

A vital skill for job seekers: sense of humor

By Susan Weiner, Globe Correspondent, 10/17/04

It helps to have a sense of humor when you're seeking work during the jobless economic recovery. Sure, new jobs have been created, but the 5.4 percent unemployment rate means that my job hunt is taking months, not weeks.

Between personal experience, friends, and buddies in my job hunting support group, I've encountered some funny stuff at every stage of the search, from networking to formal job interviews to offers.

In the following examples, names and identifying details have been changed to protect the innocent - and the not so innocent.

The informational interview strategy recommended by my outplacement agency has taught me that people are nice and mean well. However, when they talk about their colleagues at other firms, their impressions often don't jibe.

Illustration/Anthony Schultz

There's Joe Shmo, client service manager for Company A, who says "Try Jane Doe at Company B. Her sales presentations need your help."

When I meet Jane Doe, she says, "Try Joe Shmo. They could use your presentation skills at a single-product firm like Joe's."

At my next single-product firm visit I hear, "You'd be best at a multiproduct firm."

Sometimes even setting up an interview with the hiring manager can be a comedy of errors.

Fred, the human resources rep who gave Lola a telephone screening interview told her that the hiring manager would call her the following Thursday at 1 p.m. When the hiring manager hadn't called by 4 p.m., Lola called him.

The hiring manager replied, "I didn't call because you don't have Java experience."

That puzzled Lola because Java wasn't mentioned in the ad. So she called the human resources rep.

"Oh, he made a mistake," said Fred. "I'll reschedule the interview."

Then the next day, Fred called back to admit he was the one who had made a mistake. Java experience was required, so it was a no go.

Lola and I aren't the only job hunters struggling to keep a sense of humor. Consider some of the excuses that managers have given my friends for failing to show up for meetings.

"I forgot to put it in my Palm Pilot."

"My son told me this morning about his class play this afternoon."

"Didn't you get my e-mail?"

"I thought we were meeting on the 18th."

We job hunters who value our sanity have learned to think of our own weaknesses on these occasions. We smile at the reminder that we're not alone in our goof-ups.

Tiffany felt elated when her follow-up call to a potential employer yielded an appointment for a second interview at Mr. Big's office.

Scrupulous about details, she repeated the time, date, and location of their appointment to make sure she got it right.

On the morning of the interview, Tiffany polished her shoes, checked her image carefully in the mirror, and arrived 15 minutes early at the building where she'd met Mr. Big before.

"Go on up to four," said the security guard. But when Tiffany arrived on the floor, the receptionist told her that two months earlier Mr. Big had moved to the fourth floor of another company building one-quarter mile down the street. He'd kept the same phone number and neglected to correct Tiffany when she mentioned the address.

To make matters worse, by the time she reached Mr. Big's new office, he was tied up in another meeting so he couldn't meet with her.

Then there was Nate's brush with the job of his dreams. He got close to an offer for a well-paid job at a prestigious university only to have the job yanked away when the hiring manager quit or got fired. This happened not once, but twice.

George thought he had the inside track when Sylvia called him to interview for a sales job that hadn't been posted yet.

"You gave the best sales presentations I've ever heard," said Sylvia, explaining why she invited him in. "Please call me periodically so I can tell you when my job requisition is approved."

George followed his career counselor's advice. He sent a handwritten thank-you note restating how he could help Sylvia make a great company even better. He sent occasional, carefully chosen magazine clippings of special interest to her. He left voicemail messages.

Sylvia responded, telling him to stay in touch.

So imagine George's surprise when he received Sylvia's last message. "George, I've hired an internal candidate who's a perfect fit. I wish you the best of luck in your job hunt. Please call if you have any questions."

This reminds me of Roger's experience. He checked in with hiring managers for months waiting for his job offer to be approved.

Each time, the company was bought out or the job requisition was cancelled because it had been outstanding so long that the bean counters decided the hiring manager could go without.

Both Roger and the hiring manager felt as if they were playing a nightmarish game of Monopoly: Do not pass Go. Do not collect your new job or new employee.

Then there's my friend Jill. She was called in right away when she responded to an ad for a job that sounded great. She hit it off with the hiring manager and was offered a job on the spot.

What's wrong with this picture? Unfortunately, the job was for no pay at a start-up. "If our product is successful, we can start paying you in six months," said the manager.

Sometimes the joke is on the hiring manager. My friend John made the final cut for a great job in Boston. The only fly in the ointment was that the job would require him to spend a good deal of time in Merrimack, N.H. The commute from his home in Quincy would not be pretty.

Somehow John got to talking with Beth, the other finalist, in the elevator. It turned out that Beth had worked for a company with an even better job for John. Beth introduced John to the hiring manager at her old company.

If all goes well, they'll both come out ahead, with their employers none the wiser about their collaboration.

Employers don't always treat applicants gracefully. "Thank you for your application. Please see the attachment," e-mailed a company referring to a document labeled `MANAGER_REJECT.doc`. No need to read any further.

Then there's Victor who hates to network. He'd sooner dive into a pit of snakes than attend an industry event. But wouldn't you know it, he landed a job when his maniacally networking, jobless neighbor stumbled on the perfect opening for him.

Sometimes we job hunters clutch at straws. Last week I cracked open a fortune cookie that told me "You will conquer all obstacles and achieve success. Lucky Numbers 4, 11, 22, 27, 31, 35."

My first thought was to laminate the piece of paper and hang it on the wall behind my computer monitor. My second was to play those numbers in the lottery.

But what would I do if I landed the job of my dreams or won the lottery? Would I find as many opportunities to laugh? Then again, I'd like to be back in the hiring manager's seat, where I could begin to repay the many kindnesses I've received.