

The Interview, Part 1: Dealing with Stress and Reality

This newsletter is the first of a multi-part series on the interview. We will examine the interview process, how to prepare for it and how to do it more effectively.

Many years ago, I remember seeing ads for the Forty Plus Club, one of the early networking and support groups for senior executives. Its mantra was, "It's hell to be over forty and out of work". Some things never change. In today's economic environment, this is the case for any age group. The good news is that unemployment does not carry the stigma it did in previous years.

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 will automatically display more self-assurance and confidence because you are dealing from strength. But this may not be the case if you are out of work or on the way out. When you have been a CIO or have held some other senior level IT position, you are in a very volatile, high-risk situation. If you haven't been downsized, rationalized, forced out, fired, victimized or blamed, you are in a small and shrinking minority. But I'm sure you have friends who have endured such career trauma, which can happen without warning. 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".

I once heard an expert discuss causes of stress and how stress impacts our lives. I can't recall the actual numbers, but I do 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. I recall thinking then that I knew people who were simultaneously experiencing all three of these events. According to this expert, they were supposed to be dead or at least feeling pain in their left forearms.

Obviously, stress is relative to each of us, depending upon previous experience. About fifteen 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. Fear of layoffs was widespread. One day his superior commented that he was unusually calm, in spite of all the uncertainty. 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. I also think that this former officer was not faced with watching his paycheck, 401K and investment portfolio all tank at the same time as many of us are now encountering. It's more challenging now to find the silver lining when confronted with such a big "sow's ear".

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, just as people die for any number of reasons. To allow time to heal this, you need to mourn the passing of this part of your life, 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, but we share some common experience here. 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 whatever our career handle happens to be. 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. Other complications can arise if the circumstances of our unemployment were political.

Some of the roots of our pain lie in our childhood. Many of us saw our parents work for the same company all their lives and retire with a comfortable pension. A former business associate of mine was a WW II veteran who after the war, finished college and began his career. About ten years ago, he remarked that his children were more conservative managing their finances than he had been. What he had failed to see was that from the late 1940's until the early 1970's, our economy grew steadily, with some dips. Companies did not downsize and restructure the way they do now. His children were working in the more contemporary business environment and shared a totally different view of its impact on their careers and fiscal fitness.

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. Trying to interview while sweating your next mortgage or tuition payment is not easy. 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. These changes may 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 out, and not around the corner. These are part of the stakes when you "play" at this level.

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 twenty-six 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. Be prepared to discuss any gaps in your career.
- 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. 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 basic as this sounds, 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 what your career passions are. Analyze those aspects that are less pleasurable. Knowing these differences will help you to develop a clear picture of your next job.
- 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 working 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.

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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