

Common mistakes of pharmacy job seekers

Believe it or not, the job market for pharmacists is not what it used to be. In the past, pharmacy graduates enjoyed the luxury of multiple job offers, but the current sluggish economy has led to hiring freezes, work-force reductions, and restructuring of work schedules to reduce budgets.

In the Pharmacy Manpower Project's 2009 National Pharmacist Workforce Survey, 26% of employed respondents reported restructuring pharmacist schedules to save labor costs at their work sites, 13% reported mandatory reductions in work hours, 6% reported pharmacist layoffs, and 4% reported use of early-retirement incentives for pharmacists.¹ Another sign of a tighter job market can be seen in the Pharmacy Manpower Project's Aggregate Demand Index (ADI), which uses data from a national panel of persons directly involved in hiring to track pharmacist demand on a scale of 1–5 (1 denotes that demand is much less than supply, and 5 signifies high demand and difficulty filling positions). A recent check showed an ADI of about 3.3, down from one year earlier, suggesting that supply and demand are more balanced.² Now more than ever, pharmacy graduates need a competitive edge in the job market. Here are some common mistakes pharmacy job seekers make—and tips to avoid them.

Waiting too long. Pharmacy students and residents often wait until graduation, licensure, or the completion of a residency program to apply for jobs. The reality is that most employers

interview and hire staff before licensure or the completion of a residency, knowing that the employee may not be able to start working (or perform the duties of a registered pharmacist) until a later date. The interviewing and on-boarding process can take weeks or months, but if you miss the application deadline, you have missed an opportunity. The ASHP Midyear Clinical Meeting, held annually



in December, includes a Personnel Placement Service recruitment event that provides a great venue to learn of job openings and interview with employers. Start job-hunting early, and put yourself in a position to have options.

Ignoring minimum job requirements. Considering the current challenging job market and the rise in popularity of residency training, employers can be picky about new hires. It is becoming more common for employers to require that staff pharmacists already have postgraduate year 1 residency training. Likewise, it is virtually impossible to obtain a clinical pharmacy specialist position in practice areas such as oncology and infectious disease without completing a postgraduate year 2 residency. Read and heed the minimum requirements of the job advertisement or posting, and save time by only applying for jobs that match your qualifications.

Narrowing the search too much. Family commitments and other personal obligations can make relocation difficult, so you may be restricted geographically, but inflexibility regarding work hours, job setting, or minimum salary can make it very difficult to find a good match. Try not to be too limiting in your search. Your first job likely won't be your dream job, and that is OK. Be open to rural and urban settings, and consider applying for both staff and clinical positions. Your dream job might turn out to be something—and somewhere—entirely different from what you planned.

Doing it alone. Use the power of networking to get an "in" with prospective employers. Ask colleagues if their employers might be hiring in the near future; sometimes you can learn about job openings before they are advertised or posted online. An excellent way to meet and network with colleagues is to join student pharmacy organizations and attend their local and state meetings. It is also helpful to have someone review your curriculum vitae (CV) and cover letter before submitting them. Another set of eyes can often spot spelling and grammar mistakes and other errors (such as addressing the cover letter to the wrong person) that you might have missed. Gallagher and Wodlinger Jackson³ recently published helpful tips to get you started with your CV. In addition,

The New Practitioners Forum column features articles that address the special professional needs of pharmacists early in their careers as they transition from students to practitioners. Authors include new practitioners or others with expertise in a topic of interest to new practitioners. AJHP readers are invited to submit topics or articles for this column to the New Practitioners Forum, c/o Jill Haug, 7272 Wisconsin Avenue, Bethesda, MD 20814 (301-664-8821 or newpractitioners@ashp.org).

you will need a few well-crafted letters of recommendation. Select appropriately placed people who can speak to your professionalism and skills, and ask early so they are not rushed.

Winging the interview. The best interviewees are those who are the most prepared. Know how to get to the interview site and where to park, so you are not late; you might even do a practice run. Review the itinerary if possible, and become familiar with the names and titles of the people you will be interviewing with (the last thing you want to do is start the interview off by calling the director of pharmacy by the wrong name). Research the organization: What is its mission? What are its short- and long-term strategic plans? Develop intriguing questions that let the employer know you are truly interested in both the organization and the position. One of the biggest mistakes during an interview is not asking questions. Develop specific questions for each person or group participating

in the interview, but also ask different people or groups some of the same questions; different replies can be instructive.

Appearing unprofessional. The following tips are obvious but so important they bear repeating. Neglecting your appearance or wearing inappropriate clothing or jewelry to an interview can take an otherwise good candidate out of the running. Consider cleaning up personal social media pages and limiting public access; don't correspond with prospective employers using e-mail handles that might be misconstrued (e.g., Partygirl007@email.com). During an interview, do not presume to be on a first-name basis with those present, even if they are former preceptors, teachers, or coworkers; it is prudent to use formal terms of address (e.g., Doctor, Mister) until told otherwise. What may seem socially acceptable to you could be appalling to someone else, and even the little things you say or do can be magnified in the compressed time of an interview.

Answering questions vaguely. As awkward as it may be for those who are modest, an interview is the right time to talk about *you*. Be as specific as possible when answering questions, and never answer with a simple yes or no; give details to show off your training and experience. Many employers use the "performance based interview" (PBI) technique, which encourages candidates to discuss past scenarios and examples.⁴ A good way to answer PBI-oriented questions is the STAR method: Discuss the Situation or Task, then the Action you took, and finally the Results you achieved.⁵ Practice is, by far, the best way to master this technique and prevent a lot of awkward "ums" during an interview.

Displaying poor nonverbal communication. An interview is not just about *what* you say; as the old saying goes, actions speak louder than words. Some research indicates that about 55%

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of communication is visual, and only 7% verbal, suggesting that body language may be even more important than the answers you provide during an interview.⁶ Fidgeting, chewing gum, playing with hair, crossing your arms, or shifting in your seat can distract from what you are saying. Be sure to make eye contact with interviewers, and sit with good posture. Leaning back in your chair can give the impression that you are not engaged or lack enthusiasm about the position—not the lasting impression you want to leave.

Disparaging past colleagues. Pharmacy is a small world, so never speak negatively of current or former employers, teachers, coworkers, or preceptors. The person you criticize could be the interviewer's former pharmacy school roommate. This practice could cost you not only that particular job but also opportunities elsewhere.

Forgetting to follow up. Thank-you cards may seem old-fashioned, but they are still part of interviewing etiquette and might prove to be the little extra that

gives you an edge on other candidates. They serve as a reminder of your qualifications and interest in the position, while providing a chance to mention something you might have forgotten during the interview. Thank-you cards should be individualized based on the conversation you had with the interviewer, ideally handwritten, and sent within two business days.⁷

Finding your first job or a better position in the competitive pharmacy job market takes a lot of hard work, but avoiding these common mistakes can help you compete successfully.

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