



The Non-Negotiable List – 20 Red Flags For Interviews

If you ever interview job candidates, you need a Non-Negotiable List. This list is used during the interview process to help identify “warning signs” that candidates aren’t a good fit for the organization or position. When a candidate shows one of these warning signs, he or she is no longer considered as a potential hire.

We used a Non-Negotiable List quite effectively at my old company, curbing our turnover by over 90% in one year. The genesis of the list were the many occasions where on the heels of a new employee not working out (fired or resigned), one of the interviewers would say something like “You know, when I interviewed him/her I noticed he/she . . . (Fill in the blank with any of the items on the list below.) Please note that every case is different, and exceptions can be made. When it comes to interviewing, trust your gut.

Here is a list of 20 sample non-negotiable traits and behaviors that should be red flags for most jobs and most people. This list will help you start creating a list of your own, using warning signs for behaviors that clash with your company culture.

1. Could not look me in the eye (exceptions should be made for those who have Asperger’s or other inhibiting conditions).
2. Could not answer the most rudimentary questions succinctly and directly, but instead provided a wandering and vague “answer.”
3. Did not show up to the interview on time and appeared not to have a legitimate excuse.
4. During the first conversation/interview, asked about how many vacation days or work breaks were allowed.

5. Did not know what the organization does and/or what my job function was.
6. Bad-mouthed their current or last boss/employer.
7. Exhibited a high degree of drama when discussing their current or past employment experiences.
8. Moved very slowly and showed very little energy (exceptions should be made for those who have disabilities or other inhibiting conditions).
9. Could not share an honest and candid response to the great interview question, “Please share the single greatest mistake you have made in your job in the last three years.” (According to a national SHRM poll, 43% of Chief HR Officers believe that the number one reason new employees do not work out is that they cannot take feedback. [e.g., they are perfect people and do not make any mistakes.] Fielding answers to this interview question is quite entertaining, as nine out of 10 people will either: share a mistake and promptly blame others for it; sit silently for minutes on end, not being able to think of anything they have done wrong—in three years!)
10. Had inappropriate language or dress.
11. Chewed gum during the interview.
12. Displayed behavior that showed a lack of politeness, disrespect, or messiness. For example, when accepting a glass or bottle of water at the beginning of the interview, they left the used cup or bottle on the table, instead of offering to throw it out or bring it to the break room. One recruiter told me one of her candidates had the audacity to come into the interview with a “Big Gulp” from 7/11, only to leave it on her desk, condensation and all.
13. Provided inconsistent and/or conflicting information or answers.
14. Looked at their cell phone, fielded a phone call or responded to a text during the interview.
15. Did not ask probing questions about the job or organization when afforded the opportunity and/or exhibited a general lack of curiosity about both.
16. Expressed weaknesses that clearly did not bode well for the job position (e.g. an introvert who prefers to work alone interviewing for a customer service position).
17. Clearly interviewed for “a job,” as opposed to showing passion for wanting to do THIS job.
18. Did not send a post-interview thank you letter or follow-up in a timely manner. (If you don’t receive an email right away, wait for a card to come in the mail.)
19. Sent a post-interview message to follow up, but: it was generic and likely used for all job interviews; names were misspelled; grammar and writing skills showed cause for concern.

20. Was invited for a second interview or asked to provide follow up information but did not respond in a timely manner.

Create your own Non-Negotiable List to benchmark candidates against during the interview process. Use your list and make no exceptions, since the behaviors and actions are non-negotiable. Trust me, it works.

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Having spent thirty years as a high-level Human Capital Management consultant, Kevin has helped some of the world's largest corporations rebuild a culture that fosters productive engagement, earning him several distinctive awards and honors. Kevin's premier creation, PEER[®], has been consistently recognized as a long-overdue, industry-changing innovation in the field of Employee Engagement. His first book, Building A Magnetic Culture, made six of the best seller lists including The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today. He is also the author of The Virtual Manager, which explores how to most effectively manage remote workers.

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