



THE MOST
COMMON
“LIP LOADS”
THAT KILL
A GOOD
INTERVIEW

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Many hiring authorities don't realize that 60% of all interviewing mistakes are made by them as opposed to the candidates they interview. Most interviewing and hiring authorities blame the inability to make good hires on poor candidates, yet the truth is that good candidates are often turned off or discouraged from pursuing an opportunity because of what hiring or interviewing authorities say.

Here are the most common "lip loads" used to kill perfectly good interviews and the *messages* they send to good candidates:

"Hiring is our top priority. We've been looking for six (or more) months." Message: We tell each other this, but we really don't act that way. It is rather amazing that any hiring authority would say something like this with a straight face. They usually follow it with something like, "There just aren't any good candidates out there," or, something even more incriminating like, "We just can't find anybody we like who will take the job." If hiring is a top priority, the people doing the interviewing and the hiring will *act* like it.

Any candidate with half a brain will wonder about the incongruity of these two statements. The first thing they will think is, "What is wrong with these folks?" Even if an organization has been looking for six months, it's not encouraging to a candidate when he or she hears that kind of statement.

"I'm not sure what we're looking for. We can't agree, but I'm glad you're here. Now tell me about yourself." Message: We have no idea what we're looking for, wouldn't know it if we found it, can't agree, and this is a shot in the dark. We're surely an indecisive group of folks. We've even known hiring authorities who chuckle when they say this kind of thing. When we explain to



our clients that even if all of this is true they shouldn't tell a candidate that, they will often say something like, "Well, I want to be honest and I want people to know what they're getting into."

This brings up an issue that needs to be addressed . . . *honesty*. Nobody expects an interviewing or hiring authority to lie. Everyone should expect honesty on both sides of the desk. But while statements like this might be true, they're also stupid. They make a company and the people in it look foolish. No candidate in their right mind expects an organization to be anything less than human. And while this kind of indecisiveness might be truer in some firms than others, saying it (especially in the very beginning of an interview) will kill a candidate's interest.

In fact, this can be said about most all of these lip loads. They may be true, but they don't have to be stated, especially in the very beginning of an interview. As with most all of these lip loads, even an average candidate will ruminate on them throughout the whole interview. They'll come out of the interview and say something to us like, "You know what this guy (. . . or gal) said to me in the very beginning of the interview? He said that they can't agree on what they're looking for. I thought about that throughout the whole interview and I don't have any idea how I did on it. I appreciate their honesty, but that statement threw me off and all I kept thinking was, 'If they don't know what they're looking for, what am I doing here?'"

"I'll know the right candidate when I meet them." Message: I hire and fire by feeling. I don't want to be bothered by details like qualifications and the ability to do the job. As recruiters, we hear this kind of thing all the time. We are taught



to ask, “Well, can you be more specific?” And even after that, we often hear, “I’m not sure, I just know!” Obviously, it’s really hard for us as recruiters to be motivated by this kind of answer.

The interviewing authorities who say this kind of thing need to know that it is one of the most depressing lip loads a candidate can hear. It says to a candidate that the interviewing authority doesn’t really have any idea what they look for in a candidate, that their decision is simply emotional, and that the candidate is either going to be lucky or not. It’s a whim of the moment!

This approach to interviewing really doesn’t help the interviewing or hiring authority, either. Frankly, they come across as mostly confused when they communicate with the candidate. Any good candidate is going to ask them what they are looking for in a candidate. The hiring authority who begins an interview this way doesn’t have a much better answer to the question.

Anyone who is associated with this kind of interviewing or hiring authority should simply get them to write down *before* the interview what they really look for. Simple enough.

The most frustrating aspect of this approach is that screening authorities, the people who might initially interview a candidate and then pass them on to the hiring authority, have absolutely no idea what kind of candidate the next-in-line interviewer is looking for. Talk about a cluster!

“We’re in a big hurry. We’ve been without someone in this position for some time. Our process takes four weeks, if we’re lucky.” Message: We really don’t need anyone that badly. We like to stay busy interviewing because it makes us look like we’re working. On top of that, not finding good people gives us plenty to complain about.



Many companies fall into this trap because they are trying to be so “careful” in their hiring that they elongate the process with multiple interviews over an elongated period of time. Their words communicate a sense of urgency but their actions belie them.

When companies begin to lose good candidates to their competitors or other companies, they begin to change the length of time their process takes. Unfortunately, it usually costs them four or five excellent candidates (and very few are ever going to admit this, but it is true) and six months of searching (and no one admits to that).

“Let me tell you about our company, the job, me, my boss, why we’re looking to hire, what hasn’t worked in the past, what we think will work in the future, why I like football, baseball, basketball, or hockey.” Message: I’m going to do all the talking. Then I’ll decide on your qualifications and ability to do the job.

Even after a number of years of doing this kind of thing there are lots of interviewing and hiring authorities who continue to do it . . . and know they do it. They claim that by doing this they are getting to “know” the candidate. Actually they wind up doing most all of the talking and usually about subjects that have nothing to do with the job or the company. We’ve encountered a number of leaders, from CEOs on down, who love sports like baseball or football (or basketball, or golf, or hockey, etc.) who will engage a candidate with a discussion of those topics, then claim with a straight face that they didn’t really get a good feel for the candidate’s experience, background or ability to do the job during the interview. Duh!



Some leaders adorn their offices with pictures, plaques and trophies of these hobbies and will talk with anyone and everyone about them. These trappings are certainly all right, but if they become the subject during an interview it isn't good for either party.

“I’m sorry, I’m fifteen minutes (or more) late. I had to take a phone call, talk to a customer, handle an emergency, or talk to my boss.” Message: Interviewing you or anybody else just isn't that important. This kind of thing happens a lot more than interviewing or hiring authorities like to admit.

It's downright rude. If a candidate did this kind of thing in the middle of an interview, almost every hiring authority would go nuts. It would be the quickest way for a candidate to eliminate him-or-herself. But some interviewing and hiring authorities are so self-centered, they have no qualms in doing it.

This kind of thing won't cause a good candidate to remove himself from pursuing a good job, but it certainly gives the candidate a poor impression of the company and the person doing the interviewing.

“Excuse me for a moment, but I have to take a call, talk to a customer, handle an emergency, or talk to my boss . . . in front of you.” Message: Interviewing you or anybody else just isn't that important. I'm just a busy person, as well as inconsiderate. Besides, I want to look like a big shot!

A good candidate will get the same feeling as they did from the previous lip load. Interviewing them just isn't a priority. On top of that, it is very uncomfortable for a candidate. After five minutes . . . which seems like a much longer time . . . they will likely lose interest in the job. (We had one candidate not



too long ago who simply stood up while the hiring authority was on the phone and walked out of the interview.)

“The last person we had in this position was a real jerk, and the one before that was awful. Our luck in finding good people seems to be really poor.”

Message #1: I’ll talk about you the same way I talk about the other people who have left. Message #2: We aren’t very good at hiring. (Subliminal) Message #3: We hire people just like us.

Bad-mouthing a previous or even present employee is never a good idea. It makes candidates terribly uncomfortable and communicates poor judgment on the part of the hiring authority. Any candidate with any brains is going to ask, especially if they are interviewing for a position to replace someone else, what happened to the last person who was in the position. Smart hiring authorities never make pejorative comments about anyone, especially employees. Stating facts is one thing, but making negative comments about anyone is the kiss of death.

As professional recruiters we are sometimes shocked at the number of hiring and interviewing authorities who badmouth either present or previous employees. What’s even more interesting is that they often don’t take responsibility for having hired the person. Instead of saying “I really made a mistake in hiring,” they claim that the bad hire was wonderful *before* they got hired and only turned out to be a schmuck after they showed up on the job.

These comments are usually followed by something like, “It took us a year to get rid of the person . . . but we knew they were wrong immediately. We wanted to give them a chance.”



So, not only does the company appear to have poor judgment about hiring the candidate, they also demonstrate poor judgment by not letting them go when they should have.

This kind of lip load is one of the biggest turn-offs that a candidate can get. No matter how sincere an interviewing or hiring authority might be, these kinds of statements will make most decent candidates run from the opportunity.

Often, an interviewing or hiring authority will justify this kind of lip load by saying something like, “I just want to be honest with them.” Well, there’s a difference between being honest and being stupid. Remember what Mama used to say, “If you can’t say something nice about somebody, don’t say anything at all.”

“We want someone who is a cultural fit.” Message: You are too old, too heavy, or the wrong race. We can never figure out why anyone would say something like this. In this age of political correctness, saying something like this will never be taken in a positive way. A smart candidate is then going to ask, “How would you describe that culture?” Now, most interviewing and hiring authorities will then proceed to make matters worse as they try to describe the culture. Just about anything they say can be construed the wrong way . . . and it likely will be.

One of our candidates recently told us that when she heard this from a hiring authority, she looked around the office as she was leaving the interview and saw nothing but twenty-some-things in the office. Since she was in her 40s, she simply assumed that she wasn’t a “cultural fit.” Interestingly enough, the hiring authority was very interested in her and wanted to have her back. The department that she was going to work in



was reflective of her age group, and the hiring authority specifically wanted people who looked like they had more authority than a twenty-something-year-old. The candidate told us that she wasn't interested in the position, but wouldn't tell us why. She hemmed and hawed about why she wasn't interested, but we weren't comfortable with the answer. Nonetheless, we told the hiring authority that she wasn't interested in the job.

At least the guy had the courage to call our candidate and ask her why she wasn't interested in pursuing the job (which she was perfect for) and that he was anxious to speak with her again. She was pretty insistent and said that she was sorry but had to decline pursuing the job.

We presented another opportunity to the candidate two or three days later and she finally told us why she wasn't comfortable with the first opportunity. She said she wasn't even comfortable discussing the fact that the hiring authority talked about a "cultural fit." She was simply done with the whole matter and was afraid to say anything.

We tried to resurrect the opportunity by explaining to the candidate that she owed it to herself to at least talk to the guy again. But she said that she just wasn't interested. The comment about "cultural fit" blew the whole deal.

"My boss, who you'll speak with, is a real piece of work. We never know which personality is going to show up on a daily basis." Message: The boss is a real piece of work. No one ever knows which of his personalities is going to show up. He's very difficult.

Okay, there are some bosses who are difficult, even downright awful. And it is fair to warn a prospective employee about



that fact. But doing it in the very first interview isn't wise. In fact, it borders on stupidity.

This is another one of those lip loads that will distract the candidate so much they can't get it off their mind throughout the whole interview. They'll think, "Oh, my I'm having enough difficulty in finding a job. The last thing I need to do is to go to work for an idiot. I can't get out of here fast enough."

This is even more damning when there are bad reviews about the company or "the boss" on websites like Glass Door. (We believe that sites encouraging anonymous comments are rather despicable. We don't have a problem with disparaging comments, but they should only be made when people are willing to put their name on them.)

Often, hiring authorities will say things that are more subtle. Perhaps wishing to warn a prospective employee (so they can at least say they did so), they will say things like, "The boss is pretty hard-nosed . . . demanding . . . expects a lot." A perceptive candidate who is already afraid of making a poor decision will pick up on this.

"How much money are you making? We know we're not really competitive in the marketplace, but it's a great place to work." Message: We underpay and expect a lot. There is simply no good reason to discuss money this way, especially in an initial interview or even a second or third interview. When a candidate hears this he or she gets the impression that money means more to the company than a good employee. This kind of thing will totally distract a candidate from interviewing well.

Money is about the fourth reason why people work. And in the long run, even lower-paying organizations can attract



good people by communicating a great company culture, challenging work, good people, etc. But a candidate should get to know a company well enough to appreciate these things before money is discussed.

Most hiring authorities will never admit to saying this kind of thing in interviews. But they do. Even very experienced, senior HR people are known to say things like this. When it is said, our candidates will often report to us post-interview that they really don't know how the interview went, because they were so distracted by the pay issue that they couldn't focus on much of anything else. It's a real bummer for everyone.

“We really need a water-walker, someone with at least ten years of experience, an M.B.A. from an Ivy League school, a tremendous track record, and we'll pay at least \$60,000.”
Message: Our expectations are totally unrealistic and they keep getting higher with every candidate we interview. We just can't afford to make a mistake. When candidates hear something like this their guard immediately goes up. Most interviewing or hiring authorities think that they are “cutting to the chase” . . . telling it like it is. “Look,” they say, “Everybody needs to know that our expectations are high.”

Unfortunately, many hiring authorities and organizations have unrealistic expectations about the kind of candidates that might be available. There's a tendency to think that everybody in the world will want to go to work for them. They think that since they are such a wonderful organization, the world is going to stop and they are going to be able to hire anybody they want at any amount of money they want to pay.

We recently worked with a client whose start-up company



was on a great trajectory and growing quickly. The hiring authority wanted to hire two very senior, very experienced people with great track records. He also wanted them to travel 65% to 70% of the time. He was downright angry that no successful candidate of the caliber he wanted was interested in the job. It took him three weeks, cycling through nine candidates. We kept trying to explain that the caliber of candidate he was looking for wasn't going to travel 65% to 70% of the time, which all of them had done earlier in their career, and there was no need for them to do it now. He started all over with more realistic requirements.

“Thank you for coming to the interview. You know what happened to me? I just went through an awful divorce. My sixteen-year-old ran away. I was in an awful car accident two weeks ago. We just found out my mother has cancer.”

Message: My personal life is more important than interviewing you. Again, these are the kinds of statements that make a candidate cringe. The challenge is that any good candidate will engage in the conversation by responding to the interviewer's statements. What are they supposed to do, say something like, “I'm not here to talk about your problems; I'm here to interview for a job?” They aren't going to do that.

This kind of statement is the height of self-centeredness. It puts a candidate in a terribly awkward position, with no alternative but to ask more questions. When an interview starts this way it usually goes downhill fast.

“I'm the decision maker, but I like to get the input of five (or more) other people.” Message: I'm not really the decision maker; I just want to look good. Real decision-makers don't



need to make this kind of statement. When any good candidate hears this kind of thing, they don't believe it. A good candidate realizes that the "four or five other people" obviously carry weight in the decision.

Although having too many people in the interviewing process is counter-productive, this message to a candidate is very ineffective. If getting other people's opinions is important, then an interviewing or hiring authority doesn't need to say, "I'm the decision-maker." It comes across to the candidate that the interviewing or hiring authority is a braggart.

"This company is one of the hardest places to work in the whole world. But if you have a lot of courage and can weather the constant storm, it's really interesting." Message: This company has a lot of turnover. They are unreasonably demanding. A good candidate is going to really dig deep after hearing this kind of thing. As with many of the above statements, it is going to totally distract a good candidate from giving a good interview.

Again, when an interviewing or hiring authority says this kind of thing they claim they are just being candid with the candidate. But statements like this, especially with no context, are out of line. Good candidates will pass on the opportunity.

"I'm the first person in the interviewing process. Although I'm in HR (or the screener, the admin to Mr. /Ms. Big, or some other position), my job is to make sure that the hiring authority interviews the right kind of candidates." Message: I need to look good. You might be able to do the job, but I'm not going to send you or anybody else past me unless I think you're a perfect candidate. I'm really not certain of what



we need because I'm not really in that department. I have this list of qualifications that every candidate has to meet. I check boxes. I don't want to look bad.

Good candidates realize that this person is really a "gate-keeper." They might not be as qualified to assess the quality of a candidate as they are concerned about how they personally look. These kinds of interviewing authorities have a tendency to look at the glass "half empty." They will review and evaluate a candidate based more on being safe than finding the best candidate. They will look for more reasons why the candidate should not be hired than reasons why they should. They want to look good and not be criticized.

"You're one of twenty candidates who we've interviewed over the last six weeks." Message: We have no idea what we're looking for. Our hiring process is an endurance race. We can't understand why we can't find good people!

There is simply no reason to say something like this. Even if it's true, a candidate does not need to know it. A statement like this puts a damper on the whole interview. The candidate becomes just a number, and feeling that way won't help them feel good about the job or the company

"We're really careful about who we hire. We make sure every candidate knows what they're getting into." Message: We're so picky. We want everyone in the company to like the person we hire. Your ability to do the job isn't as important as what everyone thinks of you.

Every candidate expects the company to be careful. But how should a candidate take "what they're getting into?" And that's what a good candidate will ask, "What *am* I getting into?"



People need to realize that any good candidate is going to be interviewing at a number of good companies. When a good candidate hears something like this they are on their guard. They will question almost everything they hear and be suspicious. When candidates interview an organization with that attitude they are always expecting a surprise and they assume it won't be a pleasant one.

“Everyone we talk to wants to come to work here. The lucky ones get to.” Message: You're darn lucky to be interviewing here. We don't have to tell you why you ought to work here. We're the only company in the world worth working for.

Is this egotistical or what? The best firms and the people in them have lots of humility. Candidates know that. When candidates hear things like this they wonder why someone has to say it.

“Along with our interviewing, we have a battery of tests you'll need to take. But don't worry, we all took them, and they only account for 25 percent of the hiring decision.” Message: The tests decide who gets hired. They are the “first” 25 percent of the decision. We don't have to make a decision because the testing does it for us.

No matter what any interviewing or hiring authority says, there isn't a candidate who has to take tests who doesn't realize that the tests make a huge difference. The whole reason hiring authorities and companies have these tests is to disqualify some folks and qualify others. The tests become a qualifier.

Some candidates just don't do very well with tests. Others do. Rarely is a company going to hire a candidate who doesn't score well on their tests. And most candidates understand that.



They don't like it, but they understand.

Once in a while we've run into some rather sophisticated candidates who have refused to take tests. One candidate told one of our clients years ago that taking tests was against his religion. Go figure!

We recommend that if the tests are going to be used as qualifiers, then it makes sense to have a prospective candidate take them as early in the interviewing cycle as they can. We can't tell you the number of times over the years that one of our clients has invested hours in interviewing a candidate only to have their testing disqualify the candidate. So, we recommend that if there is reasonable interest in the candidate, do the testing before a great deal of time is invested in the interviewing process. Depending on the cost of the tests it might be reasonable to have a candidate take the tests even before he is interviewed.

“You're exactly what we're looking for. We'll get back to you after I get in touch with the other people who need to speak with you and find out when they can interview you.”
Message: I tell this to everyone. We're disorganized and our process will take a terribly long time. Every hiring or interviewing authority who tells this to every candidate *knows* they are doing it. Our speculation is that it comes out of a lack of security on the part of the interviewing or hiring authority. Some people just can't get comfortable with “rejecting” other people, so they tell everybody they are an excellent candidate.

A number of years ago one of our clients interviewed nine people over a two-day period. He told every one of them they were exactly what he was looking for and that they would get



back to them within a week. As each candidate reported back to us immediately following their interview, we began to suspect a problem, and then the fourth one called and told us exactly the same thing that the first three had said. “He told me I was absolutely perfect for the job . . . that I was exactly what they were looking for and they would be back to me in a week. I think I got the job.” The day following the last of the interviews the hiring authority got fired. He obviously had never hired anyone. He was one of those people who just didn’t want to reject someone else, because he didn’t want to be rejected.

Hopefully, all of us want to make people feel good. Few of us want to make people feel badly. But leading people on when it isn’t true is worse. It makes us look stupid.

AS LONG AS WE ARE AT IT, HERE ARE A FEW OTHER ISSUES THAT KILL GOOD INTERVIEWS:

“I’ll call you tomorrow (or even later).” (Then never doing it.) As with many of these lip loads, there’s just no reason to say this unless it’s true. It’s one of those things that people say at the moment to make others feel good, and they think it makes them look good. But their lack of follow through makes it worse.

“I’m so busy. We need to reschedule this interview.” In other words, interviewing you just really isn’t very important. We have worked with hiring authorities who have rescheduled interviews in this way two and three times. Good candidates won’t agree to the subsequent interviews.

Never giving the candidate honest feedback. Again, most of us don’t want to be the bearer of bad news, so it’s just easier



to give no feedback at all. Really good managers will go out of their way, even if it's brief, to give a candidate honest feedback.

Not selling the job and the opportunity to candidates. We discuss this elsewhere, but it makes a big difference in landing an excellent candidate.