

Interviewing Dos and Don'ts

By Marion Webb

Whether you're a newly ACE-certified professional or a veteran trainer, knowing the basic rules of job hunting is critical to landing that new job.

To help put some serious muscle behind your résumé and job interviewing skills, ACE has asked two highly respected industry insiders — Gregory Florez, fitness columnist and chief executive officer of First Fitness, Inc. and Todd Durkin, 2005 ACE Personal Trainer of the Year and owner of Fitness Quest 10, in San Diego — about the "dos and don'ts" of writing applications and job interviewing.

Rule No. 1-A Well-Written Résumé/Cover Letter

Florez and Durkin say a well-organized (with an overview of past work experiences and credentials) and an error-free job application can make the difference between you landing a job interview or your application landing in the wastebasket.

"Employers generally spend two to three minutes per résumé, so make it count," Florez says. A résumé and CV should be no longer than one page and provide insight to your professional knowledge, attitude and personality.

Durkin, for instance, looks for trainers who are career-oriented, team-players, hard-working and energetic while exuding passion, confidence and a shared vision. He offers the following two writing samples as exhibiting such traits: "I am passionate about strength and conditioning and can bring a level of excellence" and "I have a never-ending thirst for knowledge and want to become a leader in the fitness industry."

Durkin says while he prefers hiring trainers who have earned an exercise-science degree from a university and a professional certification, some of his hired staff members bring other valuable attributes to the table.

"Some of our best trainers have earned degrees in other fields or have worked in the corporate world for 30 years and gone through somewhat extensive continuing education and training to get their certification. As long as they have experience in business and welcome feedback, I keep an open mind," he says.

Smart job candidates differentiate themselves by highlighting their attributes early on. Durkin and Florez find that bullet points in résumés highlighting teaching credentials, diplomas, professional accolades (ACE Master Practical Trainer), ACE-certification and entrepreneurialism, can provide a competitive edge.

Says Florez, "Consider paring down the résumé, so that the prospective employer is looking at the most important things first. Everyone says they would be a wonderful asset to the organization, but those who truly stand out differentiate themselves from others."

Applicants trying to impress prospective employers by attaching elaborate marketing brochures, self-portraits in scanty clothing or posing with Hollywood celebrities may miss the mark in terms of professionalism and business savvy, at least in the eyes of Durkin and Florez.

Says Durkin, "When I do receive an application and résumé, I have received things like 'glamour shots' or 'modeling shots' of trainers. I am not big into that. I don't mind receiving a professional head shot with an application, but it is not a beauty contest and I am not looking to hire someone based on their looks."

Rule No. 2-Prepare for the Interview

Similarly, when it comes to preparing for a job interview, candidates who do their research on a prospective employer's dress code, their clientele, facility, and training philosophy can set themselves apart from the crowd.

Florez finds that fitness professionals often struggle when it comes to dressing appropriately for a formal interview, so it's always a good idea to talk to an insider first.



"The rule of thumb is to overdress rather than underdress," he says. "In our industry a suit and tie or dress could be over the top. Men should wear a sharp polo shirt with dress pants and women a nice pantsuit. Never wear workout clothes."

Other fashion faux pas to avoid: Fake nails, excessive make-up and jewelry, body-revealing clothing and muscle shirts.

Durkin advises candidates to stay away from using slang and getting too cozy.

"A future employer is a work colleague and a professional," he says. "Be sure to treat your interview as a professional opportunity to prove your worth. Even if you know your employer, you should dress professionally and speak professionally," Durkin notes.

For him, candidates who greet him with a smile and a firm handshake score immediate bonus points. If they continue to be engaging and reveal a friendly and outgoing personality, they have a good chance of being hired. That is in addition to having earned the needed credentials, education and experience.

Florez echoes this view: "This is a high-touch, personal business. Let your personality show."

Also, the more information you're armed with during the interview, the better your chances for success.

Durkin expects his interviewees to know about Fitness Quest 10.

"The more they know about our business history, culture, work structure and expertise, it shows they are interested in our organization and have prepared for the interview," he says.

Most applicants can expect to be quizzed on their technical know-how, but should not underestimate the importance of behavioral, communication and interpersonal skills.

"The fitness industry is now learning what other firms have already learned and that is that behavioral-based questions are just as important as technical knowledge," according to Florez.

He typically asks candidates to walk him through a client-trainer scenario where things didn't go so well to evaluate their problem-solving and communication skills.

"Taking initiative is huge for me," Florez says. "People either do or they don't. If someone takes ownership and makes things happen like calling the manager instead of waiting around, this is the kind of candidate I want to hire for any position."

Durkin says he is interested in finding out what makes a person tick and if they would fit into his team. "The energy and chemistry of the team is critical, so it is important that we hire people who can contribute to the organization in a positive manner."

Whatever happens during the interview, Florez advises interviewees to not be intimidated.

"It's OK to not know all the answers and not everyone is the right fit for a particular environment. Be honest in letting the interviewer know you don't know some answers."

If it's not the right fit, interviewees also shouldn't be discouraged to look elsewhere.

However, a sure way to kill any job prospects in the eyes of an employer is to inquire about salary expectations, vacation and benefits early in the interviewing process.

Ending the interview by asking for the job shows that you mean business and are interested in the position. Following up with a thank-you note demonstrates good business etiquette.

Rule No. 3-Gaining Essential Skills

While some prospective employers prefer hiring experienced trainers who can hit the ground running, the path is wide open for newcomers or individuals who chose a fitness career later in life.

Internships, which most clubs offer, are a great way to learn about the job and gain experience at the same time.

Durkin says 50 percent of his staff started as interns at Fitness Quest 10. He also values other staff members who chose fitness as a mid-life career. They bring with them decades of marketing and business experience, which is vital for their own success, as well as contributing to the club's fiscal health.

Florez says with the rising numbers of older health club members, club owners are well served in hiring trainers who can relate to their clients' aging bodies and psychological well-being.

"The largest population of personal trainer users are older people who believe that someone closer to their own age or someone who isn't in perfect shape can relate to them better," he says.

For more information on job interviewing skills and job searches, visit the dedicated Pro Site section of the ACE website (www.acefitness.org) that includes GymJob.com for hundreds of jobs listings and the ACE Bulletin Board for networking.

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