

Interview Uncertainty

Interview Uncertainty

By James Fant

On many antiquarian maps, there is a simple, chilling statement scrawled at the edge of the known world: "Here be monsters." This is the mapmaker's rather dramatic way of saying, "No one is quite sure what lies here, but it is almost certainly bad." But a hedge of this sort is not nearly as evocative, nor as indicative of human nature, as a miniature pictorial of ravaging mythological beasts. From a psychological perspective, this three-word warning symbolizes how humans have dealt with uncertainty from time immemorial: with a keen sense of dread. And returning from an interview that was difficult to read can fill you with a similar sense of foreboding. With no quick feedback, this can rapidly deteriorate into worry, followed by full-blown panic, and finally despair. Meanwhile, your recruiter could be negotiating a lavish salary package for you. Who knew?

The interviewing process is punctuated by uncertainty. Indeed, uncertainty is perhaps its defining feature for everyone involved. Let's take one example. Particularly in the early stages of a recruiting cycle, interviewers often present a poker face to everyone. Needless to say, this is unsettling-especially for their spouses-and even more so when you contrast it to the sometimes-fawning (by comparison) courtship process that you may have encountered in law school. The normal cues that accompany friendly human interaction, such as body language, tone of voice, and facial expression are either intentionally obscured or altogether absent, as if you were meeting someone who missed the audition for *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* by several decades. Why is this?

To overcome the tendency to feed into the mythic nature of the interview and to get a realistic grasp of the hiring process, the first thing that you need to do is try to understand the organization's position, however difficult that may be. Try to get perspective. In the case of poker-faced employers, it is likely that they will be meeting with a number of candidates. Many will be unsuitable for a variety of reasons. Others may be ideal, but uninterested in the position. So the interviewers, realizing that a preliminary meeting is only that, choose not to "invest" in the meeting to a great degree. It would simply be too frustrating to do so. Furthermore, no one likes to reject someone they truly like-it is too emotionally taxing-so they erect walls designed to limit any kind of rapport (at least initially). I have seen candidates walk out of an interview like this utterly mystified. The next day, they get a callback. I have also seen candidates blow the interview because they misunderstood that the frosty reception was not something they were supposed to try to overcome. Through a variety of antics, some taking place literally in front of the elevator doors, they try to break through and light up their interviewer's interest. This is almost guaranteed to backfire. The lesson is don't panic, and try to make peace with uncertainty because that is where true confidence and competence lie.

If confident candidates often react in the same way to unwelcome news-or no news at all-by keeping their cool and taking things in stride, candidates who have a phobia of uncertainty react in a variety of self-destructive ways. They may pester the hiring partner with phone calls, faxes, or emails (beyond the obligatory thank you note)-which is a bad thing to do. Or they start harassing their recruiter for feedback, which is really doing the same thing at one remove. Although ideally the recruiter will have the sense not to start harassing the hiring partner in turn, or other members of the hiring committee, there is a

danger that he/she will. This is definitely a case of less is more. Put yourself in your recruiter's shoes; in all likelihood, he/she wants you to get the job as badly as you do. The recruiter who does not care about finding jobs for her candidates is a rare breed.

Furthermore, when an organization is still soliciting feedback from different interviewers, and possibly meeting with other candidates, it may not show its hand to the recruiter, no matter how close the relationship is. It may simply not know enough yet to take a position. If it is a definite no, it will usually say so. But there are others who are maybes, and this is where the wait and the lack of information can get very frustrating very quickly.

What to do?

First of all, keep a firm grasp of reality. If the employer wants to make you an offer, it will. If you've met with them, there is very little chance that you have slipped between the cracks; and if you did, it probably was not intent on hiring you. Much of the worry that accompanies the interview process is generated by an unhealthy focus on the self. It's essential to strive to be your best: well prepared, well presented, punctual, and so forth. But even then, your ability to control other people and their reactions to you is limited. There are extraneous factors that you simply can't control. This heightened focus on the self is often what leads you to imagine the worst, to imagine monsters where a simple question mark would do.

In fact, depending on current market conditions and your practice area, recruiting is almost always a time-consuming process for everyone involved. It is also heavily subject to Murphy's law, as anyone who has been involved in it

can attest. At any stage in the process, things can go wrong, sometimes in bizarre ways. The horror stories that you hear from your friends are shared by the firms themselves, only in reverse. The gal that everyone loved turns out to be a grifter who never went law school. The guy you just hired was caught in *flagrante delicto* with the hiring partner. And so on.

So what to do? First, understand that even the most ideal interview process will have its moments of uncertainty. Second, do not use that uncertainty to construct elaborate, macabre fantasies that are the stuff of nightmares. Third, realize that no matter how much you want the job, this is partly a numbers game for you too, and you must not despair. Work with your recruiter, be at your best, and use that feeling of uncertainty to give yourself a little extra juice to climb the next mountain, which is getting that ideal job you want with what Hemingway defined as courage, grace under pressure. And finally, most important of all, stay positive and keep focused on what you want: getting the job, not what you fear. The great explorers, after all, had those primordial fears too, but they were able to overcome them.

Or else those maps would have never been finished.