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Scuttling Some Job-Hunt Myths

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What some applicants accept as gospel when they're interviewing never ceases to amaze. Here are 10 misconceptions that can really hurt.

When I had my first baby, my husband's grandmother told me to put a penny on the baby's belly button and tie something around the baby's tummy to keep the penny in place—that way the baby wouldn't have a prominent belly button. She also told me to keep the cat away from the baby because cats, she said, "steal the baby's breath."

I looked at the cat and I looked at the baby, and I couldn't see how the cat, even if she were so inclined, could manage to get a lip-lock on the baby. But grandma was certain the cat had it in for the baby. Some old myths die hard.

Job seekers have created their own mythology around the recruitment-and-selection process, and from time to time these myths bubble up to people like me, who get to poke holes in them. Here are some myths that you may have heard, and the corresponding truths of the matter:

A long resume shows that you have lots of experience

Wrong! A long resume shows that you have a hard time editing for relevance. A short, pithy resume far outshines a long, boring one. If I can get 25 years of experience into a one-page resume, so can you. Think accomplishments rather than duties and you'll be off to a good start.

A cover letter's only purpose is to say, "here is my resume"

Au contraire! Your cover letter is the vital, missing link between the living you and your resume [the formula-built document). Your cover letter conveys three important things: a) you understand the company's current need, b) you've got the skills and experience to meet the challenge, and c) you're a smart person and a good writer. Don't ever forgo the chance to impress a screener with your spot-on cover letter.

Certain interview questions are illegal

It's not the question that's illegal—it's the intersection of your being asked one of these questions [such as "What's your religion?" or "Do you plan to have children?"], your answer ["I'm Jewish," or "I'm expecting right now, as a matter of fact"], and your not landing the job. Even then, you'll have to show that the failure-to-hire decision was based on your answer to the question, as it were, but you can get some help from your state's Human Rights Dept. or the federal EEOC.

Still, if you see dollar signs when an interviewer says, "Ah, yes, Liz Ryan, a good Irish Catholic name," don't quit your day job. Failure-to-hire claims are notoriously tough to win, from the plaintiff's point of view.

The internal candidate is a slam-dunk vs. external candidates

Many a hard-working junior corporate type would have it so, but internal candidates are by no means shoo-ins when a plum job opens up. It can help you a lot to have the references and the network that your insider status provides, but

you also have to deal with the fact that your colleagues already know your weaknesses.

Outside candidates can appear to be unblemished—for just as long as it takes to finish the interview process and get the offer. By the time the chinks in the new guy's armor are visible, the outsider is an insider, and quite possibly, your boss.

You can breeze through an HR screening interview without much preparation

Companies are well aware that time is money, and the HR screener's job is to eliminate people from the candidate pile, not pass them through. If the hiring manager can see four finalists, that's better than five, and three is better still. Given the chance [in the form of an off-the-wall comment or a fumbled answer to a tough question], a screener will move your name from the contender list to the other list. Treat any interview opportunity—including an impromptu phone screen—as a pass/fail situation.

It's best to apply for any job, even ones you're not qualified for, to get your resume in the door

This may be true for very large companies, where an extra dozen or so copies of Amy Smith's resume floating around may escape notice. But in an organization that pays attention to candidate interactions, you don't want to be viewed as the person who tosses a resume over the transom for any old opportunity that comes along.

It's far better to locate [by means of networking and on- and off-line research] the proper manager's name, and contact that person directly, than to send in resume after resume for wildly unrelated jobs.

Leaving voice mail messages is the best way to stay on a hiring manager's radar screen

Voice-mail messages are a pox because they don't lend themselves to quick scanning the way email messages do—you can only listen to them one at a time, and you have to listen to the whole thing to get the sense of the message. Make sure to get the e-mail address [i.e. the business card] of every person you interview with, and send a chipper and intelligent e-mail thank you after every interview.

Do use the phone, but keep trying until you get the person live—just after 5 p.m. is a good time, because people stick around to get some work done and may not fear picking up the phone at that hour. If you do leave phone messages, leave no more than one per week, or risk being branded a stalker.

Job-seekers can't bring up the salary question—they have to wait until the interviewer does

This is false. If you're on your second trip to a company [regardless of how many people you met the first time] and the subject hasn't come up, you are free to broach it. Say to the most relevant person in your second-visit interview lineup [relevant meaning the hiring manager or the departmental HR liaison], "would this be a good time to talk about compensation?"

It is perfectly appropriate to tackle this topic before you leave the employer's facility for a second time, so that your time, and the time of the people interviewing you, is not wasted.

Be ready, if you're the one raising the issue [or even if you're not] to discuss your salary requirements. Notice that I said requirements, not salary history—if the company asks you for your compensation history, you can say "Here's the compensation level I'm looking for now."

Always take time to consider an offer before accepting

You must mull and understand the offer before accepting, that's for sure. But if you've already been through the details with an HR person or hiring manager, and you receive an offer that sounds identical to what you were expecting, it's perfectly wonderful to say "Great! I accept."

However, you must get your offer in writing. Don't ever accept a job offer and agree to a start date [especially if you're quitting a job in the process] without seeing it spelled out on paper.

You cannot negotiate an offer unless you're a senior level muckety-muck

You can negotiate an offer if you're a part-time file-stacker. The company needs help, and your skills will provide it. I have negotiated terms with high school students—and kudos to them for having the backbone to try. You have to stay professional and friendly, but you can and should continue the offer conversation if the terms aren't your cup of tea.

You should have introduced any unusual elements—like a flexible schedule or extra vacation—before the offer is extended, but if you’ve done that, or if you’re giving up valuable stuff at your current gig, don’t hesitate to introduce some back and forth into the conversation. After all, you also have something valuable to offer: You.

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