



## Job Candidates and Red Flags: What Do You Do?

By Kathy Gurchiek 8/18/2015

What do you do when a candidate takes a cellphone call, trembles uncontrollably or maintains a yoga pose throughout an interview? What warning signs should a hiring manager or HR professional shrug off and what should they consider as red flags when talking to job candidates?

It depends on the number of flags and how many there are, said Bonnie Lewis, HR director at Atlanta-based law firm Morris, Manning & Martin, in a Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) LinkedIn discussion.

“I would address flags that relate to the resume or responses they’ve given—‘I’m concerned that your resume indicates experience with software XYZ but your responses don’t show that you have much knowledge about it,’ ” Lewis said.

While she said she doesn’t necessarily address warning signs such as appearance or body language, she recalled pointing out to a candidate that her nontraditional hair color did not fit the conservative nature of the firm for which she was interviewing.

Gloria Miller, assistant professor of marketing, management and general business at Austin Peay State University and an HR manager for more than 8 years, has ended a few interviews early. Among the more memorable: the person who started unpacking his lunch on Miller’s desk and the candidate who hit her when telling a joke.

### Rooting Out the Truth

Kaitlyn Annaert, HR manager for online marketplace Voices.com, advised being on the alert for a mismatch between a candidate’s resume and the candidate’s interview answers.

“You should start to get suspicious and ask some probing questions to get to the bottom of the incongruity,” she said. “Comments about manager disputes or when someone says negative things about a company they previously worked at should be a sign to pause.”

Peg Newman, of executive search firm Sanford Rose Associates in Salt Lake City, recalled a candidate who on paper sounded like an excellent match for a call center opening. His resume made it appear he’d managed a call center. Unfamiliar with that call center, and curious as to why he’d left such an important position, Newman dug deeper for answers during the interview.

It turned out the candidate had just been released from prison in Arizona, where his work experience occurred behind bars. His felony conviction for murder ultimately knocked him out of the running.

“My favorite phrase is ‘People are messy,’ ” said Newman, who has 30 years of recruiting experience. It’s common, she added, for candidates to list a college degree before earning it, such as the applicant who was a college sophomore.

“If someone has listed a degree or has it listed in a way that leaves a question mark for me, I’ll just ask for verification: ‘You list a bachelor’s [degree] in business ... so you’ve completed the degree?’ ”

If the candidate does not indicate reasons for leaving employment previous job or provides an odd answer, she said she frames her question as a clarification rather than an accusation: “You list ‘personal’ as the reason for leaving—so did you quit with two weeks’ notice or were you released by the company?’ ”

### **Character Traits**

Rudeness, tardiness, improper spelling and poor grammar raise alarm bells for some.

“If a candidate cannot bother to arrive on time to an interview, why would they treat their commitment to their job any differently?” asked Tom Gimbel, president and CEO of Chicago-based staffing and recruitment firm LaSalle Network.

Inquire why they are late to give them a chance to explain but be wary of the candidate who is full of excuses, he advised. Distracting behavior also should be addressed, he added.

“We’ve seen candidates who have their phone out and are checking it during the entire interview. I’ve also seen candidates who will bring knitting supplies and knit in an interview.”

Consider whether the candidate’s actions or responses have a bearing on the job opening.

“If it is a red flag that directly conflicts with the job description, I always acknowledge it and explain how the job description indicates it as a red flag,” said Laura Paramoure, president of professional training and coaching firm eParamus.

If it’s a personality issue, she said in the SHRM LinkedIn discussion, don’t mention it but bear that in mind when making your hiring decision.

“A good attitude can be more important for a person to succeed; a good culture fit is as important—some say more important—than any required skill.”

### **Keep the Candidate Focused**

The interview is the most critical part of the hiring process. However, some candidates don’t always remember to maintain a professional demeanor, pointed out Alex Scharf of Edelman Corporate Technology in Chicago.

“Candidates occasionally get too comfortable with an interviewer and discuss personal issues instead of the role at hand. From candidates dishing about their divorces or their weekend escapades at bars, we’ve seen it all.”

Victoria Betancourt, founder of a California-based recruitment and consulting firm Coneybear Cleantech, said she asks a candidate to elaborate—“Why is that?” or “Tell me more about that”—when she hears something that raises an eyebrow.

“If they admit to having a felony or misdemeanor, I always ask about what happened and tend to dig for more information unless we are in illegal territory, such as marital status, gender or sexual orientation,” she told SHRM Online in an e-mail.

“I have learned to interrupt people when they are off-topic in an irritating way. However, because an interview is all about getting information, I usually let them go on unless I have decided not to hire them.”

CareerBuilder suggests that when a candidate raises questions that seem inappropriate or makes comments that seem strange, refocus the person with a reminder that they are there to talk about a professional position and the related job responsibilities.

Don't be too quick to judge, though, as some professionals pointed out on LinkedIn. Some characteristics that may at first seem to be problematic—a lack of eye contact, for example—could be tied to a disability.

“We recently hired someone with autism and anxiety disorder,” said Mary Laughlin, HR director at California-based nonprofit Antonini Enterprises, in the LinkedIn discussion. He had the experience and knowledge the company was looking for but during the hiring process he was overly nervous and “the interview went terribly bad.” They called him back the next time the position opened and Laughlin asked him to meet her before he interviewed with the owner. She addressed his earlier nervousness and tried to put him at ease.

“He finally did disclose [his autism] to us and we were able to discuss the job duties as they might relate to [it],” as well as any challenges, and hired him.

Another tactic is to ask the candidate if he or she is OK and offer to reschedule the interview, if necessary.

“I've had candidates come to interviews after a death in the family or a traumatic situation. In these cases, candidates are not at their best,” Gimbel said. “You could miss out on a great candidate if you don't acknowledge the situation.”

### **Consider whether the candidate's dress or nature is a factor in performing the job.**

“Meeting someone who is a little awkwardly dressed or shy is fine if the role is something internal,” said Andrea Berkman-Donlan, founder of personal brand development and career advancement firm The Constant Professional located in the New York City area. “If the position is an outside sales or business development position, presentation is a key factor.”

Newman said she has seen her share of inappropriate candidate behavior—the candidate who wore sunglasses throughout the interview, the woman covered in pet hair and dander—but that she offers guidance to candidates who showed promise.

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“Try to keep as nonjudgmental as possible,” she advised, and frame anything potentially embarrassing, such as hygiene or dress, as a learning opportunity. “I think a lot of times they’ve never had to actively seek a job in any kind of professional way,” and instead relied on referrals from family and friends.

“As HR professionals we need to remember that the awkwardness goes both ways,” said Glen Loveland, HR manager for media organization CCTV News. “We need to slow down and appreciate the art of interviewing and getting to know our candidates,” he added. “One of the best interviews I ever had was from my former boss at Disney, who insisted that I have a beverage from the company fridge during the interview. It made me relaxed.”

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