

10 TOP TIPS FOR JOB SEARCH SUCCESS

LEGAL

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MY **TOP TIP** FOR LEGAL JOB SEEKERS

I get asked all the time by lawyers, “How can I make my next move? Where should I go next? What do I need to do?” My biggest piece of advice is:

Have a career plan focused on what you need to do and be realistic about the timelines. Whether your potential move is to an in-house corporate team, for a partner opportunity, or for a more defined pathway. You need to take into account the following:

Be a client led lawyer. Be proactive. Be a lawyer who wants to catch up with their clients to see what is going on in the market and their sectors/industries. Build a relationship with them. Don't be seen as the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff or a lawyer who is a “sunk cost” unless really needed.

Think about your practice area. If you have only been practicing in dispute work but want to widen your perspective into other practice areas, you need to be thinking about this in advance. Some law firms can offer both contentious and non-contentious work, especially if you are in a smaller practice. However, make sure you get a balance. Ensure your experience is aligned to your long-term career aspirations and interests.

Are you really ready for in-house? You may be getting itchy feet after working for two years post qualifying in private practice, but realistically to go in-house our corporate clients are looking for four to five years PQE as a benchmark. While you may be technically very experienced as a lawyer, GCs and their Heads Of are looking for commercial acumen and stakeholder engagement from their lawyers. You need to be able to have a robust discussion with a GM, CFO, or a COO and have a commercial approach to dealing with issues.

If you need any support with your career planning or your next career move, then please get in touch with me. I practiced law for eight years and then became Auckland's top commercial banker, before joining the Consult team. Therefore, I have extensive senior networks in finance, legal, banking, and business.





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10 TOP TIPS FOR JOB SEARCH SUCCESS

I started Consult Recruitment in 2008 focusing on people and relationships, as I am a huge believer that the power of people can make all the difference in organisations.

My continued vision for Consult mirrors my ambition for the recruitment industry as a whole. We change people's lives through their careers and we help businesses to succeed through people. Therefore, Consult must continue to lead by example, in everything we do, say and learn.

To help you on your career journey, I have collated a number of our most popular blogs, that take you through the hiring process from a job seeker point of view, giving you some helpful advice on how you can improve your chances of getting that next big role in your career.

I hope you find them helpful.

Angela

Angela Cameron
CEO
Consult Recruitment

RECRUITMENT LEADER OF THE YEAR





10 TOP TIPS TO HELP YOU **SUCCEED IN YOUR JOB SEARCH**

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1. WHAT DO EMPLOYERS WANT

We have worked with thousands of clients. They range in size from SME, privately held organisations, through to global corporates with huge reporting structures. We've sat down with them, talked about their company, their team, their pain and their aspirations.

And when it comes to people - it is all the same.

Everybody is searching for the same things. They shouldn't be hard to find, in fact, you're probably not unreasonable to say, they should be a base level expectation. However, in our technology driven, social media manic world, these things are becoming increasingly rare:

👤 Ownership Employers and managers are literally falling over themselves to find people that will take ownership of their work. If you've got a can-do attitude, you can be relied upon to get the job done, your boss will be happy. Why is that? Well, your manager likely has a bunch of things on their to-do list, and having an employee they can trust is paramount. **Make sure you're taking ownership of your role and if you say you'll do something, then get it done.**

💡 Initiative It's completely reasonable to expect some good onboarding and training when you're new. But there comes a time when you're going to have to manage out of the box situations. Make sure you're using your initiative, otherwise eventually you might be replaced by a robot! **Think of it like creating opportunities or problem solving - how can you make things that little bit better?** Most employers would be really happy for their staff to turn up the initiative dial. (But double check with social smarts, because there is a risk of over doing the initiative part too!!).

🗣️ Communication skills It's on every job vacancy and the lips of every hiring manager. But we aren't talking about speaking clearly or writing good (bad grammar intended BTW) - it's about communicating appropriately for the situation e.g. not sending emails to the person sitting right next to you instead of just talking to them ! **So using the appropriate communication channels for the situation is incredibly important.** If you're not sure - observe what others are doing or just ask.

⚡ Energy Most people want to come to work to be energised by people around them. **Employers avoid negative people because they know that over time it drains everyone around them** and it reflects poorly on their company brand. Don't be that person who people avoid!

★ Social smarts Unless your role is to sit in a cupboard by yourself, chances are, you'll be working with other people - so it is really important that you've got a handle on social graces - the simple stuff - like turn up on time, appreciate opportunity (i.e. say thank you!), present yourself well, don't whine, don't smell(!). But it is also the "over-things" too:

- **OVER-OWNERSHIP** - you just won't let things go, so you end up with a massive to-do list, run down and miserable.
- **OVER-INITIATIVE** - maybe check in with your boss before you go changing key systems and processes?!
- **OVER-COMMUNICATION** - too many emails, talking too loudly, debriefing after every call...
- **OVER-THE TOP ENERGY** - You know, those people who are so raving happy all the time that you wonder if everything is an act?

2. HOW TO **BOOST YOUR VISIBILITY** TO RECRUITMENT AGENCIES

Passive candidates represent valuable prospects for employers, but how do you ensure that you'll be considered for these new opportunities? Working effectively with recruitment agencies is sometimes the difference between a great role and an average next step. Here are a few ideas for ways to bolster your visibility to recruiters so they can help you shine:

📄 Have a decent LinkedIn profile and resume I know you say - really - that's your advice?! Well, you'd be surprised how bad some people's LinkedIn profiles are and even worse, how horrific some resumes can be. At the end of the day, **you need to present yourself how you see fit**, but just know that spelling mistakes, bad grammar and incomplete profiles count against you. We've ranted over the years about this, but if you need more help - please start here!

🔍 Do your research We live in an era of recommendations. In the past, you went to the local doctor, dentist, lawyer, accountant. Not anymore. **Now, the power is in your hands* to choose the best agency to help you in the job search.**

Instead of wasting your time with agencies that don't specialise in your particular area of work - invest in getting to know the ones that will have multiple roles to speak with you about. Ask people you know and respect who they would recommend. Find out how the agency works and what their networks are. Make sure you are savvy with your recruitment agency selection - often it will make the difference between wasting your time and making your career.

**I think I have perhaps been watching too many late night British dating shows where contestants go to the "Isle of Fernando's!"*

🗨 Know yourself - what is your elevator pitch? Everyone has attributes that are attractive and those that erm, needs working on, so you should know what yours are. **Work out which organisations would get the most value out of you and use this to work back and highlight the skills and experience that you have to support this.** For example, I know that you wouldn't get the best out of me by putting me in a large corporate environment with a slow pace of change, but a more nimble, fast paced environment could use my experience and skills well. What does your profile look like and who are you attractive to? When you are working with recruiters - it is important to highlight these things, as well as organisations that you admire or would like to be a part of.

🔄 Follow up (but don't be a stalker) You want to keep in touch with the recruiter, so you are fresh in their mind - but how often is too often? The best thing to do is agree with the recruiter on what works for you both. It will depend on if the recruiters have a lot of roles that suit your profile or how well they are placed to help in the short term. Set an expectation for communication so that no one feels like a stalker (or needy!), but also so that the recruiter has enough time to speak with clients on your behalf.

All in all - to work well with good recruiters (like most good relationships) requires **clear communication, an understanding of expectations (and capabilities) and a good commitment to the long term.** Nail this, and you are well on your way to ensuring the recruiter has you front of mind when the right role comes up!

3. HOW TO TELL IF A **ROLE IS RIGHT FOR YOU** IN 5 MINUTES

When a recruiter calls to run you through a new role, it can be tricky to tell whether a role is right for you just from their description of it on the phone.

There's nothing worse than getting too far down the process of a role, only to find that it's not the one for you.

It can waste your time, your recruiter's time and the

hiring manager's time... and time is precious friends (especially when you're hunting for your dream job).

If only you could have decided whether the job opportunity was right for you beforehand!

Luckily, we've got a few tricks so you can 'yay' or 'nay' the role straight away.

What questions should you be asking?

If you can get an answer to all of these, you should have a pretty good idea of whether the role is right for you or not:

- 01 **What company is the role with?**
What can you tell me about the company culture, operations, market position, future plans?
- 02 **Why has the role come up?**
This will give you a steer on staff turnover, company culture, progression opportunities and so on.
- 03 **What are they looking for in a candidate?**
Why do you think I'm a good fit for the role?
- 04 **What is the hourly rate range and dates**
For temp or contract roles.
- 05 **What's the salary range and career potential for this job?**
For permanent roles.
- 06 **How long has the agency been working on the role for?**
What stage is the recruitment process at?

DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK!

A good consultant will welcome these questions.

If they can't answer any one of them, they've either not actually been engaged by the client (but have just heard about the role through the grapevine and are hoping to try their luck by spamming your CV to a hiring manager), or - perhaps even worse - they have been engaged by the client but haven't taken the time to understand the company and the role.

What are the chances of someone like that representing you successfully?

If an agency calls you with a job opportunity after you've met, it's up to you to make sure you've been given enough information about the role to ensure it's right for you - before you agree to being presented for it.

Do your homework before you're put forward for a role. Remember, this is your career we're talking about, so it's up to you to make sure you steer it in the right direction!

4. OUR 5 TOP RESUME HACKS FOR BUSY PEOPLE

I've always found it ironic that the most important document you'll ever write (your resume) is the same document that none of us want to write!

Maybe it's because it is, well, awkward to spout on about your achievements, or there are just more compelling things to do, but there is no doubt that a good resume is still vital in the job search process.

So, in this busy world - how do you keep your resume up to date effectively? Here are our top resume tips:

📁 Keep a resume master file (RMF) Your resume master file is basically your brain dump of every relevant job you've had. It contains details like special projects or teams that you've worked in, maybe specific achievements or awards you've had, but also important things like who you reported to, what systems you worked on, dates etc. It is more detailed than your resume will ever be, but it helps you to remember key details which are important - for example - who worked with you on the systems implementation role three years ago?

We forget these details quickly, so your RMF is a brilliant reminder for yourself. Knowing specifically which SAP modules and versions you've worked on can be the difference between you getting an interview (or not).

📱 Keep your LinkedIn profile relevant and up to date To be clear, your LinkedIn profile is not your resume - it is like a highlight reel of your career. But, it still should be included in the process of keeping your resume up to date, because you never know who might be searching for you. An outdated LinkedIn profile means you may be overlooked for your dream role.

Make sure that if you have a change in job title or have successfully completed a specific project that you at least put it on your LinkedIn profile.

✉️ Email yourself with your achievements during this year We get busy and often by the end of a project, you are sick of it, so then is not the ideal time to put it into your resume. Instead - set yourself up a gmail account such as joebloggscareer@gmail.com - **you can use this to email details of roles (JDs), or projects or feedback from your bosses** (it is so nice to read these!). In setting up this account, you'll always have a separate portal which will have all the relevant information you need. Plus, you can also use this address to apply for roles and then everything career related is in one place.

Make sure you email yourself regularly - it literally takes two seconds to forward relevant information, so just do it!

📅 Set a time in your calendar every six months to update Literally, set an appointment in your calendar at least every six months (ideally quarterly) to give yourself time to update your RMF, your LinkedIn profile and resume, and email yourself with any specific information you'd like to keep. Take yourself out for a coffee and make an event of it - as you reflect on your achievements, it also becomes a great opportunity for you to plan out your career goals too!

👤 Make sure you get someone trusted to review! It's easy to overlook things and not include them in your resume update, it's also easy for your resume to fall out of fashion (talking about yourself in the 3rd person is the most common mistake!) - so run your resume by someone you trust, but also someone with the knowledge of your job, the job market and what is current right now. Your mentor, your trusted recruiter or your mate with extensive HR experience are probably top of mind. Getting the 3rd party feedback from someone whose opinion you value is critical.

Your resume is (still) hugely important. Your LinkedIn profile might be your foot in the door, but for the foreseeable future, until recruiters are riding around in driverless cars, searching for candidates on virtual reality headsets, viewing their digital portfolio of blogs, vlogs, podcasts and Instagram stories, we are still somewhat saddled with the good old-fashioned resume. So make sure you invest a little bit of time often on keeping it current to help you put your best foot forward.

5. WRITING A GREAT CV

We often get asked by people we work with whether we'll write or format their resume for them.

A lot of agencies do this, but we're not big fans of the practice. After all - our job is to represent people, not cookie cutter resumes that all look and read the same!

A CV is a personal document - it's your chance to shine, to show your personality, what you are ambitious about and what you can deliver. At the very least, it is a way to convey your written communication skills and level of attention to detail.

When someone else formats your resume you lose all these great things and you lose your individuality. That being said, there are a few important rules for writing a great resume. We've distilled our advice into our top 6 'Do's':

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- 01 Make it easy on the eye**

Use the same font throughout, with headings in bold. Allow plenty of white space (think blank lines underneath headings and between sections). Use short sentences and bullet points instead of wordy paragraphs or tables.
 - 02 Get the tone right**

Aim for professional but natural language in the first person. Your writing should be as straightforward as possible, using action-oriented language (heavy on the verbs, light on the adjectives).

Good: "I implemented a new credit control process that reduced the average number of outstanding debtor days from 82 to 12."

Meh: "Andrew was responsible for the successful implementation of a highly-regarded credit control process that resulted in the reduction of the number of outstanding debtor days from 82 to 12."
 - 03 Make it relevant for the role**

You only have a **few seconds to grab the reader's attention**, so make sure you know what is going to be on the 'must-haves' for the role you are applying for - and ensure that it leaps off the page!
 - 04 Tell a story that's easy to follow**

List your experience chronologically (with your most recent job first), including months as well as years in the dates. If you held more than one position with an employer, list the positions separately, each with its own dates and responsibilities. Account for any gaps in work history with a simple one line explanation (e.g. November 2011 – April 2012: Backpacking through SouthEast Asia).
 - 05 Focus on achievements, not responsibilities**

Think about what you've achieved above and beyond the responsibilities in your job description; this is what will set you apart from your competition (whose list of responsibilities is probably very similar to your own). **Make sure your achievements are specific, measurable and of value to the person reading your CV.**

Good: "I led a process improvement project that reduced the number of days taken to produce the month-end report from five to two. This resulted in a 30% savings in headcount spend."

Bad: "I led a project to improve reporting processes."
 - 06 Focus on what's relevant**

Devote more space to your recent and most relevant experience and feel free to omit minor or inconsequential responsibilities altogether. If you have a long career, you only need the employer, job title, and dates for your earlier roles. Review your initial draft and delete anything that's not essential.

6. SEVEN WAYS YOU SHOULD NEVER DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN A JOB APPLICATION

Job applications are often your one and only chance to impress a potential employer. Make sure that the words you use to represent yourself as a candidate for a job aren't costing you success.

01 BE CAREFUL HOW YOU LABEL YOURSELF

There's a common theory that it takes around 10,000 hours of practice in one particular field for someone to become an expert in that topic or skill. Before you dub yourself an expert in anything when writing your resume, take a minute to consider whether you really have reached expert status when it comes to that particular topic. Would other people consider you to be an expert?

02 USE EXAMPLES TO BACKUP YOUR CLAIMS

Once you've described yourself as an ideas person, a recruiter or hiring manager is going to expect you to be able to back up that claim. So if your heart is set on describing yourself as a creative person, you had better have some examples of specific circumstances when you've used creativity in the workplace.

Make your self-professed creativity tangible to an employer, and demonstrate ways that your creative flair has made a positive difference to the way you work, or has benefited your team.

03 REMEMBER, NOBODY'S PERFECT

Most people have to be organised to a certain degree, to get their work done and to operate efficiently at work and in life. When you tell a potential employer that you're organised, are you setting up a false expectation that you are more organised than any other candidate?

Before you describe yourself as organised, make sure that you can live up to the image of perfectly labelled and filed documents, neatly formatted spreadsheets, and precision timetabling.

04 LET YOUR ACHIEVEMENTS SPEAK FOR YOU

Most potential employers will be able to recognise your ambition in the way that you present yourself in your CV and at an interview. Being ambitious is a great quality, it means that you're excited to strive for great achievements.

Let your achievements and successes spell out your ambition for you. You don't need to remind everyone of how successful you want to be, and that you'll do anything to be competitive. You might accidentally come across too focused on working towards your own success rather than that of the team.

05 SHOW MATURITY AND RESTRAINT

Young people can be keen to show off their effervescent personality. They're fresh in the workplace, and everything is new and exciting. It can be a lot of fun getting to meet new people and experience the business world for the first time, and you want your potential employer to know how excited you will be to work in an office and to create your networks.

Be careful not to make yourself sound as though your youth makes you ditzy or giddy. If you're a friendly and easy-to-get-along-with kind of person, it will show through the way that you interact with an interviewer and their colleagues.

06 AVOID WORDS THAT SOUND PRETENTIOUS

Some words just seem a little pretentious or arrogant. Words like 'guru' or 'master' are amongst them. Try to avoid using terms to represent your work experience that you could use to describe the character of 'Mr Miyagi' in the movie 'Karate Kid'.

07 BE AUTHENTIC. BE PREPARED

The worst way to represent yourself in a job application is not actually a word – it's by not describing yourself at all. If an interviewer asks you to describe yourself, it is definitely better to have something prepared than to say "I don't know". Have something modest and accurate to say. It is vital that you describe your best skills and personality traits.

Remember - this isn't a definitive guide. We're not saying that these won't be received in a purely positive way if you use them. But we hope this inspires you to think outside the box a little when you're next describing yourself in a resume.

7. STOP ARRIVING EARLY IF YOU WANT THAT JOB!

With Auckland's traffic (and the current CBD roadworks shambles), we are accustomed to people tending to run a bit late. "Sorry I am late, the traffic is terrible" must be uttered hundreds of times a day across this (otherwise epic) city. We totally get that.

But what about the people that 'run early'? The people that turn up to their interviews 45 minutes early, the people that breeze in saying - "sorry but I ended up arriving early so I thought I'd come straight in".

To you, fine friend we say: please stop arriving early.

When you turn up for your job interview and you are 45 minutes early - this is what the hiring manager thinks:

You cannot follow instructions (or you just plain ignored it).

You don't seem to respect the hiring manager's time schedule.

And if they think that about you before you have even introduced yourself - what do you think that does to your chances of getting the job offer? Yep - they aren't flash.

Turning up too early for an interview can also create logistical issues. Often, organisations only have a few meeting rooms, so if you turn up too early - sometimes you'll have to be seated in reception - sometimes right next to the person who is also waiting to go into the interview for the role that you are interviewing for. **#awkward**

Think of job interviews this way: they are a performance.

Actors will arrive early before a performance, but that's to give themselves some time to mentally prepare. They certainly don't begin their performance before the advertised start time, and neither should you.

Instead of turning up (too) early for an interview, do this:



Sit in your car (ok with the a/c on still!!!) and prepare yourself, you can practise your answers, your smile, go over your notes on the role, call your mum, coach yourself on why you are great for the job - really there are endless options.



Go to the local cafe. What better way of making an impression than meeting with the people at the cafe next door and often they have good information about the company and the people. I remember a candidate of mine did this once and ended up in line with the guy who was about to interview him - guess who got the job!?



Go for a walk. Use it as an opportunity to see what is in the neighbourhood - it creates a talking point in the interview - "I went for a short walk down the road and went into the park - it is amazing!"

In terms of when you should arrive - no more than five minutes early is perfect. Arrive then, and you've already got a couple of green ticks against your name!

8. WANT TO **NAIL YOUR NEXT INTERVIEW**? HERE'S WHAT NOT TO DO

There are a heap of interviewing 'how to' guides out there, so I thought I'd cut to the chase.

If we're brutally honest, there are a few mistakes people make in interviews that spell immediate doom.

A poll around the office narrowed it down to these top five.

01 BAD BODY LANGUAGE A limp, crushing, or creepy handshake is a universal pet peeve. Poor eye contact, toe-tapping, leg-jittering or fidgeting is a clear sign of nervousness or impatience. Slouching shows a lack of confidence, while at the other end of the spectrum, there's the 'alpha male' pose (leaning back in the seat with splayed legs, sometimes with an added hands-behind-head pose, for an extra measure of arrogance).

This stuff seems kinda obvious, but it's easy to send the wrong message under pressure.

02 GOING ROGUE One of the surest ways to sabotage your chances is by not respecting the interviewer's agenda. Aside from being a demonstration of poor interpersonal skills, if you go way off-topic or talk too much, you risk the meeting finishing without the interviewer having got the information they needed from you: Game over.

To keep yourself on track, listen carefully to questions and ask for clarification if necessary, and pay attention to your interviewer's body language – if he's shuffling his papers, clearing her throat or losing eye contact, then it's time to wrap it up.

03 SLATING PAST EMPLOYERS Most of us have had bad experiences with past employers, but it's a sign of maturity to be able to talk about your reasons for leaving in a tactful way. If you lay it out warts and all, the interviewer will get nervous about how you'll represent them if they hire you. And if you repeatedly cite conflict with your colleagues as the reason for leaving your jobs, all he'll be aware of is that you're the one common denominator in all of the situations you're describing.

04 TRYING TOO HARD The ability to confidently talk about your achievements is something many of us need to work on, but it's got to be done right. Saying 'I'm just really intelligent' (actual quote, by the way) is meaningless: let's be honest, most of us think we're pretty bright. Let appropriate, concrete examples of your achievements do the talking instead. And remember, you don't need to have the answer to everything. It's much better to simply say you don't know than to expound on a subject you don't actually have much knowledge of.

05 NOT TRYING HARD ENOUGH Enthusiasm and positivity count for a hell of a lot; if it comes down to a choice between two otherwise similarly-qualified candidates, the one who demonstrates the most interest in the role is going to win hands-down.

If you're excited about the job (and if you're not, I beg you: please don't attend the interview!), then be sure to show it. Do your research on the company so you can come prepared with some good questions. Finish by letting the interviewer know you've enjoyed meeting them and you're looking forward to the next step.

9. WHAT TO SAY WHEN ASKED “DO YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS?”

The interview's winding up, and you know it's coming...

“Do you have any questions for us?”

Hiring managers unanimously agree: The absolute worst answer you can give to this question is ‘No’.

The second worst is anything of the ‘Do I get a car park?/How often will I have to work overtime?/When's the next pay review?’ variety. The first interview is the time for bigger picture stuff: Will I enjoy this job? Will I add value to this company? Will I click with the people who work here? Save the nitty-gritty questions for the very final stage, or risk coming across as lacking in perspective.

Another interview-killer is asking a question you should already know the answer to. You can easily find out about the company's competitors or ownership structure online (and you should); asking about them just shows you haven't bothered to do your research.

So, what should you ask?

Here are some ideas that will not only help you to decide if the job's right for you; they'll impress the interviewer, too:

01 What do you love most about your job here? I love this question. It's friendly and positive, and it's a great way to warm up your interviewer by showing interest in them as a person. It should also give you a little window into what makes them tick and what they'll be like to work with.

Because interviewers won't generally be expecting a question that's directed at them personally, this might catch them a little off-guard. The result is often a more honest insight into what the company's like to work for, than if you took the more common route of asking about the company culture. And obviously, if the interviewer struggles to come up with an answer to this one, you should run for the hills!

02 Tell me about one of your star performers. What do you attribute their success to? Asking your interviewer to give a real-life example of a successful employee (rather than an HR-devised list of preferred employee ‘competencies’) is a good way to get them to focus on what really matters. File this information away and highlight the strengths you have in common with this star employee when you next get a chance.

03 What are the top 3 things you need me to achieve in my first 3 months? This shows you're not just focused on landing the job; you're already planning exactly how to add value to the company once you're there. It should also help you to assess a) whether the job has the right level of challenge for you and b) how realistic and forward-thinking the hiring manager is.

04 What concerns do you have about my skills or experience? Their list of diplomatic HR-approved questions belies what most hiring managers are actually itching to ask: ‘What doesn't this candidate know? How much time am I going to have to invest to get them up to speed if I hire them? What are the chances of me making a bad hire?’ Rather than shying away from this question, smart candidates will address the elephant in the room.

Giving the interviewer permission to talk about this directly is refreshingly frank. It shows you understand you're not perfect, but at the same time, you have enough confidence in your abilities to be able to ask the question. Play this one right and you'll have an opportunity to allay their concerns directly.

05 What are you doing to tackle (insert industry issue here)? Firstly, this question addresses any concerns you might have about the company's future and their approach to dealing with threats and opportunities. Secondly, it shows you're on top of industry trends and interested in the bigger picture. It can also open up a conversation about what skills you can bring to the table to help.

Next time you get the ‘Do you have any questions?’ question, see it for what it is: a great opportunity to set the interview agenda to your advantage. Use it wisely.

10. HELP! THE INTERVIEWER WANTS A REFERENCE FROM MY OLD BOSS FROM HELL!

In New Zealand, references matter.

Maybe it's our confidence in our B.S. detection ability, which leads us to believe we can spot an honest reference from a not-so-honest one. Possibly it's got to do with our conservative approach to hiring.

Or maybe it's because, unlike in the UK - where due to some high-profile legal cases, most employers refuse to divulge anything but the barest of details - New Zealand employers are generally more than willing to provide detailed references.

Whatever the reason: in this country, if you've got a bad reference trailing you around (no matter how undeserved), you're going to find it really tough to land a new job.

Most of the time, for most people, this isn't an issue. I mean, you're a great employee, right? Hard-working, competent - just an all-round delight to work with. Your references up to this point in your career are glowing. That's all good, but you never know when you might have the horrible misfortune of landing a Boss From Hell (henceforth referred to as the BFH). No matter what you do, no matter how brilliant you are, you cannot win this person over. The BFH harbours an intense and random dislike for their victims that no amount of coffee shouts will assuage.

Eventually you'll throw in the towel, pleased that chapter of your life is closed forever. Unfortunately though, you'll find it's not, at some point in the future, someone is going to want to ask the BFH for their opinion of your performance.

I've seen several great candidates come a cropper due to that one bad reference that they just can't shake. For them, the situation can seem hopeless - they feel their career has been permanently handicapped by something that's completely out of their control.

The good news is, if you wake up one morning to find yourself working for a BFH, there are certain things you can do to safeguard yourself against a career-killing reference.



Prevention is better than cure

First off, see what you can do to improve the situation.

Sometimes, you'll be dealing with a straight up sociopath. In this case, there's not a whole lot you can do - short of talking to HR and/or the BFH's manager in the hope that you'll be adding your voice to other complaints, and the BFH will be moved on.

Often though, you'll be working for just your run-of-the-mill, regularly-flawed human, who for whatever reason is taking their frustrations out on you. In this case, there are a number of strategies you can use to help them become a better boss, thus avoiding total workplace misery.



Forge connections throughout the business

You'll also want to pay extra attention to other relationships you have in the organisation. Aside from keeping you sane, it could potentially give you an opportunity to move into another project or position.


At the very least, you'll have other people who might be willing to provide an alternative reference when you leave.



During future job interviews, don't pretend the BFH didn't exist

Accept that when you're interviewing for a new position, you will have to deal with a request for a reference from the BFH at some point. So, when your interviewer first asks you about your job, don't say you loved it and all your colleagues were great.


Bitching about past employers is generally a major faux pas, but if you're going to have to have the conversation at some point anyway, it's better to be honest at the outset. Briefly mention that you found this particular manager difficult to work for, and then try shift the focus of the conversation back to more positive elements of the job.


 **When asked for the reference, try to provide alternatives** For example, you could say: “Unfortunately (despite my best efforts!) we had a difficult working relationship, and I’m not confident they’ll be able to give me an accurate reference. I can give you the details of other senior colleagues at the company who would be happy to provide references instead. Would that be an acceptable alternative?”

That might work, but often it’s the corporate policy of the employer or their recruitment agency to speak to the direct line managers from the candidate’s most recent positions. At Consult, for example, we’re very stringent about this. There has to be a very good reason for us not to take a reference from recent direct managers, otherwise all sorts of exceptions to the rule start to creep in.

Legally, no-one can request a formal reference from a former employer without seeking your permission first. So ultimately, it’s up to you. You can withhold your permission, but bear in mind that may mean you’ll have to forfeit the job opportunity. Instead, try this approach:

“I understand you need to do your background checks and speak with my former manager. I’m really excited about the opportunity to join your company, so I’m willing to give you permission to speak with them. However, because I’m not confident they’ll be able to provide an objective reference, can I have your assurance that you will also contact the other referees I’ve provided, so that you can get an accurate picture of my work performance?”

 **Man up and speak to the referee** Before you give the BFH’s contact details, you’ll need to speak with them to get their permission. Depending on exactly how septic the relationship was, you may find this easier to do over email. Keep it short and sweet - explain that it’s the policy of your prospective employer to speak with all recent direct line managers, that there will just be a few straightforward questions, and thank them in advance for their time.

 **Decide a course of action after the reference has been given** If you’re lucky, the BFH will provide the bare minimum of information (dates of employment and job title), and your prospective employer will turn to your other referees for more detail.

But even if the reference is more detailed, you can take some solace in the fact that most experienced recruiters are adept at separating fact from personal vendetta when taking references. You may find that once it’s taken in context with your alternative references, the bad reference actually doesn’t hurt your job chances at all.

If you’ve been told you’ve been given a bad reference, and you’ve also missed out on the job, ask to see a copy. Check there’s nothing irrelevant or personal included. In New Zealand, employers are required to give an accurate reference – whether good or bad – and stick to the subject of the employee’s performance, not irrelevant personal details.

If the BFH isn’t sticking to the facts, and it’s jeopardised your job search, you may have a case for legal action. You should carefully weigh up whether this is worth pursuing though, as the emotional toll and impact on your reputation (even if you’re vindicated), may not be worth it.

Rest assured that even if you have worked for a vindictive BFH, it doesn’t take much to repair your reputation. Once you have another job or two under your belt, you’ll have new referees to call on, and the BFH will recede into the past like a bad dream.

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