent to particular job adverts. Ask for specific advice on how you could have put together more effective applications.
- ✓ *Consider whether you are applying for the wrong sorts of jobs.* No matter how well-written your CVs and covering letters, ask yourself if you're applying for jobs that you are not eligible for. Perhaps you do not have the particular skills, qualifications, or experience that your target role requires. Reflect on whether you may need either to target different sorts of jobs (e.g. ones that play more to the strengths you do have) or to bulk up your

skills, qualifications, and experience through contract or other temporary work, training, volunteering (see Q96), and so on.

- ✓ *Check the effectiveness of your networking efforts.* Networking is widely considered *the* most productive use of a job seeker's time (see Q9). However, networking must be done correctly to deliver results. Consider whether you are networking to the best of your ability (see Q54).
- ✓ *Widen your range of tactics.* Job hunting is, unfortunately, a bit of a numbers game. The more jobs you apply for and the more people you speak to, the more likely you will be to get a job. However, no one can guarantee that networking alone will find you a job. If you have been relying primarily on only a few tactics, consider introducing some new ones into the mix (see Q39).

96

I'm starting to panic – what can I do if I've been unemployed for some time?

Firstly, consider how long people with your skills and experience tend to have to wait before finding a job (see Q6). For example, a senior manager could rightly expect to wait six months or more; an entry-level office worker should on average expect to find a job within a few months.

Consider where the bottlenecks in your strategy may lie. Is it to do with your application strategy (see Q95) or your interview performance (see Q94)? In particular, consider whether your anxiety about finding a job may be obvious to others. Desperation, complaining, or whingeing only make other people feel *less* inclined to help you.

If you have been unemployed for more than three months, you should begin to think about some longer-term plans to ensure that you remain employable and can talk confidently about any time you are spending out of paid work:

- ✓ *Consider taking temporary or contract work.* Employers worry that the long-term unemployed may have lost their ability or motivation to work hard and deliver results. Think about pursuing some form of temporary or contract work, even if the pay is significantly less than you are used to receiving. The objective of doing so is to gain an experience that you can talk about during interviews to prove you are still eminently employable.
- ✓ *Consider voluntary work.* If you struggle to find paid temporary work, consider finding a charity, political party, school, church, hospital, local committee, neighborhood group, or other organization to work with. Ask people within your network for opportunities to use the skills you most want to hone. Even if the work is considerably more menial than you are used to, at least you will be able to talk about working in a team, contributing to a goal, and so on. Consider even working only one or two days a week as an opportunity to put a more positive spin on your time out of paid work.
- ✓ *Sign up for a course or training opportunity.* Many candidates try to cover up periods of employment by claiming that they were engaged in “independent study” (see Q38). Rather than simply pretend to be studying, why not sign up for a course or other development opportunity? Ideally, look to take up a course that enhances your employability in the eyes of your target employers.

Desperation,
complaining, or
whingeing only make
other people feel *less*
inclined to help you.

97 How can I deal with the fact that interviewers get the wrong impression about me?

First impressions count (see Q65). Unfortunately, it can be quite difficult to figure out exactly how others do see you.

No one ever likes to give negative feedback, so don't bother asking friends as they would hate for you to shoot the messenger – i.e. them. Friends won't tell you to your face that you're too quiet or boring or arrogant or lazy or whatever.

Your first port of call should be to seek feedback from interviewers (see Q93, Q94). Failing that, you may need to engage the help of your advisors in meeting some total strangers. Ask your non-executive advisors (see Q52) to set up meetings for you with some of their business acquaintances. Treat the meetings as

information-gathering opportunities to learn about their industries. Once you have finished a particular meeting, ask your advisor to seek feedback on how you came across. Encourage your advisor to seek the negatives much more than the positives.

Once you have feedback – whether it is from an interviewer, an advisor, or an advisor’s business acquaintances – you can work on portraying yourself through your body language and voice appropriately during further interviews (see Q68, Q69).

However, if you wish to make even more of an impact on interviewers, then consider preparing a statement to correct any possible misperceptions that interviewers may have of you. Think about how you can explain any possible contradictions between your ability to do the job and how you initially come across. If, for example, you believe that interviewers feel you are “too relaxed,” “overconfident,” or “insufficiently action-oriented,” you can raise the issue and, by making them aware of it, encourage interviewers to reconsider their first impressions of you.

Friends won't tell you
to your face that you're
too quiet or boring
or arrogant.

Why haven't I found a job yet?

There are two reasons you may not have found a job yet. Firstly, you may be spending your time in the wrong ways – perhaps not being as effective in networking, tailoring CVs to specific jobs, sending carefully crafted speculative letters to organizations, and so on (see Q95). The other reason, however, is that you may not be spending enough time on your job search.

Time and again, I come across job hunters who spend a bit of time flicking through newspapers and surfing online vacancies; they may make a handful of phone calls and send out some emails. But essentially they are not spending ten hours a day on their hunt for a job. Which is a big mistake. Huge.

Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that it takes 200 hours to find an entry-level job. If you spent ten hours a week job hunting, that would mean 20 weeks to find a job. If you spent 20 hours a week looking, it would only take ten weeks. Push those hours up further to a full-time 40 hours a week, and it might only take five weeks.

Of course those numbers are purely for the purposes of illustration. But unless you treat job hunting as a form of unpaid, full-time work, you are not maximizing your prospects.

Here's another common mistake: don't confuse activity with productivity. Ten hours poring over the Internet is mere activity;

ten hours meeting three possibly important people is productivity. At the end of every day, set yourself goals for the next. Here's a sample list of goals that you could set for yourself:

- ✓ Meet at least one *new* contact every day face-to-face. Meet perhaps for interview practice, information, or referrals.
- ✓ Thoroughly research one organization you want to work for. Stop by their shops, showrooms, branches, or distributors; go to their customers, competitors, and suppliers. Read online and in libraries; speak to people within your network too. Then write to the boss of the business and explain what you could do for the organization (see Q57).
- ✓ Speak to people within your network and gain at least five referrals to new contacts for the next day.
- ✓ Send thank-you letters to every person you met or spoke to from the day before.
- ✓ Follow up with a handful of contacts you haven't spoken to for in a month. Pick up the phone – email does not count as *effective* contact!

Sounds like a lot of work, doesn't it? Yes. Tough? Maybe. But don't slacken off just because your full-time job at the moment is looking for a paid job. On the other hand, if you try it for a week and exceed your targets, obviously you're a hard worker – add 10 per cent to your targets for tomorrow.

Don't confuse activity
with productivity

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Should I play off multiple job offers?

Playing off one employer against another is a risky strategy. It's true that you have more power once you have been offered the job, but it would be arrogant to expect an employer to hold an opening for you indefinitely. Employers like to feel that you want the job for reasons other than just the money. Going back and forth between two (or more) offers could enforce the impression that you are interested *only* in the money and eventually annoy an employer enough for them to rescind the offer. Game over. You lose.

Here are some more effective guidelines for negotiating the best deal:

- ✓ *Discuss salary only after you have been offered the job.* I've already mentioned this (see Q87), but it's so important it's worth mentioning again briefly. Deflect questions about salary and never willingly bring the topic up first.
- ✓ *Understand your market value.* Prior to any discussion about salary, ensure you have spoken to recruitment consultants and business acquaintances in similar lines of work to establish what people like you are being paid elsewhere. Bear in mind though that a person doing the same job (e.g. an accountant or

an engineer) could easily get paid much more in one industry than another (compare, for instance, the finance sector and manufacturing).

- ✓ *Persuade the employer to mention an amount first.* Salary negotiations are like a game of poker. Whoever shows their hand first generally loses. Do whatever you can to encourage the employer to state a sum first. You can be sure that this value is towards the *lower* end of what you might reasonably expect to receive.
- ✓ *Focus on your total package.* Bear in mind that benefits such as a pension, car, guaranteed and performance-related bonuses, healthcare cover, insurance, tuition fees, and so on can make up a substantial amount of your total reward package. Consider non-financial elements such as flexible working, more annual leave, and agreements to work from home on certain days. If the employer refuses to move further on salary, seek a compromise on other elements of the total package.
- ✓ *Evaluate the final offer in writing.* Celebrate only after you have seen the offer in writing. Negotiations are tricky and job offers that are not written down are worth nothing.

Salary negotiations are
like a game of poker.
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Any last words of advice before I take the job?

Join an organization without asking the right questions and you could land yourself in the wrong job. Interviewers who are keen to see you join the team may offer a skewed perspective on the organization. Only by digging can you understand whether you will truly “fit” or not.

Seek people within your network who know employees or ex-employees of the organization and encourage them to give you the inside scoop. Ask to return to the organization informally to chat to some of your prospective colleagues too. Offer to take a couple of your peers out for lunch or free drinks after work and get them to dish the dirt (see also Q91 on other questions you may want to ask about).

In particular, ask about the organization’s culture – its unwritten rules and regulations, the intangible code that determines how people should and should not behave towards each other. Otherwise, if you like to have a lot of freedom in your work but the organization likes to manage you tightly, there’s going to be trouble. If you like to spend a lot of time brainstorming ideas with others but the organization prefers people to work on problems alone, you’re going to get lonely.


Consider some of the following questions:

- ✓ What kinds of people succeed in the organization? And what kinds don't?
- ✓ What's the boss of the team *really* like? What are his or her good points and not-so-good points?
- ✓ What are the best things about the organization?
- ✓ How do decisions get made? How much politicking goes on?
- ✓ What are the little things that frustrate you about the team and organization?
- ✓ What do the members of the team do to keep the boss on side? And what annoys the boss?

You should ask as many questions as you see fit – the list represents only a few of the questions you may want to ask. The final choice whether to sign up is yours. But I commend you to look, listen to your advisors, and look again before you leap. Good luck and let me know how you get on!

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Interviewers who are keen to see you join the team may offer a skewed perspective on the organization.



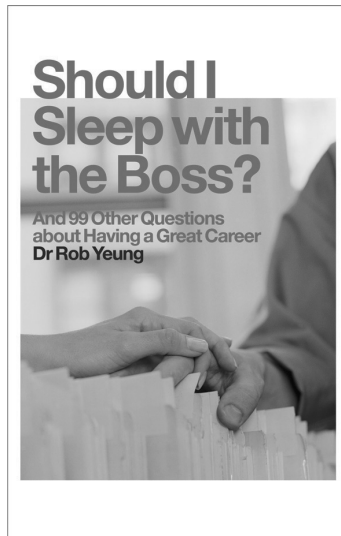
About the Author – Dr Rob Yeung

As a psychologist, Dr Rob Yeung is hired by organizations to find the right person for the job. He trains interviewers and designs assessment centers. He has written the questions for interviewers to ask and told them the answers to listen out for. Over the years he has worked with organizations ranging from big insurance companies, law firms, investment banks, and airlines to small businesses including advertising agencies, a funeral home, and a private detective agency!

Rob does other stuff too. He's an international speaker on topics such as motivation and success, entrepreneurs and leadership. He has written over a dozen books on career and work topics. And you might have seen him presenting TV programmes such as *How To Get Your Dream Job* for the BBC.

For more information, visit www.robyeung.com.

ALSO BY DR ROB YEUNG



Whatever you want from your work, this book is packed with information to help you achieve your career goals. We all know that being smart and good at your job is no longer enough to get ahead. *Should I Sleep with the Boss?* sheds light on exactly what it takes in the modern-day workplace to get paid more, find your motivation, and leave the office on time.

This provocative book provides pithy, informative, and entertaining answers to 100 questions such as: How can I manage my useless boss? How can I escape the ranks of middle management? How can I deflect criticism? How can I learn to say "no"? How can I find my calling in life?

Should I Sleep with the Boss? lays down the rules for success at work in the 21st century. You'll find in this book the answers to the questions you *need* to be asking. Whatever you want to change or achieve at work, this book will show you how.