

## Interview Communications

As I was planning this newsletter, I found myself thinking about an old blues song revived by Eric Clapton on his Unplugged CD (Reprise/MTV 1992, Track 6), “Nobody knows you when you’re down and out”. The truth is, no one hires you, either.

I have experienced other recessions since entering the search business in late 1975, but I can’t recall any of them being as bad as this one. The near simultaneous confluence of the Tech Bubble, Y2K, 9/11, Middle East instability, the stock market meltdown and corporate financial scandals are unprecedented in our history. Depending upon our individual ages, we may find ourselves telling stories about our present experiences to our grandchildren, much the way we heard stories about the Great Depression, the World Wars or Viet Nam when we were growing up. My only hope is that all of us will be able to endure these challenging times with the same strength of character that Tom Brokaw captured in his book, The Greatest Generation, where he chronicled the challenges faced by our forebears who endured the Depression followed by World War Two. I don’t want to be remembered as a whining “Baby Boomer”.

Most IT people don’t interview for a living. As a senior IT executive, the greater portion of your interviewing experience is gained when you are hiring and not when job hunting. Try to recall your successful hires in recent years and analyze the decisions you made. I suspect that you hired people who not only were qualified, but who also appeared energetic, alert, upbeat and enthusiastic. It is very easy to display this behavior when you are employed and some other firm is trying to recruit you. Mentally, you are dealing from strength. It’s a whole different matter when you have been out of work for some time, your financial situation is worsening and you can’t get an interview, let alone a job offer. Unfortunately, when you allow the negativism created by these challenging times to pervade your mental outlook, it creeps into your vocabulary, your tone of voice, your appearance, your posture, your step, your handshake, your eye contact and every other visual and aural manifestation of your behavior.

Interviews are a very unique business and sales event. Negatives are not allowed under any circumstances. Companies will not hire anyone who displays the following characteristics or behavior:

- An appearance of desperation, characterized by nervousness, hopelessness, distraction, fatalism and the like.
- Complaints about the job market, ill-mannered company officials and recruiters.
- An attitude that you have received a “raw deal” or that everyone else is wrong and you are right.
- Reticence on one hand or “diarrhea of the mouth” on the other, in an attempt to rationalize your present situation or offer only those answers you think the interviewer wants to hear. My experience is that too many candidates speak incessantly, sharing non-essential details, especially on phone interviews, where they lose the visual advantage of eye contact and body language.

- Criticism of previous employers or recent interviews. Blaming others for your present condition.
- Inappropriate interview posture, i.e. slouched position, poor eye contact, reclined in chair, etc.
- Behavior in an apologetic or less than confident, self-assured manner.

We communicate via words, tone of voice, eye contact, body language, posture and gestures. Please be sure to display these attributes on future interviews, if you wish to be a serious candidate:

- Be sure that your hygiene, dress and grooming are all in order. This was previously discussed in TENG Newsletter, Vol. 2 No 20, "Interview Attire". Grooming is a very visual form of communication. It displays attention to detail, self-respect and respect for the interviewing company.
- Greet your interviewer with confidence. This includes a confident step, a firm handshake (not a bone crusher, "wet fish" or a "dish rag"), good eye contact, a smile and an upbeat tone of voice.
- When you sit down, don't sit back or sit on the edge of your chair. Do sit completely on the chair, erect, leaning slightly forward to show your interviewer that you wish to listen and communicate with them. Reposition your chair only if you feel it will improve eye contact or allow you to hear them better.
- Pause briefly before answering questions. Avoid blurting out answers or interrupting your interviewer. You want to appear deliberate, thoughtful and measured in your words. Brief periods of silence are permissible. They sometimes help to emphasize a point or transition to a new topic. You can also use them to shift the pressure onto your interviewer. A conversation does not need to have every second filled with words.
- Provide concise, direct answers to questions. This is very important. I am continually amazed at well educated high level professionals who either answer a multi-level, complex question with a simple "yes" or "no"; or who run off at the mouth for an extended period, causing me to forget what I asked them in the first place. If you fail at this only once on an interview, you will more than likely end your candidacy for the position.
- Give honest and accurate answers. Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know". When asked for your opinion, state it, and avoid saying what you think your interviewer wants to hear. If you do the latter, it will make you appear to be a "phony" and someone who can't be trusted in difficult times.
- Try to achieve a good "give and take" in your conversation. Ask questions. Interview the interviewer. Assimilate her or his answers and share common experiences. Project yourself via your experience and strengths into the job. Use critical details to explain how you fit and how you can benefit the company.

- When an interview requires meeting several people serially, assume that each person has the power to veto your hire. If the first meetings go well, don't let your guard down on the later ones, especially if they are with potential peers or subordinates, or seemingly less important players. Inevitably in this type of interview process, candidates will tell me that one interviewer talked constantly and would not let them interrupt with questions. Upon debriefing the client, I will learn that that particular interviewer complained that my candidate did not ask any questions and is a poor communicator. When you encounter an interviewer who talks incessantly, you must politely, firmly and periodically interrupt with focused and relevant questions. This is not easy, but it is necessary and important.
- Don't discuss your financial or personal hardships at any time. Even if you fit the job perfectly, you may be eliminated if the hiring executive feels you are desperate. At best, you may get a "low-ball" offer. Companies avoid people whom they feel have personal problems that may prevent them from being productive.
- Treat second and other follow-up interviews as first interviews. Remember, you are still being scrutinized. You must not let your guard down. Keep selling yourself as if it were a first interview.
- Without fail, display a positive outlook and attitude at all times.

In case you're wondering, the pain you are enduring now is a test. Instead of getting a passing grade you get a paycheck. This is a test of your character, intelligence, mettle, problem solving skills and ability to endure privation and adversity. You may not be aware that you are sending negative signals during an interview. In addition to researching the company and the position, you must also get connected with yourself and mentally prepare to be at your very best. Without a doubt, nobody hires you when you're down and out.

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