

Life | A bullshit guide to CVs, interviews, and getting a job

An anti-advice column.



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I don't work. Well, I don't do paid work. I haven't done for two years. The reason for this is fairly simple: I can't stand the bullshit and ridiculous tediousness of the contemporary world. I much prefer to spew my quasi-bonkers views on life and politics on the Internet. It's much more satisfying.

However, when I did operate in what is laughably called the "normal" world, I was actually quite good at bullshitting my way into jobs and passing interviews. What follows are my tips for doing so. As for keeping jobs, well, that's always been my problem. I can get them, but I can't keep them. You'll have to work that part out yourself.

These tips are not my own. They represent a collection of ideas that I've picked up from various career blogs, chit chat, and books over the years. There is little originality here. All I've done is screened out the advice that didn't work for me, and put the advice that did in my own words. Advice from an American career blog will not always translate to Britain, especially as the American cultural style tends to favour as desirable behaviour that is seen as boorish or overly aggressive in Britain.

I suppose the same goes for whether or not this advice rings true in Bangalore or Cape Town. I don't know. Maybe. For good or ill, we live in an increasingly homogenised world. Corporate culture, a sickly monoculture, extends to every continent. So I imagine a lot of this advice will hold good wherever you are. This advice does not always extend to every sector. It is more attuned to those working in the private sector, and not the state-regulated professions. The procedures for doctors or university lecturers are often much more constrained and require very specific forms and styles of engagement, but some of these tips still apply.

1. If you get an interview, they already think you can do the job. The purpose of the interview is to check if you're personable, sane, and plausible. They want to see if you're a drooling imbecile or an asshole who'll piss everyone off. The most important part of the interview is to build rapport and reassure them that you are what your CV says you

are. It's useful to hold this knowledge in mind because it's an immediate boost to your confidence. You're already chosen, and your interview is a matter of consolidation. But it's also important to understand what you're trying to achieve in the interview. The interview is as much, if not more, about your character and demeanour rather than your skills. In this sense, your actual demonstrated knowledge is not the most important point. A good interview should be like a chat or conversation where there is mutual rapport. It's not an interrogation, if you treat it like one then that's what it will be. The whole process will be brittle and awkward. A chat is natural and flows.

2. Get to the point. Two pages is the maximum for a CV. One page is better. Select the highlights. People get bored reading twelve page tomes and can't remember anything about you by the time they get to picking interview candidates. If you give them the edited highlights, you'll stick out amid all the volumes the same length as *War and Peace*. There are very few people who have lived lives interesting enough to include every biographical detail about their career. Don't do it.

3. Your CV is not a factual report of everything you've done since you left school. Your CV is a story that sells your highlights. People will often tell you that you need to lie on your CV to get a job. This is not so. What you need to understand is that a CV is a non-fiction story. You have control over the story you tell about yourself, and there are many ways you can tell this story without lying.

4. Don't lie on your CV.

5. What do I mean by telling a story? I mean telling a non-fiction story. You need to make it compelling and interesting. How do you do this? You do this with details. The details make a good story, and it's generalities that are boring.

6. Consequently, avoid vague buzzwords that convey no information. I mean words or phrases like "world class" or "excels at customer service". These mean nothing and convey nothing. You need to make every line on your CV a descriptive element about yourself. So, for example, if you worked in a retail clothes shop you should say something like, "Presented and arranged window display for three clothing lines. Handled orders for 300 new items per week." If you want to demonstrate good customer service, you could briefly describe a time when you helped a customer. Similarly, if you work in sales concentrate on how many sales you made per week in your previous jobs. Be specific. Most people are not specific, and consequently any figures or details will stand out – even if those were modest in the context of that job. Your next employer doesn't know that.

This is how you craft a story about yourself, and you can tailor it by excluding certain facts according to the job you're going for. Poetry and literature are about describing the world precisely. Describe your world precisely so your potential employer can form a vivid picture of you. Telling your employer that you "excel at world class customer service" or whatever paints no picture. It just says you're like everyone else. Specific points on your CV also allow the interview to flow, because the employer will ask you questions about a specific experience you can remember. It's easier to answer the question "How did you make 200 sales a week?" than it is to answer the question "It says here you excel at converting leads. How do you do that?". The latter question, being general, puts you on the spot. But you can easily remember without effort how you did your job every day for months and describe that. Detail in the CV makes the interview easier.

7. Ask questions as you go along, don't wait for the end of the interview. Ask genuine questions about what you'll be doing, who you'll be working with, and what your section of the company has planned. Ask them what they expect from you. Don't just ask "How much will I be paid?" or "What are the paths for career advancement?". These are basic bitch questions that show laziness, selfishness, and lack of thought. They'll almost always ask at the end, "Do you have any questions?" It's useful to say, "No, I've already asked about everything I want know." This sounds impressive.

8. You need to be memorable in the right way. This means being authentic in your answers and showing genuine interest in the company.

9. Salary negotiations happen after you've been offered the job. Don't let them pin you down with salary details in the interview. If they ask about your salary expectations say something like, "I expect the industry average for someone with my skills and experience." They will try to pin you down. The point is to get them to name a figure rather than naming a figure yourself. This is because it's to their advantage to make you guess a figure that's much lower than they're prepared to pay for. Try to dance around. If you're absolutely forced to give a figure, ask for a higher – though not unrealistic – figure. If they want you, they'll try to beat you down. Don't lowball a figure. If they're talking about money, they're not going to withdraw the job offer over it. They'll negotiate. Employers count on people losing their nerve at this stage in order to beat them down on salary because the interviewee is frightened to lose the job. Hold your nerve. Salary discussions are a negotiation, and rarely – if ever – about if they'll actually offer you the job.

10. Research the company in a general way, but there's no need to be autistic about it. You don't need to be able to spout off their quarterly returns. You need to understand what they do, the company's immediate priorities, what your part of the company does,

and any major industry or world events that have affected that company and sector. You need to be able to describe this fluently. As you describe the company, take the opportunity to ask questions and be interested in what the company does.

11. Run a practice interview. Don't worry too much about getting accurate questions or trying to model an interview exactly as it will happen. There are certain set questions that always come up. There are lists of these online. President Eisenhower once observed that plans are useless, but planning is essential. The interview practice will be nothing like the actual interview and don't worry about making it so. The point, as with making a plan, is to prepare the ground in your mind. This subtle preparation will make the actual event easier, even if the real interview is nothing like the practice – as real life is nothing like the plan.

12. Prepare two or three weaknesses (and strengths) to discuss. A question about your weaknesses is a pretty common one. Everybody has weaknesses. Confidence is appealing and essential, but denying weakness is not a sign of confidence. It's a sign of delusion. Select your weaknesses, and also tell them the ways you address them. So, for example, if your weakness is planning, tell them how you use apps, spreadsheets, calendars or whatever to help you prioritise.

Select weaknesses that are not directly relevant for the job. For example, if you're applying to be a voice actor and you're bad at maths tell them that. They'll just say, "That's not relevant for the job." The point of this question is not to humiliate you by making you tell people what you're bad at. The point is to see if you understand that you have weakness (self-awareness and arrogance) and that you can think of ways to address those weakness (desire to improve and ability to plan). In this respect, it does not matter if the stated weaknesses have anything to do with the actual job.

13. Try to establish early in the interview who is making the hiring decision. Interview panels usually consist of three people. There will be a girl from HR. She will be the least important person and will only ask boilerplate questions. You don't have to worry about her much, just don't upset her. She's there to do the paperwork when the person who actually hires you makes a decision. Once you know who's in charge, concentrate on building a rapport with them.

14. Dress appropriately. This usually means wearing a suit. Brush your teeth and scrub up. Look in a mirror before you go in. Shave or trim your beard. I know this is fucking obvious, but a lot of people don't do it.

15. Never criticise your former employers, even if they were awful.

16. It is perfectly acceptable, if you genuinely do not know an answer to a question, to answer “I don’t know”. You can get away with this once, and I have done this in interviews and still been hired. If you really don’t know the answer to a question, it’s better to say you don’t know than waste everyone’s time bullshitting. It shows honesty and willingness to be wrong, if nothing else. If the answer occurs to you later in the interview – this being how the human mind works – there is no shame in saying, “I’ve remembered the answer to that earlier question.” Equally, if you don’t know the answer you should turn the question round and probe them about the correct answer. “I don’t know about System X10–231. Can you me about how you work with that system here?” This shows that even if you don’t know, you’re not floored by an unexpected situation and are willing to learn. In other words, you turn an apparent failure into a strength.

17. Remember that you are interviewing them as much as they are interviewing you. You are trying to work out if this is the right place for you. Do you want to work for this guy? It’s important to think this way because doing so places you in a position of confidence and power. I don’t mean that you need to be arrogant and railroad the people interviewing you. It’s simply that, as with sex, nothing is less appealing than desperation – even if your situation is desperate it is important to maintain your dignity and self-respect and act as if your have options, although you don’t seem to have those at the moment. Also, it’s worth being prepared to walk away from a job or job offer if you get a bad feeling about it. This depends on how desperate your are for money, but it’s better to reject a job rather than be miserable in it. And, who knows, perhaps the company is dodgy or up to no good. Trust instincts.

18. In a connected point, do not build a false persona based around buzzwords or what you perceive to be necessary to get the job. A large chunk of humanity does this, and they consequently become sort of blank space of corporate idiocies. As stated above, you need to build rapport in the interviewers and make the interview into a chat. However, you can’t just “be yourself” as you are with your friends. You’re not going to swear or start talking about football or sex or whatever – not if you want a bloody job.

Your work persona should be your persona around friends and family, just dialled back somewhat. The appropriate level is about how you are with a favourite uncle or aunt. You’re respectful, honest, and friendly, but you’re not – probably – as extreme as you are with your closest friends. If you build a false persona for a job, as I know for experience, you will be miserable because you will struggle to maintain it for months on end. Your employer will be bewildered that the person they hired is nothing like the person in the interview – everyone will end up dissatisfied and confused.

19. Don’t suck up.

20. Proofread. I've watched a CV be rejected on the spot for a spelling error. Read it seven times, and then give it to three friends to check it over.

21. Don't use stupid fonts on a CV. Don't do anything "cute" or "clever" on a CV. You know what I mean, you think it's going to make you stick out but it'll just piss people off. You have to stand out in making a convincing presentation, not by engaging in attention grabbing like a teenage girl.

22. Ignore all rejection. There are people who like to keep a score of CVs sent out and interviews they've had. They will then make a rod for their own back by complaining, "I've sent out 72 CVs and had 5 interviews. Still no one will employ me!" These people eventually turn into bitter and resentful creatures and give up, lamenting that the universe and the gods have always been against them forever and everyone hates them anyway so why even try! There is no iron rule that you must be employed after applying for a certain number of jobs or a certain number of interviews.

The universe owes you nothing, and better people than you have been washed down the gutter on the least pretext. You must continue indifferently, don't even keep a score. Only consider your objective: to get a job. Any other thinking is futile and pointless. However, if you are being rejected on a regular basis ask other people to review your CV and interview style. It is possible you're doing something wrong. Continue to refine the CV and interview style until you get a job.

23. Don't try.

24. Don't care (be diligent, but be indifferent).

25. If a company rejects you, it's because they're not good enough for you. Whether or not this is true in a global sense is impossible to know, but it will help you immeasurably to maintain that they are foolishly short-sighted in not hiring you and will live to regret it. This also works in relationships with the opposite sex. I don't mean to say you must be resentful towards the company or partner. That is the attitude of someone who thinks the company or partner "owes" them something. Nobody owes you anything.

If you wish to proceed from a position of power, you must assume your own awesomeness (or at least your own self-worth). There is nothing wrong with this, and many people conflate self-worth or self-respect with arrogance or selfishness. They then refuse to value themselves. You are there to give the company something valuable, it might be something very modest like being able to answer the phones effectively or perhaps it's something impressive like building a supercomputer. The point is to be conscious of what you're bringing to them. You are going to add value to the company, it's not a matter of them being "kind" or "nice" to you by giving you a job. They should be

aware that you are good at what you do, even if that is modest, and that they will benefit from having you.

26. Find out the name of the person who is making the hiring decision. It's the least you can do. This is especially relevant if you're applying to be a journalist or a job that requires you to be inquisitive in any way. If you can't even be bothered to find out the name of the person making the hiring decision, how are you going to check any other details? If in doubt, telephone the company. That can be a good tiding, especially if you speak to the person who's going to interview you. By making first contact, you immediately begin to establish rapport. And it's a lot better to write "Dear Ms. Hatcher" on the covering letter than "Dear Sir/Madam." We are all egotists and people are immediately flattered that you used their name, even if it was just a question of a 30-second Google search.

27. Bullet points, bold headings, and concision are your friend. Keep information spaced out and highlighted with bold headings. Do not write a covering letter of more than 400 words. Use bullet points in the covering letter to highlight your three most recent relevant achievements.

28. Read the instructions when applying for a job.

29. If you have never been employed, take any job. If you can't get any job, even bar work, volunteer at a charity. If you can't do that, make sure you do something productive like contributing to Wikipedia or making YouTube videos about your favourite video game. These can be leveraged into points for your CV. The point isn't what you do. It doesn't matter if you've created 300 videos about World of Warcraft providing tips on how to fight effectively in that game. The point is that by doing these things you demonstrate commitment, diligence, and an ability to learn. Those 300 videos can become a point like this on a CV: "Created 300 videos on defeating goblins from the eternal night world. Generated 1,200 views per week and 120 comments. Designed logo, banner art, and video graphics for channel and video". Employers are perfectly human and sensible. They are looking at ability and capability, not necessarily the content of what you do.

Don't get hung up on some vague notion of social approval that you learned at school or university. Don't worry that, say, World of Warcraft – or whatever you like – is "sad", plenty of people play these games. The point is to do something constructive and show that you can stick at it. People will see the potential that can be fed into almost any type of work.

University degrees are basically a very large and expensive version of the same thing. The content of your degree is not so important outside the professions – it just shows that you have diligence and certain baseline capacity to work independently. This is why it doesn't matter if your degree is in Gender Studies or History, if you're just doing a basic corporate job. The degree shows a certain capacity for development, that's all.

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