

CAREER & CASH

A woman with dark hair and glasses, wearing a dark blue blazer over a white blouse and a white skirt with a black and grey geometric pattern. She is holding a large yellow folder and looking off to the side with a slight smile.

20 Real Reasons Why You Didn't Get the Job

Top female CEOs and managers from SA and beyond – who look at thousands of CVs a year between them – reveal the lesser-known interview mistakes and how to avoid them ▶

BY AOIFE STUART-MADGE

With youth unemployment rates in South Africa reaching chronic levels (a whopping 48% of 15- to 34-year-olds are unemployed, according to recent figures), competition for jobs is fiercer than ever. The country's big firms receive a crazy number of applications for graduate-entry jobs, so it's crucial that you stand out at that all-important job interview for all the right reasons. We quizzed top female CEOs and business managers for their interview tips, and the quirky reasons why they *won't* hire you. Read on...

1 You had a sugary breakfast

The wrong breakfast before a big job interview can not only affect your energy levels, but it can even negatively impact your ability to speak clearly. Connie Mdladla, MD of Khaas Logistics, says it's her personal bugbear when an interviewee has obviously indulged in something sugary beforehand. 'Sugar pieces in your mouth pop when you speak,' she says, adding that it results in 'a slight speech impediment'. Nix the pancakes and opt for slow-release carbs for breakfast instead.

2 You didn't take advantage of the Q&A

If you're mute during that crucial 'Do you have any questions for us?' stage of an interview, it could scupper your chances of getting hired, says Bainang Mpolokeng, director of the Local Government Business Network. 'Turn the tables: ask questions and convert your interview into a conversation.

You're not being interviewed by computers, so make sure to touch the human element of your interviewer.'

3 It was a round-hole/square-peg situation

'Fitting into the company culture is paramount for a prospective employee,' says Margrit Wolff, managing director of Mercury Freight. 'We are a direct bunch who tell it like it is and use colourful language, and I often raise my voice when stressed. We tell candidates this, but many are shocked when it happens.'

4 You didn't catch their name

During those tense introductory moments of an interview, when you are busy worrying if your hand is too sweaty, it can be difficult to catch your interviewer's name. But paying attention to this one detail could pay dividends, says Bianca Shakinovsky, co-owner of Penta Floor. 'Use the interviewer's name often – people like the sound of their own name,' she adds.

5 You applied for the wrong job

When you're looking for work, it's tempting to cast your net as wide as possible in the hope that something will turn up. But when you're lost in that job-hunt vortex, it can sometimes take the sharp eye of a prospective employer to realise you're not right for a role. Shan Harker, PR manager at Roving Ambassador, says she often sees people applying for jobs they aren't passionate about. 'Don't apply for a position unless you're truly interested in the company and position, otherwise you won't portray the passion that's needed to land the job or indeed project enough interest to show you can do the job,' she says.

6 You fluffed a curve ball question

Interviewers can ask bizarre interview questions ('If you could be any kind of animal, what would you be?', etc) and how you handle these curve balls can make or break your chances of landing the job. Helen Joubert, general manager of Mando South Africa, says that it's important to remember these questions aren't designed to trip you up, but to give you a chance to show your ability to think on your feet. 'Remember: the person interviewing you generally wants you to do well,' she says. 'Always be honest and substantiate answers. I was asked whether I tell lies at my first-ever job interview. I wasn't ready for that question, but I answered it honestly and with a bit of humour – and I got the job.

It's a question I always ask when I'm interviewing someone now – it tells me a lot about the individual.'

7 You read from a script

During a job interview, it can be hard to think on the spot so it's tempting to memorise chunks of information that you can recite ad nauseam. But this will make you sound robotic and will stop your potential employer seeing the real you. As well as your professional experience, employers are looking at how your life experience shapes who you are and where you want to go. Emma Codd, managing partner for talent at Deloitte, says you should be yourself. 'Employers want people from various backgrounds, not corporate cutouts,' she says. 'Everyone's life experiences are different; yours make you who you are. At Deloitte, we want to hire people who can bring a range of perspectives and experiences to our firm.'

8 You didn't pick up on their doubt

It's a common interview question yet one that is dreaded. When the inevitable 'What are your weaknesses?' question comes up, use it as an opening to ease any doubts in the employer's mind that you are the right candidate for the job. To this end, Mel Barclay, career coach at Lee Hecht Harrison Penna, advises you to avoid listing a weakness that is an integral part of the role and instead use this slot of the interview to 'fill in' the gaps in your skill set. ▶

'Avoid talking about your weaknesses against the selection criteria,' she says. 'Directly ask, "What would make you hesitate about hiring me for this role?" This gives you the opportunity to provide further evidence of your capacity to learn.'

9 You steamrolled the money question

Canadian woman Taylor Byrnes went viral recently when she had her interview with food delivery service Skip The Dishes cancelled after she asked how much she'd be getting paid. But while most employers won't go to that extreme, there is a time and a place to ask about benefits, says Nargis Gani, founder of Future Africa Consulting And Training professional services. Gani says the candidate question section at the end of an interview should be reserved for researched questions about the job, not about how many paid leave days you'll get. 'Do thorough research on the company and have some questions ready for the interviewer,' she says. 'Steer away from asking questions about remuneration until the offer stage.'

10 You skipped the tweet and greet

In the social media age, making contact with informed people in your industry is just a click of a button away. And making virtual connections with companies in your chosen industry (even if it's just a Twitter follow) can provide a vital research tool before a big interview. Erica Langhi, senior solution architect at IT company Red Hat, says this is particularly relevant if you want to work in IT. 'Coders are on the Internet and are much more accessible than many people in other professions,' she says. 'You can use sites like Reddit to ask coders for specific advice. Get in touch with companies and tell them why you want to work with them, and show them why they shouldn't pass up the opportunity to hire you!'

11 You tried to be perfect

'I do like when people indicate that they're not afraid to fail in an interview,' says Gillian Tans, CEO of *Booking.com*. 'People are often scared to talk about failures during an interview, but we like to hire people who aren't afraid to test new ideas, even if they fail. I see a candidate's willingness to be open about this during an interview as an indication that this person is willing to push the boundaries, which is critical to innovation in any business.'

12 Your brand message missed the mark

An interview is like a sales pitch with you as the product, so treat it like one, says travel entrepreneur and founder of *Yourcaribbeantravel.com* Jamie-Lee Abtar. 'Just like marketing a brand, be very clear about your values. The interview is your time to communicate key messages. Keep an eye out for nonverbal cues (such as fiddling with pens) and a lack of mirroring behaviour that shows your message isn't hitting the target. And if it isn't, it's time to change your tactics.'

13 You wore red

Tracey Garreffa, founder and director of Mistral clothing, says that the colour of your interview wardrobe is as important as the cut. 'Don't wear red: it's a warning sign that indicates danger,' she says. 'It gives totally the wrong signal to a future employer. Wear cool blues and greens to show assertiveness and calm. Avoid natural tones, which may appear boring. Navy and black are predictable, so always try to add a twist to make it more interesting.'

14 You blew it with a weak handshake

Motivational coach and 'Kitty Talks' podcaster Kitty Waters says your handshake gives away much more than you realise.



PHOTOGRAPHY SCOPE BEAUTY/PAUL SUESSE/MAGAZINE FEATURES, TRUNK ARCHIVE/FOLIO ID/IMAX VON TREU

'It's imperative to shake hands with a firm yet not overpowering grip, and look the interviewer in the eye,' she says. 'I don't trust people who don't hold my gaze. I had one candidate who didn't do this and I felt they were lying the entire time.'

15 You fell into the apology trap

'If I've invited you in for an interview, it's because I think you have the skills and experience I'm looking for – but I also want to understand your limitations,' says Lea von Bidder, co-founder of Ava fertility-monitoring bracelets. 'Sadly, a lot of well-qualified women will spend precious interview time explaining how they lack experience in an area or how they're new in another. Make sure you talk about the things that you're good at. If I have concerns about you as a candidate, asking questions usually leads to an open conversation about your suitability for the role.'

16 You sounded like Siri

While it's important to check out a company's website before an interview, quoting it back to the employer verbatim is not a good idea. 'Don't just repeat what's on the website,' says Kerrine Bryan, founder of Butterfly Books Limited. 'I once conducted a telephone interview where the candidate was obviously reading directly from the website. He even repeated and corrected a sentence he had misread. Not impressive.' Instead, interpret the information to give your view on the company's ethos and mission – and more importantly, where you fit in.

17 You asked something you should have known

'I find one of the most annoying traits is when a candidate asks too many inane questions,' says Rachel Parsonage, MD of beauty company KMI Brands. 'In today's world you can find so much information about the company through LinkedIn, social media, websites and industry events.'

I recommend sticking to a maximum of five questions – and don't ask anything that can be found online.'

18 Your ego took over

Yes, an interview is a time to big yourself up, but you also have to be prepared to talk about your weaknesses. 'Always consider your weaknesses and strengths versus the role – be prepared to discuss both,' says Paula Tinkler, commercial director at chemicals firm Chemoxy. 'Don't show off: the interviewer wants to know your strengths, but make sure you present these without boasting.'

19 You complained about a previous job

'The last thing you should do during a job interview is speak negatively about anything – that includes your current employer,' says Rupa Ganatra, the founding partner of global business summit Millennial 20/20. 'This can paint you in a negative light with the prospective employer. You should take the initiative to turn everything into a positive learning experience wherever possible. This will position you as someone who uncovers solutions to problems, rather than dwelling on the issues themselves.'

20 It's not what you said...

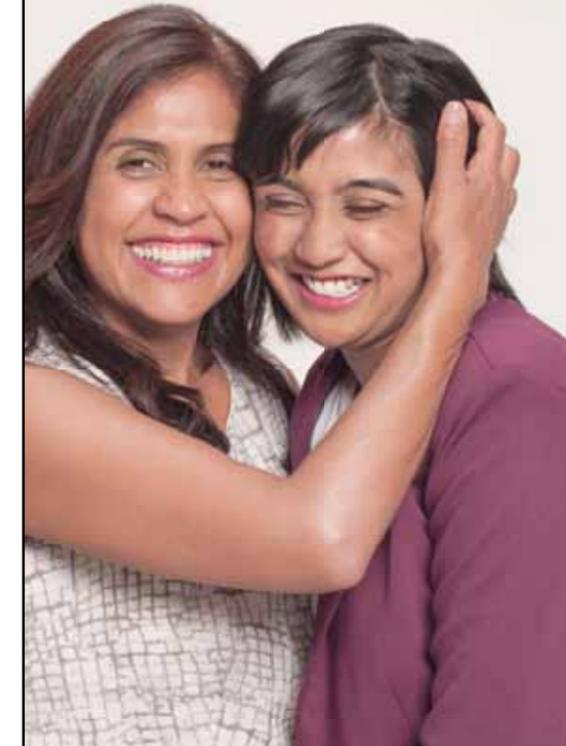
You may have aced the hard-line questioning, but nonverbal cues can tell a prospective employer much more than your CV ever could. 'Eye contact, fiddling with your hair and what you wear to the interview are all indicators of what a candidate is all about,' says Viv Gordon, MD and recruitment consultant at Viv Gordon Placements. 'Chewing gum in an interview is not great. A real turn-off is someone who ate garlic the night before (or at lunch) and reeks of it.' Finally, try to keep nerves under wraps. 'Some candidates have a nervous giggle, which would be best to try and control,' she says. 'It makes you seem immature and not serious.' ■

"Without her, I couldn't have done it."

- Niamaat, Mother

"I couldn't have done it without her."

- Nur-Jehan, Daughter



Handbag Cover

Women do so much for so many and seldom put themselves first, that's why we do, with **1st for Women's tailor-made Handbag Cover**, included in our home contents insurance. So should your handbag be lost, stolen or damaged, you get up to R5000 cover, so you can still do what you do best.

Let us put you first. For an insurance quote, call 0861 11 38 96 or SMS 'first' to 42859 and we'll call you back.



1st for women

ffw.co.za

T&Cs apply. Authorized FSP 15261.