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**Why Contact Often Stops After Each Job Interview**

By Mark Goebel

In the current employer's job market, rejection letters appear to have dried up like rain in the Sahara, and candidates are wondering why. Perhaps it's because overworked human-resources managers, knowing they have the upper hand, don't feel the need to respond to runners-up. Perhaps they simply don't have time.

Staffs of some HR departments have been cut so dramatically that line managers are now running the hiring show, says Tyrone Redden, a human-resources consultant in Oakland, Calif., for DuPont. "Your typical manager focuses on whom they want, not whom they've rejected, so passed-over candidates aren't likely to hear from them," he says.

Communications between employers and job candidates began to deteriorate during the boom years of the late 1990s, according to New York-based career counselor Ed Vladich. At the same time, Internet job sites -- Hotjobs.com and Monster.com, for instance -- grew in size and influence. Hiring managers found they could recruit candidates directly, circumventing HR headhunters who understand the importance of keeping candidates informed.

Says Mr. Vladich, "Companies couldn't bring people on fast enough, so all the care that now goes into hiring went out the window. It was only when the economy slowed that we noticed how important communication had become."

**The Silent Treatment**

Top candidates and marginal ones alike get the silent treatment from employers. After Joy interviewed for a senior staff position with the chief executive officer of a multinational company in early 2003, she felt optimistic. The current incumbent had recommended her for the role, she had references, plus "the CEO and I had a great meeting," Ms. Haas recalls. "[He] said I was perfect. He followed the interview with a letter outlining exactly what I could do for the company." But "they never got back to me, not even a phone call from his administrative assistant." Ms. Haas accepted her current position as director of volunteers for the Jacob Perlow Hospice at Beth Israel Medical Center in New York.

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Career counselors say not keeping applicants informed is rude and hurtful to a group that has a lack of confidence. "Poor communication on the part of prospective employers is one of the top sources of anxiety for my clients," says Wendy Landers-Lee, a vice president and senior consultant in New York for Right Management Consultants, a Philadelphia-based outplacement firm. "I tell my clients to tell candidates who've heard absolutely nothing, even after being told they were leading a contest for a job."

For most candidates, not knowing where you stand is worse than outright rejection, she says. "It's a closure."

A client of Ms. Landers-Lee had eight interviews with a boutique investment bank, including two with managing partners. She, too, didn't receive a rejection letter. "It wouldn't have killed them to call me on the phone and let me know that it didn't work out," says the client.

### Likely Reasons

Here are five likely reasons why companies won't return phone calls or send rejection letters after job interviews:

- **There's no downside.**

While the job market is improving, in many fields candidates still outnumber openings. In a tight market, there are few consequences to a poor image with job candidates, says a senior human resources executive with a large technology company in California's Silicon Valley.

Hiring managers also can demand more from candidates as the process moves forward, according to Brad Agry, a principal with Career Team Partners, a New York career-consulting firm. Hiring managers aren't worried about the downside of treating a job candidate poorly, he says, whereas "HR people are trained to think of the big picture and the company's reputation."

In the long run, it's foolish to treat job candidates badly, says Dan Relton, head of HR in New York for GCI Group, a global public-relations firm based in New York. The agency typically contacts unsuccessful candidates, he says.

"If a person takes the time to meet with us, we let them know how they've done, even if we can't go forward," he says. "It pays dividends down the road -- [candidates] may become a customer of our firm or someone we want to hire if they go away feeling good about their experience."

- **Line managers don't have HR backgrounds.**

When recruiting specialists are shown the door during HR downsizings, good communication with candidates often goes with them, says Alan Harris, president and chief executive officer of McCully Associates Inc., a New York-based career-management firm.

Then, too, in addition to hiring, line managers nowadays have many more responsibilities than a few years ago. "They're under a lot of pressure, so a job candidate is no longer under consideration as a top priority," adds Mr. Harris.

- **Who wants to be the bearer of bad news?**

Many line managers dislike doing performance appraisals, which require them to deliver bad news as well as the good. With other tasks clamoring for attention, few relish making courtesy calls to unsuccessful candidates, say career advisers.

- **No one wants to be sued.**

To avoid violating various federal laws, companies must be circumspect about interview conversations with prior employers or references, and the reasons for an applicant's rejection. "Companies are afraid of being sued if they say the wrong thing," says an HR specialist with a New York-based insurance company.

Not responding to prospects "is not intentional or malicious," he says. "They're focused on finding a perfect candidate, so the process drags on, making it much more likely that someone will crack."

Joe Madigan, an accounting and finance recruiter in Oakland, Calif., says some HR professionals who work with aren't well-informed about hiring procedures. "They may be good at explaining why they're often poor nuts-and-bolts communicators, don't always know what the needs are when trying to fill a position and know little about the mechanics of hiring someone. It has gotten so bad I've had to draft offering letters for some of them."

George Fencl, an advertising executive in Austin, Texas, had three rounds of interviews with an advertising agency before learning he wasn't chosen. For one sudden afternoon interview with a worldwide account director, the agency called him at 11 a.m. "It seemed that the people I had interviewed hadn't communicated with each other, and they really didn't know what they were looking for," Mr. Fencl adds that follow-up phone calls and e-mails went unanswered.

- **The hiring process has gotten longer.**

Hiring a new employee now takes an average of eight weeks (but often longer) compared to three years ago, says Mr. Madigan. Someone interviewed early on may fall off the radar as the hiring process drags on, says Mr. Agry. Moreover, to keep their options open, some companies hire the finalist in the job for a few weeks before closing the files on runners-up.

"If a candidate goes in early, a required skill set may not come up in the interview," says Ms. Landers-Lee. "I'm telling my clients to ask up front for the opportunity to address any issues the hiring manager has" later in the process.

But how can you avoid getting the brush-off from hiring managers? Mr. Agry and Ms. Landers-Lee advise clients to ask for a hiring timeline when they first interview. "Be direct, find out when they anticipate making a decision," says Mr. Agry. Also, "ask if it would be a good idea to call if you haven't heard anything by the anticipated decision date," he says.

Ms. Landers-Lee adds: "That puts the hiring manager on notice [you] won't just simply disappear."

But job hunters may have the last laugh. Economic growth, job creation and the impending retirement of baby boomers in significant numbers may create new labor shortages. When this happens, that have been treating passed-up job candidates poorly may regret their shortsightedness," says Vladich.

-- Mr. Goebel is a free-lance writer in New York.

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