

How (Not) To Get a Job in Security

By Jeff Combs

Every morning my colleagues and I meet to discuss a variety of things ranging from clients to the industry to our individual search activities. We talk about our successes and sometimes our frustrations. In a recent meeting, the topic of how candidates shoot themselves in the foot came up. Everyone was able to provide a few good examples of candidates we've worked with, who, for a variety of reasons, were their own worst enemies. It became apparent during this conversation that there were some valuable object lessons for security professionals looking to make their next career move. So in this article, I'm going to point out a few of the mistakes candidates have made in the hopes that you won't make the same ones. Taken at face value, the blunders I'm about to describe may be considered funny, but blowing a great opportunity, regardless of reason, isn't funny at all.

Prepare and Show You Care

The most common mistakes candidates make is lack of adequate preparation for an interview. This can include anything from getting a good night's sleep to dressing appropriately to remembering what you wrote about yourself in your resume. A large number of candidates get washed out because they are unable to convey enough enthusiasm or energy during an interview. Other candidates show up either dressed too shabbily or too formally. If you're interviewing for a Big 4 consulting gig, it stands to reason that you should dress in a way that reflects how you'd be perceived by *their* clients. Obvious, right? Wrong. Here's a real-life example of a candidate who dropped the ball in several ways. Not long ago, a Big 4 client complained about a candidate that was presented by another search firm. The candidate showed up wearing ripped pants and carrying a skateboard. The hiring manager swallowed hard and proceeded to go over the candidate's resume. The candidate yawned and responded with something to the effect of, "I don't remember what I wrote in my resume, I threw it together a long time ago." As the client told me this, I could almost hear the sound of a train wrecking in the background. Clearly this candidate either didn't care or was too stupid to recognize how poorly they had represented themselves.

Too Much Enthusiasm

Just as lack of enthusiasm and preparedness will ruin your chances, over-enthusiasm can hurt you, too. I once represented a sharp, energetic candidate in the early stages of his career. Unfortunately, his enthusiasm was his undoing. After finishing a round of tough interviews, my candidate was overwhelmed when the interviewers told him he passed their test. As a matter of fact, he was so enthusiastic, he leapt from his chair like a game show contestant and hugged the interviewers. Not surprisingly, they decided not to hire him. The lesson learned? After finishing a successful round of interviews, do not try to hug the people you've been meeting with. Eye contact and a firm handshake will suffice.

Get Organized

Let me offer another example of what not to do. Last year, one of my

colleagues was representing a candidate to a large pharmaceutical company for a director-level role. When asked to describe the initiatives he led for his current company, he responded by plopping his backpack onto the conference room table and pulling out his laptop, spilling a pile of papers all over the floor. This is an excellent way to make an impression on management regarding your organizational skills. Unfortunately, it's not the right impression. When interviewing for an executive management role, do not ask the client to wait while you rummage through your Shrek backpack to find the answers.

Keep Private Company Information Private

Here's another example. A colleague was representing a candidate to a financial services firm for a role focused on developing risk assessment methodologies and metrics for outsource partners. The candidate was extremely well qualified and had just finished developing a similar program for her current company. The client asked the candidate for samples of her work that would demonstrate her writing skills. The candidate complied, but (insert sound of car crash here) there was a problem. The examples the candidate supplied revealed some highly sensitive information about her current company. Unfortunately, despite the fact that everyone was really excited to hire her, they could not move forward due to her mistake. So, it's safe to say that when the company you're interviewing with asks you to provide writing samples, do not give them unsanitized risk assessment reports from the company you are currently working for.

Lying

I've saved this final example for last for a reason. This one isn't funny at all, and it happens often enough that it needs to be addressed. I'm not even going to tell the story behind it because I don't want to be flippant on the subject. To cut to the chase... ***job applications are considered legal documents and all of the information that you write down and sign your name to must be verifiable in a background check.*** In fact, job applications are the basic template on which most background checks are based. Therefore, lying about compensation or education or any other detail on your application is completely unacceptable. It's also a fantastic way to blow an opportunity and damage your reputation. Always remember, as an Information Security professional, you are providing "assurance" services, and your integrity is your most valuable asset. If an employer catches you lying on your job application, they will be forced to ask, "what else is this candidate capable of lying about?" Need I say more?

Conclusion

Fortunately, the vast majority of candidates we choose to represent are highly credible and the situations described happen rarely. However, "stuff" happens, and even the best and brightest make mistakes. It's human nature. But when you're striving to reach the next level in your career, you can't afford to make *stupid* mistakes. Lack of preparedness, the wrong attitude, poor presentation skills, simple oversights and "little white lies" will all ruin your efforts to get ahead. When you speak with as many hiring managers and sit on the sidelines of as many interviews as we do, you see things from a unique perspective. Regardless of an interview's final outcome, there are always lessons to be learned. The five scenarios

that I've described all provide excellent lessons in ways to NOT get a job in security.

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