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By BRIAN MOORE

THE DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS

From too much cologne to the wrong socks, the little things can hurt a job seeker

SARAH Welch had a mind to hire the guy, at least before she got a whiff of him.

"I came into [his interview] really wanting to like him. He had a really good portfolio and a really good resume," says Welch, the COO of Buttoned Up, a Web-based firm that helps women become better organized.

"We're an all-woman company and we thought it would be a good idea to have a guy in the mix."

But at their tete-a-tete, the applicant sported "a sickly sweet cologne that was out in front of him by a few feet," she says.

"After about five minutes, I couldn't think. It was really making me nauseous," says Welch. "It was such a negative experience interviewing the guy."

The otherwise desirable applicant was kicked off employment island because of a single misstep that had nothing to do with his ostensible qualifications. But his scent told Welch plenty that she'd never be able to find on a resume.

"I think on some subliminal level it's an indicator that you're not aware of the impact that you have on people around you," she says.

Even hyper-qualified job applicants can blow a job opportunity by being careless about matters seemingly unrelated to the position at hand, career experts say. And smelling like Chanel No. Google isn't the only instantaneous deal-breaker. Mistakes in written correspondence, ill-advised remarks and issues with appearance can hurt you in ways often undreamed of when it was an employees' market.

"You have to be dead-on with these jobs," says Rich Greenwald, owner of the New York-based staffing firm The Concorde Group. "There are no more situations where a company is going to hire a 60 percent candidate, where you have six out of the 10 criteria for the job."

And a "yea" or a "nay" can come down to the smallest details, says Richard Dukas, CEO of Dukas Public Relations. He remembers inviting an applicant for a round of interviews at his firm, but essentially crossing the guy off his list when he failed to bring copies of his resume for other employees to inspect. "I thought you had it," the applicant told Dukas.

The oversight demonstrated "cluelessness," Dukas says. "He just didn't anticipate my needs, which is not good."

To help you avoid such landmines, @work spoke with recruiters, HR execs and other experts to find out what to avoid when job-hunting. While it may be tempting to dismiss some of their advice with a "well, duh," keep in mind that they see this carelessness on a daily basis, from otherwise strong candidates. Ignore their counsel at your own risk.

NOT THEIR TYPO

Odds are a letter, e-mail or resume is going to provide your first contact with a potential employer, and no small mistake can do as much damage as sending one with a typo or a misspelled word. It can and will send you straight to the reject pile, say employers, who have no patience for errors in an era of spell-check programs and online dictionaries.

Beyond that, take extra care with any written correspondence, says Greenwald, noting that even legitimate abbreviations can subject you to ridicule: He once received a letter to a division of his company from a potential client who addressed it to "Concorde Search Ass.," which didn't say much for his eye for detail.

The biggest minefield, though, is the job interview, since its up-close-and-personal nature can expose you faster than a college student with a cellphone cam.

Your appearance is paramount, so err on the side of overdressing even when the dress code is corporate casual, says Joe Pitino, practice director at The Mergis Group, an NYC-based recruiting firm. "I'm still amazed at the number of people who don't dress professionally," he says.

And details matter. White socks are a pet peeve for Joe Maturando, who as Ernst & Young's lead campus recruiter in the Northeast has seen plenty. (He won't cross you off any list the first time, but there shouldn't be a second time.) And we've already seen the potential downside of overdoing it on the perfume or cologne — they're better avoided, or used conservatively.

Speaking of scents, there are other olfactory errors that can derail even the most polished presentation. Rich Gee, an executive coach in Stamford, Conn., recalls an old job in which he interviewed a promising candidate

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who had "a great resume," and arrived in a nice suit.

But when he opened his mouth, "I suddenly started getting wafts of this great, garlicky breath," Gee says.

He didn't get the job.

Take note, though, that while a stick of Big Red might have fixed that hapless interviewee's problem, gum chewing is another potential turnoff.

"It's low-class," says Rick Probstein, CEO of TopJobLeads.com. He also recalls one IT dude who walked in licking an ice cream cone, which leads to another rule: When meeting a potential employer, get your snacking done beforehand.

And while you're at it, turn off your cellphone — having one ring in the middle of an interview is a proven deal breaker.

"They don't turn it off — and then they actually answer the phone," says Dan Relton, head of HR for Grey HealthCare Group in NYC, adding that one interviewee stopped an interview to tell the caller where a sweater was.

PUT A LID ON IT

Once you've passed the appearance test and the questions start flying, it's important to be articulate without orating like Cicero.

An otherwise qualified investment banker literally talked his way out of a senior corporate development job at a Fortune 500 company, recalls Sandy Gross, a managing partner at the Manhattan recruiting firm Pinetum Partners.

"He kept inching closer and closer to me," Gross says, adding that he got louder and began to spit without realizing it.

Conversely, silence isn't golden, either. Relton recalls the woman who recently answered his question about

her salary requirements with "I'm not ready to talk about this right now" — not quite what he was looking for.

And while no one wants to be an uptight goon, be careful about coming across as overly casual, particularly in later interviews.

"They think, 'I can open up now. I don't have to be so guarded,' " says Greenwald of the Concorde Group.

A light touch is a good touch — as long as you don't do any actually touching. Gross says one interviewee started complimenting her jewelry, then was all paws as his admiration for her bling overcame his decorum.

Rule: "Don't touch the recruiter," she says. "Talk, don't touch."

That's not the only way to come across as overeager. While it might seem a good idea because of the hard times, experts say a great way to kill a job offer is to open an interview by stating your willingness to work for a low salary, or relocate at your own expense.

"When someone does that immediately, it can be a red flag," says Kimberly Bishop, vice chairman of the NYC-based recruiter Slayton Search Partners. "Control your anxiety and don't sell yourself short."

Another pointer from Bishop is to remember that good manners don't begin and end in the interviewer's office. Candidates who come on like George Clooney to the interviewer but Christian Bale to the rest of the staff can find themselves wondering why a callback never came.

"If an assistant set up the interview, they're going to ask the assistant, 'How was that person?'" Bishop says.

DOWN, BOY

Even if your resume's golden and your interview went better than Romeo's first date with Juliet, there are still opportunities to blow it. Potential employers will usually let you know how long it will take them to make a decision. If they don't, ask before you leave. But once armed with this information, don't hound them until after the time has expired.

"Some people will call the next day,"Relton says.

A major faux pas? Maybe not. But now more than ever, landing a job depends on demonstrating that you will anticipate the needs of an employer rather than the other way around.

"People will look at that typo and wonder what his work habits are like," says Gee. "It's so unfair, but that's business."

[VITAL STATS]

- Number of workers in survey who've changed their workday habits to save money **80 percent**
- Number who are bringing lunch **60 percent**
- Number who are skipping happy hour **23 percent**

Source: Vault.com