

WHY AM I NOT SUCCESSFUL IN MY JOB INTERVIEWS?



Question: I'm currently a [financial consultant](#) with a small firm, but after two years there, I'm looking for a change since finance no longer drives me the way it did. I'd like to do something besides stare at a computer screen all day. I've tried to branch out and interview for such jobs as [computer analyst](#), economic-development associate and [research analyst](#), to name a few within my current salary range, but I haven't gotten any offers. I'm African American with a B.A. in economics from a top school, and throughout my job search, recruiters have said I have a great background and the skills they're looking for, yet I rarely get a second interview. I'm trying to figure out what I'm doing wrong. My parents say that I tend to be overdressed, and others have mentioned that I have an "air about me." Yet my upbringing has always been to think and speak positively. In fact, I chuckled at a Wall Street Journal article last month about African Americans who are complimented at work for their speaking ability. I too have received those compliments and have shrugged them off, but I have to wonder whether white interviewers are surprised to hear me speak so well? Another complication is that I wear a hearing aid. My father has pointed out several instances in which my hearing could be perceived as a negative. What do you think?

— *Douglas, Ardmore, Pa.*

Douglas: You raise several important issues: Are you making a career move for the right reasons? Do you interview effectively? Are you being discriminated against because you're African American, hearing impaired or both? After asking several HR pros about the potential biases you may face in interviews, they agree that neither your race nor your hearing impairment alone would account for your lack of success thus far. They agree that you'd probably benefit from conducting mock interviews with fellow professionals to hone your skills. But the real concern is whether you're targeting jobs that require your skills and training. If you're attempting to enter a new field without any grounding in that discipline — such as computer analysis — you'll likely have problems. Even in a tight job market, few employers will give you a chance to prove yourself if you haven't shown initiative by gaining expertise before trying to make the switch. Volunteer for assignments in the specialty you want to enter, either at your current employer or with a volunteer group. Take appropriate classes or workshops to build expertise. And network with contacts in the field to find out exactly what companies are looking for today. You might also consider graduate school, where you can build your credentials as you explore new career directions. Remember, your reason for jumping ship and selecting a new career should be more than just escaping long days in front of a computer. Of course, if you perceive discrimination when meeting with company hiring managers, decide what your plan of action will be. You can sue, which is potentially expensive and can damage your job-search efforts. Or, you can decide that you don't want to work for a company that doesn't appreciate who you are, and cross that company off your list. Sadly, that's a decision thousands of candidates have to wrestle with every year.