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Why You Keep Getting Close But Still Aren't Landing Job Offers

If you keep making it to the final round of interviews but don't get the job offer, it could be because of one of these more subtle factors.



RICH BELLIS 06.01.16 5:00 AM

You're eminently employable, and you have the results to prove it. You're getting called in for interviews, then called back for more. Recruiters are peeping your LinkedIn profile and you're hearing back when you send out your resume. But at the end of each hiring process, you get a polite, "No, thanks." How is it that you keep getting whittled down to the last two or three candidates, and time and again, they go with the one that isn't you?

MAYBE IT'S YOU . . .

First things first, get straight on what you know you're already doing right.

Your resume is in great shape. You've avoided the usual pitfalls and know how to tailor it to each position you apply for. You've practiced answering the most common interview questions, and you can even nail some of the weird ones. After shaking hands and parting ways, you write a smart, memorable thank-you note to everyone you've met with.

Taking stock of all this isn't just to cheer yourself up—the point is to figure out what *isn't* causing the offer to keep slipping through your fingers. You don't want to revise your approach where you don't need to, or where it can actually wind up hurting your chances further.

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According to Kim Shepherd, CEO of the recruitment firm Decision Toolbox, the likeliest culprit (if not the only one) is soft skills, the behavioral qualities we bring to our interactions with other people—like how well we listen and ask questions, for

instance. "They're really what usually attracts a hiring manager once they know that you can do the job," she tells *Fast Company*. "If they're interviewing with three people, chances are all of them can do the job."

At later stages of the hiring process (similar to what tends to happen at the later stages of our careers), those interpersonal qualities often hold more sway than technical expertise. "It's kind of like dating," Shepherd adds. Hiring managers are thinking, "Do I like talking to you? Are you approachable?"

One subtle risk here is in getting *too* approachable and slipping up as a result. In other words, those same exemplary soft skills that help you strike up a great personal connection can also lead you to say the wrong thing.

"When you're in an interview and you're being disarmed by a charming hiring manager, you've got the dialogue going, you've let your professional guard down—and someone will go to a

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negative: "Yeah, that company wasn't the best employer." It can be a fine line to walk. On the one hand, you've got to strike up that rapport since it's what will set you apart, but on the other, Shepherd adds, "Anything negative belongs out of the process"—and could swiftly disqualify you from it.

... BUT MAYBE IT ISN'T YOU

While most soft skills are pretty universal, some of them may trade at higher values in different contexts. Maybe one company's culture is more collaborative and extroverted than another's. Two candidates who get equally high marks for their soft skills might be on less even footing depending on what a given employer values.

To minimize the risk of getting all the way through a hiring process before finding that out, Shepherd says it's important to understand the company's culture as best you can and as early as possible. "It's not just a hiring manager reacting to the soft skills of the candidate, it's the candidate reacting to the soft skills of the company."

That's sensible enough advice, but Shepherd acknowledges isn't always easy to put into practice. As the career expert J.T. O'Donnell has explained for *Fast Company*, more companies are getting conscious about projecting a carefully crafted employer brand. Ideally, their goal is to pinpoint candidates with that elusive "culture fit" Shepherd describes. But it isn't hard to imagine some employers, in the tightening race for top talent, adopting a bit of a marketing spin that may not reflect what things are really like on the inside.

So rather than just asking a hiring manager, "What's the culture like here?" Shepherd suggests asking more targeted questions, like employees' average tenure or the average generation of the company's workforce. "That person's being pulled in for a face-to-face interview, so they have open license to ask the recruiter or the HR person about culture"—not just in general, but whether it's right for *you*.

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Shepherd recounts one fifth-round interview she recently gave where a candidate asked, "What is the one thing with me in this job that will scare me the most?"

"I love that question, because she was asking me to dig deep and already putting herself in the position," Shepherd says, "but was also vetting *me*. It was very sophisticated on a lot of different fronts, even though it sounded easy." And that perceptiveness—bridging the interpersonal and the cultural—has the added advantage of showing off your soft skills. As a recruiter, she adds, "I like that skill set very much."

YOU'VE BEEN TURNED DOWN AGAIN—NOW DO THIS

Rejected job candidates are often counseled to ask for constructive feedback at the end of a hiring process that hasn't gone in their favor. But as [Monster.com](#)'s Vicki Salemi tells *Fast Company*, they often come up short for reasons outside their control. "As a former corporate

recruiter, I was never able to give a response, even though I truly wanted to. It puts employers in positions of liability because they're not giving input to every single candidate." As a result, many hiring managers either offer vague feedback or simply decline to do so.

So Shepherd suggests depersonalizing that request in order to learn something really useful. "I'm very interested in working with you," she recommends saying. "If I were to apply for this position again in three to five years, what would make me a viable candidate, in your opinion?"

By framing your request for feedback as a forward-looking hypothetical rather than as a postmortem, Shepherd says, "You're letting them free-flow now—you're not putting them on the spot. You're asking them to help groom you."

An alternative approach: "You could say to the hiring manager, 'I've been in a hiring role in the past myself, so I know how difficult it can be, but I've often found there's one thing in everybody I really like and one thing I wasn't crazy about. Could you share with me the thing where I fell short, and the one thing you really liked?'—How does someone *not* answer that question?"

As Shepherd explains, this can help create an identification with the hiring manager's challenges, clue you into your strengths as well as your weaknesses, and avoid seeming defensive—all in one shot.