Tips for Success

Tax Tips

The tax man is on your side when job hunting. Search expenses are deductible as long as you are looking for a new position in your current field - even if you're still working.

Job hunters may be eligible to take the following deductions, according to an H&R Block senior tax-research analyst:
- travel expenses
- employment agency fees
- résumé-preparation fees
- career counseling expenses
- the cost of advertising your services
- newspapers and other periodicals purchased for their help-wanted ads
- legal fees paid to an attorney to review an employment contract

To take advantage of these deductions, you need to itemize, rather than take the standard deduction. It's important to keep good records. For instance, by scrupulously tracking the time you spend online to job hunt, you can deduct that percentage of your Internet access fees.

See a tax professional for more information.

SIX TIPS TO A BETTER INTERVIEW

E-Mail Etiquette

E-mail can often be your first - and possibly, your only - point of contact with other people. Practicing good business etiquette on the Web can make a difference between hearing back from an employer or not when applying for that perfect job.

E-mail is a serious communication tool and not an excuse to forget about being professional, courteous or friendly.

What message does an e-mail address like bigman@xyz456.com, hotbunny@abc123.com, singlebabe@123.com send? Those addresses are not professional and could be considered demeaning and insensitive. Most businesses don't want to convey that type of image and applicants with these types of addresses will probably not be considered for employment.

Always provide a personal name if your mail system allows it - a personal name attached to your address identifies you better than your address can on its own. As a good example, robertanderson@abc123.com conveys the sender as a professional person to be taken seriously a lot more than boblovesbeer@abc123.com.

People should select a simple address, not one loaded with letters and number and definitely not something odd or off the wall. Some people consider their e-mail address as a personal expression but understand this advice - if that's your image, you have to understand the consequences of those choices.

Our society needs proper etiquette now more than ever, good manners maintain consideration and kindness in our busy lives. Knowledge of good manners can lead to success in life. Appropriate conduct can make or break business deals or determine the outcome of a job interview and promote good relations.

The bottom line is to be professional. Your e-mail address is a direct reflection of you, your image and your values.

Ten Things to Know About Background Checks

You have been working long and hard on your search for a new job opportunity. Finally, you have an awesome interview and you get a great offer. The hiring manager indicates that the only thing remaining is a background check. Here are the most common items they review in a background check:

1. Criminal History
Felony and misdemeanor searches can be conducted by county, state or throughout the nation. Each respective search costs an additional fee. Some states will only provide information for the past seven years. You need to check each state for its policy. Only information of public record is available. Juvenile records cannot be accessed.

2. Civil History
Similar to criminal history and includes whether the job candidate is/was a plaintiff or defendant.

3. National Wants and Warrants
If the candidate is "wanted," it will appear through the NCIC system, but this information is not frequently requested.

4. Credit Report
This is a very common item for BCs. Companies are searching for financial stability. Bankruptcies prior to seven years will not appear.

5. Social Security Reports
This will reveal where the candidate has lived for the past seven years. Name variations are frequently used to verify addresses and locations.

6. Previous Employer Verification
This is the item that makes most job seekers nervous. Almost everyone has had some form of disagreement with his or her boss. The concern centers on what the employer will say and whether they will release employment files. In most cases, because of a dramatic upsurge in

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lawsuits from job seekers who received false bad references, previous employers typically only confirm dates of employment. Compensation and good or bad references are not generally provided; however, that doesn't mean it is not done. A job seeker might want to consider hiring a "reference check" company to verify what previous employers are saying.

7. Drug Tests

Approximately 15 to 20 percent of all BCs include a drug test. BC companies typically contract with local medical clinics to conduct the test. It can be expensive, so it is not done in all cases. In most cases, the job requirements determine if a drug test is necessary, particularly for anyone operating machinery or a motor vehicle. Executives are also frequently screened for drugs.

8. Reference Verification

The employer or BC firm will contact references provided by the job candidates. Typically the questions are very specific regarding job performance as opposed to personal or private information. They rarely contact anyone other than the designated references provided by the candidate.

9. Education

The BC will verify attendance, majors, degrees, certifications and dates earned. This has become a common BC item as a result of overwhelming falsification by job candidates. We have all seen news reports of leading politicians, executives, teachers and celebrities who have falsified their education. Be honest about your education. Your efforts to complete or enhance your education will definitely be viewed positively.

10. Driving History

A common and almost mandatory BC item for people required to operate a motor vehicle. They are checking for license status, holder, dates of insurance and expiration, violations, suspensions, or other actions.

Tax Advice for Travel Expenses

Unreimbursed travel costs to meet with employers are the most costly job-search expenses. In many cases, these are deductible, but travel is the thorniest point of contention with the IRS. That's because the IRS allows taxpayers to deduct the cost to travel to interviews only if the main purpose of the trip is to meet with an employer and secure a job.

In other words, if you fly to Boston to interview with one or two companies, stay overnight in a hotel, have breakfast with a recruiter in the morning and fly home - all the costs associated with your trip are deductible. That includes airfare, the hotel bill and 50% of the meal costs.

However, if you visit Hawaii on vacation, decide you want to live in Honolulu and arrange a job interview while there, you can't deduct those expenses because the main purpose was vacationing. It's possible you could deduct the cost of using a rental car to travel to the actual interview but you can't write off the flight or your meals.

Interview Tips for Baby Boomers

Here are five of the most common age-related interview questions - an how to field them gracefully:

1. "Will you be using this job as a bridge to retirement?"

Reassure your interviewer that you are excited about the position and plan to continue working for a long time. If you're relatively young and look even younger, you may not need to address the issue at all.

2. What are your salary requirements?

When faced with this question, first respond with a cool noncommittal answer. If pressed, give a salary range based on your research. For example, say: "I've researched the salary range for this position in our area and have found the typical salary range to be from $125,000 to $175,000, plus bonus. Is this what you have in mind?

3. "Do you have enough energy, stamina or brain power to do the job?"

This type of question is your cue to talk about your drive, energy and enthusiasm for the job. Give specific examples that reveal your energy using the STAR technique, where you describe the Situation, Task, Action and Result. Also keep in mind that this type of question reveals clues about the job's demands, hours, deadlines and overall expectations.

4. "Aren't you overqualified for the position?"

If the question does come up, emphasize your strengths and accomplishments, not the length of your experience, the interviewer may be concerned that you will have excessively high salary requirements or won't be a fit with the company culture. Remember to always stay positive and try to determine and address the real reason why the interviewer is asking the question.

5. "How old are you?"

This type of question is generally illegal, and you can graciously refuse to answer. Other tactics include responding with humor, or addressing the question behind the question: "I am incredibly energetic and expect to be working for a long time." Whether or not you choose to reveal your age, always keep the atmosphere positive.

Tax Advice on Moving Expenses

Job hunters who move because of a new job can deduct moving expenses that they pay out of their pockets. To qualify for this deduction, your new job must be at least 50 miles farther from your home than the location of your old job. If your old job was three miles from your home, your new job must be at least 53 miles from your home. You also must work at the new location for at least 39 weeks during the 12 months after you move to get the deduction.

The good news is that there's no cap on moving deductions. Moving expenses are reported on line 29 of Form 1040.

Trips back and forth to scout out a new area cannot be itemized. So any trips to a new location to look for a new home or open a bank account aren't deductible. Review IRS Publication 521 - Moving Expenses for more detail.

Why is Networking so Important?

In the world of work, networking is, indeed, a very big deal - even the Wall Street Journal reported that 94 percent of successful job seekers claimed networking had made all the difference for them. Networking comes in many forms; everything from meeting an old friend for a cup of coffee to ask how she likes law school, to having your best friend's father put in a good word for you at his company, to meeting with an older alum from your college to learn more about a career in social work.

How you find Networking Contacts

There are many ways to identify networking contacts. Here are some places to find folks who know something about a field, organization or school you are considering:

- your college alumni association or career office networking lists
- your own extended family
- your friends' parents and other family members
- your professors, advisors, coaches, tutors and clergy
- your former bosses and your friends' and family members' bosses
- members of clubs, religious groups and other organization to which you belong
- all the organization near where you live or go to school

What can these Networking Contacts Tell You?

1. They can tell you what it's really like (from their perspective, of course) to work in a given field or organization now. They can also tell you how the field has changed and what they see for the future.
2. They can help you understand the aptitudes and training needed to get into and be successful in a particular field.
3. They can give you the inside scoop on schools and training programs.
4. They can give you insider information on an organization, such as who is in charge, what the culture is like, what kinds of people have held the job you're looking at, what it takes to succeed in that position.
5. They can be living demonstrations of what it's like to work in the field. Can you imagine yourself doing what they do?
6. Every once in a while, the person with whom you're having an informational interview will offer to help move your application along. When that happens, it can be a real advantage for you. But whether you get that offer or not, the nuggets of information you've gathered can be essential in helping you to sort out your options and present yourself more effectively.

Tax Deductions - What doesn't qualify?

New clothes to wear to interviews aren't deductible. Nor are your dry-cleaning bills between interviews. The IRS allows taxpayers to deduct only the cost of work uniforms that aren't suitable for any other purpose. Other items that have to be worn as a condition of employment also are legitimate expenses.

If you've had a substantial break between your last job and your current job search, job-hunting expenses cannot be deducted. This is because the IRS considers them as a business expense, and if you've been out of work for a long time, you're technically not in business at the moment. The IRS doesn't provide clear guidance on the length of time that you'd have to be unemployed before you aren't allowed to take these deductions.

Most first-time job-hunting expenses aren't deductible either. You have to itemize expenses on your tax returns.