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By Greg Bensinger, Betsy Morris and Georgia Wells

Bad job interview? Ask the recruiter what went wrong

William Olson has switched employers seven times in 25 years, usually because a search firm pursued him. His success stems in part from his refusal to cooperate unless the recruiter promises to give him frank feedback about his performance during interviews.



He became a regional manager at Guinness Brewing North America, for example, after a recruiter recommended he tone down his aggressive manner. He rose to the top post there five years later. "With good feedback, you can adapt during the recruitment process," says Olson, now president and chief executive officer of MRINetwork, a Philadelphia search firm.

That's one way to solve a persistent problem. Most job seekers never recognize the shortcomings that kept them from a job — and so go on to repeat them. The fix: Persuade key players that you will all benefit from an honest reaction.

Lacking a strong rapport with a recruiter, you may never learn about mistakes made. "It's not my job to tell candidates why they didn't get the job," especially if they were a poor fit, treated the receptionist rudely or looked disheveled, says **Dora Vell**, managing partner of **Vell & Associates**, a high-tech search boutique in Waltham, Mass.

Yet sometimes, Vell does help contenders who help her. She recalls one IBM general manager who lost his bid to run a division of a major business-services company last summer. He talked excessively about his lengthy finance experience during the job interviews. "He spoke like a CFO," she says.

When the manager met Vell for coffee months later, he casually inquired about his failed candidacy. She divulged his blunder because he had opened doors for other Vell clients keen to do business with IBM. "I would definitely present him again for a general manager's position," she says.

Try to solicit criticism from recruiters without sounding defensive. "Some of my best clients are former candidates I have coached through more than one search" because they showed willingness to hear constructive feedback, reports Jordan Hadelman, chairman and CEO of Witt/Kieffer, an Oak Brook, Ill., firm specializing in health-care hunts.

Well-prepared, neutral questions "can distill out a pretty accurate picture" after a turndown, says Gary Ambrosino, chief executive of Sencicast Systems. The Needham, Mass., manufacturer represents his ninth start-up. He suggests asking a recruiter, "Was there anything that made me less competitive?" Another nonthreatening query: "Tell me about the person who got the job."

However, outside recruiters don't always know the real reason that employers reject prospects. And hiring managers rarely cooperate. "They are too busy," a 52-year-old merchandising director frets. Though she has interviewed with nine companies since her August layoff, only one hiring manager provided feedback.

When you request a hiring manager's reaction, emphasize your continued interest in working there. The best time "is at the end of your interview," advises Jeff Kaye, CEO of recruiters Kaye/Bassman International in Plano, Texas. "You may reignite interest in a dead deal." He has hired people he initially rejected because they dug hard to understand why or pledged to fix deficiencies he cited — such as repeating "you know" 64 times within 15 minutes.

A Kaye/Bassman managing partner interviewed dot-com business manager Andrea Chamberlain last spring for a recruiter's spot. As their session concluded, he told the curious applicant that she was unqualified.

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She reiterated her strengths. "I may not have the recruiting experience you're looking for," Chamberlain remembers saying. "But I have the energy, I'm motivated and I want to work for your company."

Kaye/Bassman subsequently invited her to interview with a different managing partner. He hired her the day they met.

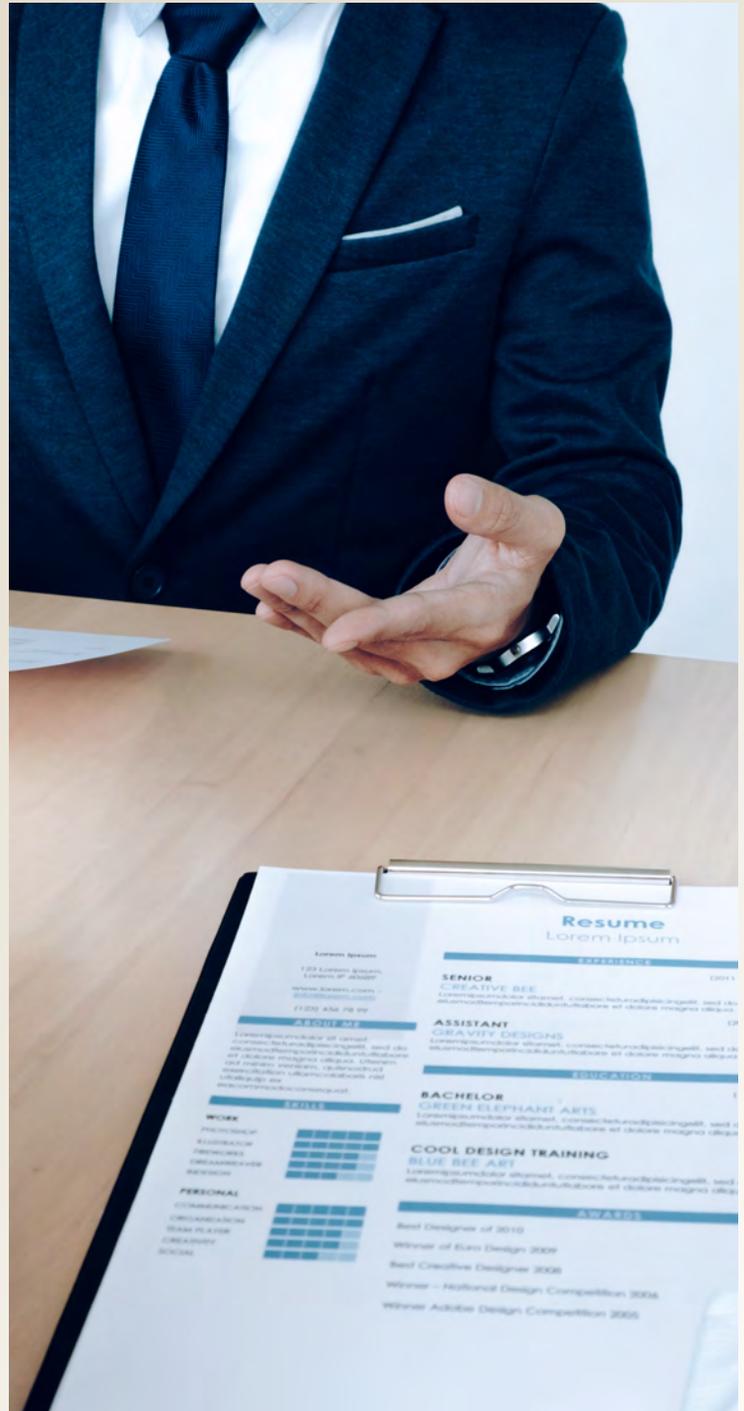
You might find other ways to learn why you didn't get picked. Ambrosino says his most accurate assessments of his turndowns have come from board members and investors he already knows.

With knowledge comes the power to repair correctable flaws. A Dallas high-tech executive unsuccessfully sought to become chief operating officer of a small concern in late 2005. The outside recruiter informed him that he had acted a little nervous and lacked skills needed to take a company public. The executive quickly changed tactics and got a job offer elsewhere.

"Simply being told that you presented as 'nervous' or 'weak' doesn't provide any concrete, usable feedback," remarks Donna Schwarz, a partner at ImpactCommunicationExecutive, a New York communication-coaching firm. She suggests a good coach could help polish your inadequate interviewing skills through techniques tailored to your personality.

Can't afford a coach? Conduct mock job interviews with friends. "Or, listen to your enemies," Vell proposes. "Maybe they have a point. Hear what you don't want to hear."

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