

PREOCCUPATIONS

CARL DIEHL

Hearing the Right Notes From a Job Candidate

I AM a co-founder of a small national exercise company that has been expanding. We have a franchise operation, now with 35 exercise studios in nine states, and a media company that sells exercise DVDs and accessories on the Internet and to our franchisees.

The company recently finished interviewing for three entry-level positions. That's how I found myself reading hundreds of cover letters and résumés from recent college graduates. Most of the letters went something like this:

"Dear Employer: I am a wonderful person with terrific skills and an amazing amount of experience. Therefore, you should hire me. Thank you, Job Applicant."

Most of the applicants appeared to have read a large number of "how to get hired" articles and interpreted their advice as "sell yourself relentlessly." They frantically trumpeted their perceived virtues and skills and, in the process, completely failed to notice what I, as an employer, was really looking for.

Most of the applicants seemed to be wonderful people with great skills and at least some experience. But could they think creatively and solve problems? Most of them said they could. But I needed some proof.

I had taken care to state in the ad that the job involved far more than routine filing and Xeroxing, and hinted that we looked at the position as a stepping-stone to much more challenging responsibilities. In their cover letters, only a few applicants showed signs of noticing those clues, and the ones who did were called for interviews.

I was the primary interviewer for one of the positions. In my e-mail message inviting 10 of the applicants for interviews, I asked each to examine our Web site as well as those of our competitors,

and to chat with me about what our brand stands for and how we distinguish ourselves from our rivals.

At their interviews, most of the applicants just repeated what the Web site said about our history, instead of thinking about the brand's meaning. Our two finalists gave me intelligent insights into how we were positioned in the market — and what this said about the brand.

In the ad for the position, I had stated that we were particularly open to graduates in the liberal arts. Then, in the interviews, I described a number of tasks and projects that called for some analytical thinking and creativity.

I asked the interviewees what they had learned in their college career that might help our company. I was hoping to find people who could connect their intellectual growth in school to approaching the real-world problems and projects I had just described.

Instead, most applicants talked about specific skills they had been taught in their courses but didn't mention the projects I had outlined. That's not what I was looking for.

One applicant, by contrast, told me about the messy and difficult process of gaining mastery of the idiom of a foreign language and how this experience could apply to solving some of the problems I had presented. She was a finalist for the job.

Finally, I gave all our interviewees nine paragraphs corresponding to the nine personality types of the Enneagram — a system for understanding the human personality — and asked them which one seemed to fit them best. I wasn't trying to discover their actual personality types, but rather to find out whether they were aware of some of the complexities of their personalities.

Not surprisingly, most all of the applicants chose the paragraph that sounded most positive. The real test came when I asked them for the "dark side" of that personality type. This type focuses on

So many applicants, but so little understanding of the qualities my business needed.



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performance and accomplishing tasks, but can be oblivious to the emotional needs of themselves and others. Obviously, an awareness of this kind of flaw is very significant in business as well as in personal relationships.

Most of the applicants did not have a clue about what I was looking for when I asked about that "dark side." The two finalists, however, told me that while people with this personality type might be very hard-working and results-oriented, they could also be unaware of the effects of their actions and words on other people. That demonstrated the kind of emotional maturity I was seeking.

ONE of our finalists was a French major, and the other was a music major and violinist. We ended up hiring the violinist (although I tried very hard to find some way to hire both). She had demonstrated to me that she knew how to use her imagination, intellect, energy and power of concentration to solve the real-world problems that face us every day.

Yes, she's doing some Xeroxing and spreadsheets and flow charts. But she's also helping to track down possible trademark infringers and DVD pirates and figuring out how to get us into the Japanese market. The same passion that helped her master the violin is now helping our company grow. □

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