

The Interview, Part 1: Laying the Groundwork / Dealing with Stress and Reality

This newsletter is the first of a multi-part series on the interview and your job search campaign. We will examine the interview process, how to prepare for it and how to do it more effectively. It is adapted from one previously published early in 2002.

It is impossible to wage a successful job search unless you have the right mental attitude and outlook. In an expanding job market, if you are recruited while happily employed, you automatically display more self-assurance and confidence because you are dealing from strength. Extended unemployment has a way of eroding your confidence. One day, you are in a frenzied work environment, the next day you are sitting home out of work and stunned. You have moved from “full speed ahead” to “stop”. Even if you have seen the warnings before the break happened; optimism, hope or even denial may postpone the actual reality that “this has happened to me”. If interviews are scarce, the competition is tough and you’ve been out for awhile, it is very hard to maintain a positive outlook and demeanor when networking and interviewing.

I once heard an expert discuss causes of stress and how stress impacts our lives. I remember him saying that a change or loss of employment causes about the same level of stress, as does the death of a loved one, a divorce or physically moving your household. Anyone facing this kind of trauma has to take the time to acknowledge its existence and the impact it is having on them.

Stress is relative to each of us, depending upon previous life experience. Many years ago, I met a senior executive whose company had been taken over in one of the first large acquisitions in the 1980’s. Emotions ran high in his company, as it had been stable for years. Although fear of layoffs was widespread, his superior commented that he was unusually calm. He replied that having been a combat infantry officer in Viet Nam, he frequently had been at risk for his life, and the pending loss of his job was not a big deal. Comparatively few of us have experienced hand-to-hand combat, so for most of us, loss of any job is a big deal, perhaps more than we would like to admit. Many of us are now suffering previously unknown long periods of unemployment along with the simultaneous meltdown of retirement investments and savings, which can strike fear into the hearts of the bravest.

Whatever your personal experience, it is imperative that you deal with it before you begin looking for a new job. An important part of your life has died. To allow time to heal this, you need to mourn its passing, come to terms with what went well and what did not, and move on. I also understand that this is easier to say than to do. Probably all of us define ourselves by our careers. Indeed very few of us, when asked what we do, will say, “I’m a parent, or spouse, or golfer, or churchgoer”. We respond with our career title. When we lose our job, it is not just the paycheck and the comfort of a familiar situation that goes away, but part of our identity dies with it. Prolonged unemployment afterward

doesn't help either as feelings of isolation, bitterness and helplessness set in. You must also conceal these feelings while interviewing.

Anyone who aspires to top management nowadays has to accept the idea that a graph of their career more than likely will not be the smooth, uphill line that they would like. This is not unlike managing an investment portfolio. It means that we have to plan for unexpected setbacks. Understand that they will happen. Be prepared financially since it is not easy to interview while distracted by financial worries. Financial experts advise us to have at least six months of living expenses on hand as cash in the event of job loss. Have you considered setting aside two years' of expenses? If you have children in college, how will you pay their tuition if you are unemployed? How do you save this much? Look at your lifestyle. If you own a home that has a few thousand square feet more than you need, perhaps you should start cutting there. Be ready to relocate, if not nationally, at least regionally. As a senior IT executive, you are called upon to orchestrate changes to improve a business, which have gut-wrenching impact for people at levels below you. You are also subject to comparable changes, and they are worsened by the fact that when you are a senior executive, a new job may be a year or more out, and not around the corner. These are part of the stakes when you play at this level. More than one TENG member has opted for other careers, after growing weary of these cycles.

How do you prepare yourself for an interview campaign if you have lost your job?

- Come to terms with why you are out of work. It's usually just business.
- Business is relationship-driven. If there were political issues surrounding your departure, you are not "damaged goods". It is still just business.
- Allow some time to pass before organizing your search campaign. Take a vacation, spend time with family, remodel a room, enjoy a hobby or read a book. Unwind.
- Understand that you are not alone. In fact, you have excellent company. In my nearly twenty-eight years in IT executive search, I have never seen such a large group of well-educated, credentialed and experienced people simultaneously unemployed.
- Be ready to explain your career history with plausible rationale for each of your moves along with any gaps in your career. Most interviewers will understand, but there exist some, possibly detached from reality, which will not. Ignore them and move on.
- If you do not have a four-year degree, understand that some doors will automatically close to you. This will be especially true, but not without exception in the Fortune 1000, the larger consultancies and academic computing. Be ready to accept that. I agree that with senior executives, experience and accomplishments can overshadow education, but in a tight market, some companies want every ticket punched and this is another means of cutting the list. In others, degrees are required of anyone in management, even if it only means bragging rights to clients.

- If you harbor any ill feelings toward a former employer or supervisor, get over them. Nothing will kill an interview faster than negative comments or attitude about previous employers. As elementary as this may sound, many people still fall into this trap. You have to learn to deal with negative experiences in a positive way. It is the martial arts of interviewing, because you are using the weight of a negative issue against itself and flipping it into a positive growth experience.
- Take the time to learn your true value and career passions. Analyze those aspects of previous jobs that are less pleasurable. Knowing these differences will help you to develop a clear picture of your next job. This is not easily accomplished on your own. Some professionals hire an executive coach to help them. If you can't afford one, speak with former colleagues and supervisors who know you and your accomplishments. Focus on finding only those jobs you want to do.
- Avoid the trap of setting a deadline for starting your next job. If you don't make it, it will be a negative motivator. First determine what you want your next job to look like. Factor in actual duties, possible industries, companies, geographical location, atmosphere, environment, culture, management style and compensation. Then commit to networking relentlessly, full time, until you find it.
- You are embarking upon a campaign to market and sell yourself. Ask any professional sales person about the importance of a positive attitude and self-assurance. Without them, you can't succeed. You have to admire who and what you are and passionately believe in yourself in order to sell you.
- What are your alternatives? Is this the time to leave the corporate world to pursue self-employment in some other business? Is this your passion or a means to avoid a job search?

Seeking a new job is a full time and serious endeavor. Treat it the same way you would as if you were on someone's payroll. Prepare for it mentally. Get rid of the old "baggage". Make sure you have the proper tools. Once you have come to terms with your departure from your previous employer, you are ready to begin laying the groundwork to find your next one. If you paid attention to these details and do it right, you should feel a sense of self-confidence and empowerment that will grow each day and help you through each step. The right mental outlook can turn this into one of the most rewarding experiences of your life.

If you have any questions or thoughts, please contact me at any time. I am glad to help you.

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