



Most Job Seekers Know What Can Cost Them a Job but Are Less Certain What Actually Gets Them Hired

Top survey responses point to references as the leading advantage, while tardiness remains the biggest dealbreaker.

OKLAHOMA CITY, May 27, 2026 — With ongoing volatility in the U.S. job market, many job seekers are focused on how to separate themselves from the competition. But a recent Express Employment Professionals-Harris Poll survey shows candidates are more likely to identify what could cost them a job than the factors that improve their chances of getting hired.

What Job Seekers Say Helps Them Stand Out

Job seekers point to a wide range of ways to stand out, from refining their resumes to putting in extra effort during the application process.

But when asked what really separates them, a few factors consistently rise to the top.

The most common answers lean toward proof:

- Having references who can speak to qualifications or work: 45%
- Demonstrating passion for the role: 42%
- Quantifying achievements: 40%
- Having a personal referral from someone at the company: 40%

While candidates mention a variety of tactics, the top responses share a clear thread: the strongest signals are those that can be verified.

Additional ways job seekers say they try to stand out include:



- Having a resume optimized for applicant tracking systems and search engine optimization: 38%
- Showing they have researched the company: 37%
- Keeping the resume short and concise: 36%
- Showing creativity: 33%
- Including contact information upfront: 31%
- Reaching out to the company or hiring manager about application status: 31%

These responses reflect a mix of common advice and extra effort. But unlike the top drivers, these tactics are less about what can be validated and more about how candidates present themselves, highlighting a gap between what job seekers do and what they believe carries the most weight.

What Job Seekers Say Can Cost Them the Job

What helps job seekers stand out is not always clear, but what can hurt them is. Candidates are far more aligned on dealbreakers than differentiators, and the top ones are straightforward:

- Being late for an interview: 54%
- Being rude during an interview: 53%
- Dressing unprofessionally during an interview: 51%

From there, the list shifts to preparation and consistency, where smaller gaps or missteps can still raise concerns:

- Using unprofessional body language during an interview: 49%
- Having multiple jobs in a short period of time: 42%
- Being uninformed about the position during an interview: 41%
- Having large, unexplained gaps between work experiences: 38%
- Being uninformed about the company during an interview: 36%
- Not asking questions during an interview: 32%
- Having few or no references: 31%

Some of these concerns are cited more often than in the past. Compared to the fall of 2023, job seekers are increasingly likely to point to unprofessional clothing, unprofessional body language and frequent job changes as factors they believe could hurt their chances.

When Standing Out Goes Too Far

Even with a clear sense of what can hurt their chances, some job seekers say the pressure to get noticed can lead to stretching the truth.

A little more than 1 in 5 candidates (22%) say they have listed skills on their resume they did not actually have.

The tendency is more common among younger workers:

- Gen Z: 23%
- Millennials: 27%
- Gen X: 21%
- Boomers: 4%

Some job seekers surveyed shared examples that range from slight exaggerations to clearly made-up claims, including saying they were fluent in a language after only a single class, listing experience at a prestigious school they never taught at or even claiming to be “fluent in dolphin communication.”

Others admitted to stretching their hands-on experience, presenting themselves as more skilled or experienced than they really were.

“Many job seekers believe standing out comes down to polishing their resume, but employers are looking for something deeper,” said Bob Funk Jr., CEO, president and chairman of Express Employment International. “Candidates who can point to real achievements and confidently demonstrate their skills bring a level of credibility that goes beyond words. When that proof is paired with the right cultural fit, that combination defines the strongest hires.”

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Survey Methodology

The Job Seeker Report was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of Express Employment Professionals from Nov. 7 to 20, 2025, among 1,003 adults ages 18 and older.

For full survey methodologies, please contact Sheena.Hollander@ExpressPros.com, Director of Corporate Communications & PR.

If you would like to arrange for an interview to discuss this topic, please contact Sheena.Hollander@ExpressPros.com, Director of Corporate Communications & PR.

About Robert (Bob) Funk Jr.

Robert (Bob) Funk Jr. is the Chief Executive Officer, President and Chairman of Express Employment International, a global staffing franchisor founded and headquartered in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. He leads a portfolio of workforce solution brands, including the

flagship Express Employment Professionals franchise, along with several affiliated brands serving specialized markets. The Express franchise brand is an industry-leading, international staffing company with franchise locations across the U.S., Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

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