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15 tips for landing your dream job even if you're not 'perfect' on paper

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Sometimes job seekers run across postings that they're excited about, but they don't necessarily tick all the skills or experience boxes. Still, you might be a perfect fit for the role, and there are ways to make up for what might be lacking on your résumé during the interview process.

Below, 15 members of Business Journals Leadership Trust share the things a candidate can say or do to convince them to extend a job offer. If you're fighting to prove yourself against your résumé, try these tips.

1. Be ready to respond to challenges.

Job interviewing is akin to going on a blind date, using Zoom with only a headshot and a self-serving list of a candidate's greatest attributes. It's just unrealistic. We ask candidates to respond to real-world, challenging scenarios from our business. Great answers get a callback. – Donald Donnalson, Beantown Builders, Inc.

2. Use the product or service before the interview.

If you're talking to a company that offers a consumer service, there's no excuse not to have used the product before interviewing. It will provide direct insight into what works and what doesn't at the company while giving you great talking points about

how you can help the company be even better in the future. Going out of your way to use and learn the product before your interview shows that you're willing to learn and explore — exactly the traits employers need today. – Steve Banfield, Simplata Technologies

3. Show your enthusiasm and passion.

Passion is a stellar quality in a job candidate. Even if they are not a perfect qualification match, there's one thing that a candidate could say to persuade me: "It has always been my dream to [specifics about the job role]. If you give me an opportunity, I won't stop until I achieve [role objective]." That reflects the commitment, research and heart. I'd probably give the job on the spot! – Lori Daugherty, IMCS

4. Demonstrate initiative.

It's important to look at the whole person, not just how they interview or what their résumé states. A candidate who can demonstrate a strong work ethic and has proven his or her ability to stick with something for a long time — whether it be earning an Eagle Scout award or having a 10-plus-year involvement with an organization — holds weight in my book. Professionalism and demonstrating initiative through followup further cement a candidate in my book. For me, the icing on the cake is a handwritten note following a meeting or interview. – Brian Boone, Hylant

5. Share relevant stories.

The résumé is just the ante to get a seat at the table. After that, everyone is on equal footing. What you say and do during the interview will determine your chance of success. Sharing stories about your perseverance or problem-solving abilities goes a long way toward making you stand out. Additionally, we look at how someone will fit within the existing team that we are trying to further develop, not just what your résumé says you have done in the past. Try to limit the interview buzzwords and show us who we will be working with for the long term. – Thomas Golczynski, Assured Flow Solutions

6. Articulate your core beliefs.

We want employees who appreciate our culture, philosophy and mindset. That singleness of purpose leads to longevity, expeditious assimilation and mutual satisfaction. When a candidate articulates our firm's core beliefs (which are easily discoverable with a smattering of research) and describes a shared vision, his or her attractiveness is greatly enhanced. Give us a sophisticated appreciation for what makes us outstanding advocates and a unique place to achieve like-minded goals and we may hire you on the spot. – Melissa Day, The Law Offices of Melissa A. Day, PLLC

7. Demonstrate your soft skills.

Attitude is everything! We can always train hard skills, but it is really difficult to teach soft skills such as collegiality, congeniality, empathy, willingness to learn, etc. Demonstrating soft skills during an interview can overcome any lack of specific hard skills. – Jeremiah McKinley, Cascadia Group

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8. Display curiosity.

Candidates who display curiosity during the interview process capture my attention. Curiosity is a skill that will assist the “not perfect on paper” applicant to navigate deficiencies in their skills. A curious individual is often more teachable and hungry to learn new things. – Tim Tiller, MyTek Technology Solutions

9. Be ready to adapt.

If a candidate can show they are teachable, adaptable and willing, specific experience may not be as important as “job fit” and motivation. Showing they are informed, knowledgeable and able to bridge similar experiences gives them the chance to be taught. Demonstrating a willingness to learn and being a great cultural fit are key — they may be one of the best hires you will make. – Sarah Geltz, Champion Title and Closing/Kendrick Law Group

10. Show you are willing to learn.

We always look for a willingness to learn and a willingness to work on a wide variety of tasks. As a small employer, we need to attract team members in the office who have a good attitude. We can teach skills, but if the personality isn't a fit, it likely won't work out. – Dean Watkins, Sunward Electronics Inc.

11. Bring answers to the table.

I like a candidate to show initiative, and I don't mean just sending an email to ask for search updates or sending a handwritten letter. Rather, if the job is in sales, come to the interview with a strategic sales growth plan. Or if it's in operations, bring a presentation about how we can achieve better throughput efficiencies. Don't just answer questions asked of you. Bring answers to questions that we as the interviewers haven't even thought to ask. – Sam Davidson, Batch

12. Demonstrate your aptitude.

I've seen my fair share of candidates who may not have been perfect on paper but who have gone on to become rock stars. One key attribute that I look for is aptitude. If a candidate can show me an example of a time they faced adversity or a challenging scenario and yet still prevailed, then that shows an aptitude to learn and be creative. Those are key concepts in problem-solving, and I weigh them heavily when other skills are not as apparent. – Jacquay Henderson, Square Peg Technologies

13. Be inquisitive.

The candidate should ask informed questions related to the business and their role. Demonstrate that, although you may lack experience, you have the gumption and initiative to come to the interview prepared. Asking questions about the company's challenges, needs and desires will demonstrate your intention to integrate with the company. Someone who shows they're ready to commit to your organization is going to be a valued candidate, regardless of their level of experience. – Zee Ali, Z-Swag

14. Let your personality shine.

There were times when I listened to my intuition and hired people who weren't super qualified for the job but had great personalities and were ready to learn. And they ended up doing better than I ever thought they would. So I think it's not something you "say" during the interview, it's who you are and what energy you bring into the room. If it matches the company's vibe, they will hire you even if you don't know it all yet. – Solomon Timothy, OneIMS

15. Show you are willing to do whatever it takes.

This actually happened to me once. On paper, the candidate didn't match well. But toward the end of the interview, she turned and looked directly in my eyes and said, "I really want this job." I asked her about her pay expectations and she replied, "I don't care." In other words, she was willing to do whatever it took to get that job, and she wasn't afraid to make it known. She was hired. She turned out to be one of the best hires to date and she is a huge part of the company now. – Santino Filipelli, Modern Realty