



ETIQUETTE AND ETHICS IN YOUR JOB SEARCH WHAT ARE THEY AND WHY SHOULD YOU CARE?

Your job search involves other people. Just as you have legitimate personal feelings and pragmatic interests so do the people on the hiring side of the process.

Etiquette is a generally accepted mode of conduct. For example, dining etiquette facilitates people eating in a group without giving offense to one another. (You wouldn't eat with your elbows on the table or talk with your mouth full of food). Job search etiquette enables people who are essentially strangers to explore the possibility of entering into a mutually beneficial business relationship. (After all, that's what an employer-employee relationship should be). A violation of etiquette could strain feelings and raise questions about behavior that interfere with examining the overall fit between the job applicant and the job.

Ethics is a search for the good or right way to do things. Ethics teach that some values may transcend your personal best interests. Because of ethics, you may need to sacrifice some benefit simply because the legitimate interests of another party need to be taken into account. For example, accepting a job offer as a safety valve while continuing to pursue other employment options might be in your personal interest. However, doing so would be a violation of ethics because that practice causes harm to others.

Following professional etiquette tends to support our practical self-interest because it removes possible causes of adverse reactions from those who may be able to influence our professional future. Adherence to professional ethics, on the other hand, may involve some pragmatic loss to us. There may be some benefit through a good reputation, but that is not a certainty. Perhaps this explains why the questions most people ask about etiquette involve understanding what to do, while questions about ethics are often designed to escape their constraints.

Let's go through the job search process together, examining what proper etiquette and ethics guide us to do.

RESUME

Ethics

Absolute honesty on your resume is an ethical imperative. There are two aspects to this.

Don't overstate:

- *GPA.* Your *GPA* should be stated as it is when constructing your resume. Do not include if it is below 3.0
- *Titles.* Whether jobs you have held or in student organizations, job titles should be clear and uninflated. If you were pumping gas, don't write "petroleum supply consultant." If you were the "president" of a club with two members that never met, it doesn't deserve a mention.

Don't understate, either

Don't mislead the employer by *understating* your accomplishments. An ethical presentation is one that alerts an employer to your critical skills and characteristics. Your chances of getting an interview could be in jeopardy if your resume is overlooked because you understated your qualifications.

Similarly, not having an august *title* doesn't mean you lack organizational or leadership skills. Let the employer know that you "*led* a class research team" or "*organized* a charity benefit" or "*volunteered* 10 hours a week." Don't downplay your skills because you haven't been featured in *Business Week*.





REFERENCES

Etiquette

At some point in the interview process, you may be asked to provide a prospective employer with a list of several references. These are people who know you from an employment or other non-family context and who will speak well of you.

References are generally not contacted unless the company is preparing to extend a job offer. At that point, it is cost effective to check your references for two reasons: (1) to uncover reasons why the offer should be withheld, and (2) to fulfill “due diligence” requirements. However, you may need to list some references when you apply for a job. Therefore it makes good sense to contact each prospective reference early in the process. **Request permission** to use a person as a reference. Be prepared to **explain** what your job search **plans** are. Also, provide the potential reference **with examples** of qualities you possess and ask the reference if she would like a copy of your resume for her convenience.

On your list of references, include the person’s name, title, professional affiliation, and telephone number. It makes most sense to submit your reference list only under two circumstances: (1) the prospective employer explicitly requests it, and (2) the references would clearly help you advance your job candidacy. Let’s look at some job search situations and see whether submitting references is called for:

- **Job application:** If the form asks, you should provide the references.
- **Resume:** Generally you have better things to do with your resume space. However, if you are looking for a job in TV news broadcasting and Tom Brokaw will be a reference, state that fact. It is a good selling point to use references in high places or with very high and positive visibility.
- **Initial Interview:** Even though it is unlikely it will be requested, bring a list of references to the interview. It is better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it.

If the interviewer tells you that he loved his last job at Certainco and John Jones of Certainco is one of your references, mention that fact. “That’s interesting. Did you know John Jones? He happens to be one of my references.”

- **On site interview:** Submit your reference list if requested. Also, contact your references to let them know that you have reached this stage.

INFORMATIONAL MEETINGS

As you consider leaving your college career for a professional career, speaking with practitioners in fields of interest to you makes a good deal of sense. Practitioners can provide insights about work life and needed skills that are difficult to access in any other way.

Both etiquette and ethics have a role to play.

Etiquette

- **Professional demeanor:** If you are visiting a person’s place of work, make sure that your appearance, including mode of dress, is appropriate for that environment. You are not a student going to class. Consider yourself a professional trying to make a positive impression.
- **Time and timeliness:** Be a bit early for your appointment. Also, be mindful of the other person’s time. In addition to helping you, she has a job to do. Coming in with some prepared questions and knowledge of her business will help you use, rather than abuse, her time.



- **Thank you:** It is appropriate to send a thank you letter after your meeting. So is keeping the person you met with informed about your job search if he has expressed an interest in it?

Ethics

- **Representing others:** If you have arranged the meeting with the help of friends, relatives, or your college, how well you present yourself is a partial reflection on them. Your conduct should not make them look like poor judges of character.
- **Misrepresenting yourself:** You requested the meeting to request *information*. Do not ask the other person for a job unless that would be clearly acceptable to the other person's agenda.

APPLYING FOR A JOB

Etiquette

Compose all correspondence in a professional manner. Your cover letter should be personally addressed. Your resume should be professional in appearance and informative in content. Unless you have an existing relationship with the addressee, use "Ms." or "Mr." rather than "Carol" or "Charles."

Ethics

Apply for a job only if you have some realistic level of interest. You would be wasting a company's time if you apply for a job in a state where you would not live. Electronic recruiting through the Internet has made this an especially serious problem. It is now possible to go "click crazy" and apply for a multitude of jobs with little expenditure of thought, time, or effort. Spurious job applications clog a company's candidate search system and result in a significant loss of time.

INITIAL INTERVIEW

Etiquette

- **Arrive early:** Plan to arrive 10-15 minutes early. Lateness says that your time is more important than the other person's. Arrival at an interview in the nick of time doesn't show time management skills. Rather, it demonstrates certain recklessness in important situations.
- **Forms of address:** It may be unclear how to address your interviewer. If a representative of a company with an informal culture invites you to call her by first name, it's fine to do so. Also, interviews at an E-business almost always fall into the first name category. However when in doubt:
 - *Ask:* "How would you like to be addressed?" is a perfectly reasonable question.
 - *Be on the safe side:* Few people are offended by the title, "Mr." or "Ms."
 - *Follow your culture:* Some people have been raised to address anyone who is older by "Mr." or "Ms." There is no need to make you uncomfortable by violating that norm. On the other hand, if the interviewer says, "Just call me Chuck," it is best to accede to that request.
- **Courtesy:** Be courteous to *everyone* you meet, including secretaries and other individuals interviewing for a job.
- **Thank you:** A brief thank you note to your interviewer(s) is a professional courtesy.
- **Initiating a discussion on compensation:** It is poor form to initiate questions about compensation at an initial interview. However, it is appropriate to respond if the interviewer raises the subject. In most cases, the response should be nondescript. Indicate an interest in the job and a sense that the interviewing company is probably competitive with the market. In the case of an E-business, your initial interview day may also be the day of decision on whether to extend an offer or not. In that case, be prepared for a more substantive discussion of compensation if the subject is raised by your interviewer(s).





Ethics

- **Being there:** Once you have arranged an interview time, it is your ethical obligation to be there, prepared, and on time. The main reason is that the number of interview slots allocated for a specific college recruiting day or a specific job is limited. An unused interview time costs someone else a chance at that job. There are two other reasons. The interviewer's time is one of his most important resources. Wasting that time is like burning someone else's money. Further, if the interview was scheduled on campus, your college's reputation will suffer as a result of no-shows.

Canceling an interview at the last minute is little different than not showing up at all. If you come down with an illness that prohibits you from keeping the appointment or a family emergency calls you away, missing your interview is not unethical. However, to lessen the disruption to the interviewer's day, let him know you are unable to make the interview as soon as you can.

Think about the following scenario: Steve wakes up one morning with a headache. It is raining outside and Steve has an exam that evening. Steve is scheduled for an interview with Certainco at 10:00 a.m. A bit conflicted, Steve looks in the mirror and engages his conscience in dialogue.

Assuming that you have the role of Steve's ethical conscience, how would you respond to Steve's arguments for blowing off the interview, as given below:

1. I don't really want the job anyway, so I would be wasting the interviewer's time if I showed up.
 2. The economy is booming, jobs are chasing people. If someone really wants to interview with Certainco, I'm sure they can get an interview.
 3. My first priority is to be a student and I need the time to study for my exam.
 4. The college is more concerned with its reputation than with good old Steve. Besides, I have been paying the placement office salaries with my tuition for four years, so what is their complaint?
 5. People miss appointments all the time. It's no big deal.
- **Everything you say must be true.** Every answer should be straightforward and thoroughly honest. Do not shade the truth, let alone lie. Anticipate that any statement you make about your past performance will be probed by follow up questions to ascertain details. If you can't back it up, don't say it.
 - **But you don't need to say everything:** There is no ethical requirement *to volunteer* information that may be destructive to your chances of being offered the job. Ethics is not self-abnegation.
 - **Your questions:** In most interviews, you will be invited to ask questions of the interviewer. Let's say your interview is with Ozonebust and your research reveals that the company has been accused of violating federal environmental protection standards. Putting courtesy and pragmatics aside, would it be *ethical* to ask a question like this?: "Ozoneburst has been named as a major polluter, threatening the health of millions of people, including my as-yet-unborn children. Aren't you guys ashamed of yourselves?"

Phrased this way, the question is probably unethical and certainly bad etiquette for the following reasons:

- You were invited to ask a question and you vented your hostility instead. That is an abuse of the situation. It's as if the interviewer asked you, "Aren't you ashamed that you wasted so much time drinking beer instead of studying?"
- You are putting the interviewer in the position of dealing with your anger instead of your concerns.
- You have introduced a note of hostility when you had an option to ask your question in an appropriate way, like "As you know, there has been considerable adverse publicity about





Ozonebust in regard to pollution. Like many people, I am concerned about this. Can you tell me what the company's perspective is on this?"

Sometimes there is a benefit to ethical interviewing as the following story illustrates:

Bill came to see me before one of his interviews. He was concerned. At a previous interview, Bill's answers about his work experience seemed to fall flat. "Maybe I could stretch a few points a little," Bill suggested. "Who would get hurt? Besides, everybody fibs a little, don't they?"

I could understand Bill's concern, but couldn't agree with his solution. Getting a job is tough, but that makes honesty even more important. I wanted Bill to find his own answer by thinking about some questions.

"Bill," I asked him, "why do you think your responses fell flat?" Bill told me his work experience was thin. "My experience isn't what they're looking for. I need to dummy things up a little."

"Bill, I think you have it backward," I responded. "The problem is that you weren't *honest enough* at your interview. Remember that the employer is looking for a match between the requirements of the job and what you have to offer. The honest approach is to use your work experience, whatever it is, to demonstrate some of your positive characteristics that the employer needs. *You* are the subject of the question. Your work experience provides examples and historical context for your attributes."

Bill thought for a moment and then reasoned, "So, if I stretched the truth about my jobs, I would be moving away from the point of the question, which is what skills and attributes so I have that would help me do the job well. Fibbing demonstrates a characteristic that is unattractive to employers. By focusing my energy on identifying what I achieved or learned on those jobs, I would be honest and also more successful."

"Exactly," I said. "Altering the facts lets you escape from truly examining what is important about them. The consequence of telling the truth is that you will actually identify more of the skills you have that the employer needs. *But remember this, Bill: although ethical behavior could be a benefit in this case, ethics should be followed even when there is no benefit at all.*"

- **Other students:** What if the interviewer initiates topics that are ethically questionable. You may be asked to say something about another student or another applicant. While you have every right to build yourself up you have no right to undermine someone else.

For example, a candidate may be asked, "Peter, tell me why I should hire you *and not the other students I am interviewing today.*" Peter should respond by telling why he should be hired. "I know that you are interviewing some wonderful people today. The reason you should hire me is.." "Gail, you and Jolene were both Art History majors. What can you tell me about Jolene?" Gail should say, "I know a lot of really nice people from Art History, but I am not comfortable discussing anyone but myself."

- **Other job search activities:** It is not unethical for an employer to ask you about other interviews, job offers, and salary offers you have had. Their purpose may be to see if you are seriously interested in the position they are seeking to fill. *However, you are under no ethical obligation to give a direct answer.* All you need to say is, "Yes, I am pursuing a number of job opportunities [add 'in this field' if appropriate] but I prefer to limit my comments to my interest in your company." Remember, if they discover that other employers are interested in hiring you, it can work to your advantage.

FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS

If your initial interview went well from the company's perspective, you will be invited to a follow-up or second-round interview. Typically, these interviews are held *on site* at the employer's place of business and may be referred to by that name.





Etiquette

- **Confirm your interview arrangements:** Two or three days prior to your on-site interview, call the person who invited you. Confirm the details of your visit, including date, location, time, and any transportation or lodging arrangements made by the company. It is a good idea to ask about the day's schedule, including how long you will be expected to stay and the number of people with whom you will interview.
- **Meals:** In many cases you will be invited to a meal, perhaps lunch, as a guest of the company. If dining in a restaurant, avoid ordering foods that are messy or difficult to eat (e.g., spaghetti or lobster) and keep the cost of your order within a moderate price range. Engage in table conversation, remembering that the meal is part of a professional interview process and not a chance to blow off steam or pig out.
- **Thank you:** At the least, a thank you note to the person who arranged your on-site interview is in order. A note to each person who interviewed you is also recommended.

Ethics

- **Deciding whether to accept:** On-site interviews are very costly to companies in terms of staff time and financial costs, such as travel. Only a limited number of people can be interviewed. If Jones accepts the interview, Smith may not be invited. Therefore, do not accept an on-site invitation unless you have some degree of interest in the job. Accepting the interview just for practice, the plane trip, or a stay in an elegant hotel asks the company to incur an unnecessary expense. In addition, a frivolous acceptance may come at the expense of another person who is actually interested in the job but didn't quite meet the cut for on-site interviews.

On the other hand, protecting your legitimate interests is also an ethical concern. Don't reject an on-site invitation simply because you are not sure that you want the job. The following story illustrates these issues.

David's Dilemma

David had mixed emotions when he came to see me. He had done everything we had recommended in the Job Search Club and had succeeded in being invited to three on-site visits. He was happy about two of them, but concerned about the third.

"Schlockco just isn't for me," he said. "The more I think about it, neither the firm nor the industry is for me. But I convinced them at the on-campus interview that I really want the job, so I don't want to feel like a liar now. And I'd love to visit San Diego. What should I do?"

I told David that he had raised an important issue and that students struggle with the same question every year. Only he could decide whether to go, but I gave him guidelines for deciding whether to decline an on-site interview invitation.

- **"No Way?" "Really?"** If you are 100 percent sure, positively and absolutely, that there are no way you would accept a job from that firm if offered, then don't go. If there is even some possibility that you might want the job, then go to the on-site interview.
- **Remove needless concerns.** David, for example, had told the firm at his initial interview that he wanted the job. In the context of that interview, David was telling the truth. Now he has a different perspective. At this stage of the process, it is not unethical to change your mind and tell the company that you no longer wish to pursue this opportunity.
- **Don't count birds in the bushes.** I told David not to turn down the visit to Schlockco on the assumption that one of the other firms he had interviewed with would make him an offer.





There is no job offer until the firm has explicitly made it to you. Praise for your character, capabilities, and potential with the firm is not a substitute for a firm offer.

- *The interviewer is not the firm.* Don't reject an on-site interview because you didn't like your initial interviewer. A half-hour experience with a single individual is no basis for closing out a potential career opportunity.
- *It would be fun, good interview practice, etc.* Accepting an on-site interview simply for fun or practice is unethical because it is an abuse of the employer.

JOB OFFERS

Probably the most sensitive issue in the entire job search process is the ethics involved in handling job offers. At this point, both the prospective employer and prospective employee have something at stake.

Here are some basic guidelines:

- It *is* ethical to receive more than one job offer.
- It is ethical to negotiate in good faith for better terms.
- It is **not ethical** to accept a job offer while continuing your search for another job or waiting for another company to offer you a better position.

Let's examine excuses students (and others) sometimes offer in defense of their unethical behavior in this regard:

- **Not enough time to decide:** Unfortunately, it is true that some companies do press students for an immediate response to a job offer. That is poor business judgement on the company's part, but it does not excuse poor ethics on yours. You have three choices:
 1. You could say "yes" and mean it.
 2. You could say, "I simply can't respond in the time frame you have given me."
 3. You could try to juggle decision dates.
- **It won't matter to the company:** This is the "no harm-no foul" theory. However, the company does suffer harm. Thinking that a position is now filled, the company's search to find a candidate for the position ends and other candidates will receive a polite letter letting them know they are no longer in the running. The reputation of your college may also suffer.
- **It's really best for the company:** Some people rationalize this way: "I wouldn't be happy with the job, so it's really in the best interest of the company for me to withdraw my acceptance. They will have an "unhappy camper" and lose their training investment for me sooner or later anyhow." The issue is that when you accept a job offer, you must mean it. Consider your happiness with the job *before, not after* you accept it.
- **I need to protect myself:** The feeling is understandable. However, no one has the right to maximize his or her own self-interest while disregarding the rights of others.
- **People do it all the time:** Some people do, but ethics is not a pursuit of the lowest possible standard of behavior.
- **Employed at will:** The company may have stated in its offer letter that your employment is "at will" and that the offer does not constitute an employment contract. You could be fired for any reason or no reason at all. You may think that employment "at will" allows quitting even before you start, but it doesn't. Ethically speaking, accepting a job offer means accepting it under the terms offered.

The Issue of Good Faith

What about major, unforeseeable events that occur after you accept a job offer. Examples might be dramatically adverse news about the company, discovering previously hidden facts about the job, or a dramatic change in your personal status.





The ethical issue in such circumstances is one of “good faith,” namely that you made your decision with full intent to carry it out. Let’s say that you read in the press that DoneDeal, Inc. shocked the business world by announcing that it is in serious financial trouble and anticipates layoffs. That news seems to undermine an implied aspect of your agreement to work for Done Deal – namely that you would have a future there. Presumably, DoneDeal, Inc. told you nothing about their financial problems during the recruiting process. Under such circumstances, you should seek iron-clad assurances that your job will not be eliminated or adversely affected in content. Absent that assurance, in writing, you have the ethical right to protect yourself against this major change in the company’s situation.

Major, unforeseen changes in your personal life may also be an ethically valid consideration. If your fiancé is unexpectedly transferred a thousand miles away, you may need to withdraw your acceptance to preserve your upcoming marriage. On a sadder note, a serious illness or death in your family may require that you not relocate as previously planned. Critical changes in family circumstances can reasonably reverse a previously made decision.

What if you receive a better job offer from Betterco after accepting a job with DoneDeal. This is **not** an example of a major, unforeseeable event. The ethics of acceptance in good faith precludes even considering the Betterco offer.

REJECTING A JOB OFFER

You may receive one or more jobs offers that you decide to reject (Wouldn’t it be nice to be in that position?).

Etiquette

You should convey your decision to reject a job offer orally and in writing. The considerations here are speed and certainty of delivery.

- **Call** the person who signed your offer letter. Explain that it was a difficult decision, but you have decided not to accept his company’s offer. You may wish to contact other people in the company who interviewed you as well. Leave a brief message on voice mail if necessary.
- **Write** a brief letter. Thank the person for the offer and politely decline it. Send a hard copy through regular mail. Send the same text by e-mail if you didn’t speak with a person when you made your phone call.

Ethics

- **Timely Notification:** *Once you have made your decision*, you are ethically bound to notify the rejected company promptly. The company needs to move forward with its staffing plans and the next candidate in line may be looking forward to receiving the offer. Don’t forget the other birds in the forest just because your own nest is well feathered.

CLOSING THE LOOPS

Many people have helped you with your job search. It is good etiquette to contact each of them. Express (again) your thanks for their interest and let them know how happy you are to have accepted a new job.

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