Chapter 1: Absorbing the Shock Of Losing Your Job

By Tim Johnston

On Jan. 8, at 3:35 p.m., I lost my job with a Boston nonprofit. I expected the layoff, but not the subtle shock that set in over subsequent weeks as I realized how much the world has changed since my last job search.

I'd spent 15 years in a variety of disparate and often concurrent occupations -- consultant/programmer, theater director, university administrator, voice-over artist and others -- choosing jobs and projects that offered new areas for learning and a chance to create something from the ground up. Then I had an epiphany. A master's degree in business administration would help me connect all of these experiences and fill in gaps in my knowledge. In 1998, my wife, Claire, and I moved from North Carolina to Boston, where I earned my M.B.A. at Boston University. I collected a second master's degree in management information systems simultaneously, since it was only a few bucks more.

When I graduated in May 2000, anyone who could breathe could get a job. I accepted a position as marketing director for a nonprofit that created Web-based courses for physicians. Then dot-coms started collapsing and the recession began. Scores of my classmates found themselves unemployed. The nonprofit world, by contrast, seemed stable. But when future funding suddenly became uncertain, my position was eliminated.

At first, Claire and I were relieved. We'd grown weary of Boston for several reasons. It was too expensive. We had few close friends and little time to make new ones. And we now had a child. Our daughter, Hannah, was almost a year old. Suddenly free, we could relocate to New Jersey (Exit 8, if you're asking), where we both have family.

Just a few years ago, returning to New Jersey would have felt like a form of failure to me. Having a child changed that. Being physically close to family again seemed like a wonderful completion, a return to wholeness.
I grew up in Princeton, where my father and sister still live. Claire's father and stepmother live close by, and assorted other sisters, stepbrothers, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc., live within a 50-mile radius. Hannah would have playmates; we'd have support, comfort and (we hoped) occasional free childcare.

By moving day, we were so anxious to leave for the Promised Land that I didn't even argue with the movers when they told me I had to saw the legs off our sofa to get it out of our house. Apparently, furniture's physical properties can change over time. Though the sofa went in with legs, they had to come off to remove it. I bought a saw around the corner and cut off the legs.

So, within four weeks of losing my job, we'd jammed our stuff into storage in New Jersey and taken up residence in my in-laws' house, bringing only a small quantity of clothes, job-search materials and Hannah's toys for "the occupation." Having fled Boston successfully, I was ready to begin my job search in earnest.

That's when I begin to realize that the world is very different from when I last sought work 18 months earlier. It's different because of fatherhood, technology, the recession and Sept. 11. As I crank up my search to a furious pitch from my in-laws' dining room, I start to recognize these factors and their impact.

Now that I'm a father, I see every consequence of unemployment -- real and imagined -- in terms of how it affects my daughter. For example, Claire and I cried when we took Hannah out of her beloved day-care center in Boston.

The evolution of the Internet as a recruiting and hiring channel (by one estimate, there are 40,000 job sites) has made establishing human contact with potential employers far more difficult. Charm and presence, which I've always perceived to be among my strong assets, are suddenly difficult to apply. Now when I make a cold call to an employer, I hit a stronger wall. The larger the company, the harder it is to get even a name of a contact. "Can you tell me the name of the person responsible for hiring?" is met with "Why do you want to know?" Up to this point, I'm fine. A small joke or a little warmth and I should be set.

"Well, I'm very interested in learning more about how your company does [fill in the blank]," I say with a smile.

"Just send your resume to recruiting@company.com."

"Well, I'd like to make it more personal. Can you help me with a name?"

"No." End of conversation. I'm still trying to follow up with several Sirs or Madams.

The recession and the general numbing effect of the events of Sept. 11 have created a buyer's market in which I'm one of 8,000 candidates for almost any job. Everyone also seems a little depressed, unsure and suspicious because of the new circumstances. As I soak up these emotions through my cold calls, I'm not feeling too well myself. I hang on Alan Greenspan's every word.

After three weeks of sending hastily updated resumes into the electronic void and trying to follow up with the nameless people who received them, I realize no movement will happen without serious networking, because networking has become exponentially more important. While family surrounds me, it dawns on me that, after an 18-year absence, I might not know anyone else in New Jersey. I'm home and yet I'm not. I don't know who's hiring or even what companies are in the area.

I've been trying to make a list of people I know, but it isn't easy, especially when I'm down. (David Rockefeller has an index card for everyone he's ever met; I wish I'd started years ago.) The more
contacts the better, so I try to identify people with whom I have the smallest connection. In this respect, the Internet is a big help. You can learn almost everything about someone, as long as you're not choosy about who that someone is. So I'm hoping to get lucky by contacting people I'm connected with in some small way, e.g., "I see from your online profile that we both like cats…So what do you do for a living?"

Trying to build my network, I hit up my dad for contacts. He's had a long and successful consulting career. We quickly realize, however, that he has scant experience with networking circa 2002. He thinks I want to talk with people who can directly hire me. He used to just "go and see some people" to find work. After dinner out one night, we go to his house. Sitting around the dining-room table, I wonder if his Christmas-card list might yield gold. He's pretty sure that he doesn't know anyone who can help, insisting that, at 73, most everyone he ever knew is dead. I start going through the list. "What about this one?" I ask. "Oh, he's a good connection…but he's half-dead." "Is he half-dead or all dead?" I probe. Once I stress that I simply need names of people who will take my call because I mention his name, things proceed more smoothly. Turns out there are some people who can help me who also happen to be living.

Now I just have to rework my resume so that recipients will understand how I can create value for them. Gotta get busy….

-- Mr. Johnston lives with his family in Princeton, N.J.

Talk to Tim about his job search. Join him and other readers on CareerJournal's discussion board.
Chapter 2: Why Resume Revision Means Never Being Done

By Tim Johnston

When I graduated from business school, I had a sparkling new resume. It had been worked and reworked -- by the school's career-placement office, my wife, friends, and trusted advisers.

The career office demanded final approval. When its writers were done, my essence had been distilled onto a single page -- a page so dense I feared it would collapse under the sheer weight of the toner fused onto it. I dreaded gaining new experience, for it would force me to redo entirely what had taken hundreds of man-hours to create.

Getting laid off immediately ended the one- vs. two-page resume debate for me. I couldn't possibly incorporate my most recent experience without spilling onto a second page. At age 41, I have 15 years of relevant experience, and I don't believe that a cogent history can fit on a single page. To start my search, I hastily updated my one-pager by adding my most recent job and increasing the white space and font size to make it into a respectable two-pager. I sent it off in response to a dozen online postings, with no result, and figured I'd have to redo it once my family and I relocated to Princeton, N.J., from Boston. That redo is still underway...because a resume is never done.

Without the b-school's placement office to assist me, I sought new counsel. And there's no shortage of it. Resume advice is available from countless sources, both professional and personal. In fact, everyone's an expert.

I started with friends and family. I knew I had major work ahead when my father's only comment after reading it was, "So what?" Two years ago, I showed him my resume, and his response was "Wow, I'd like to hire that guy." I think this is a sign, not that my dad is becoming a curmudgeon, but of the times. Two years ago, I was a hot commodity on the job market, and now I'm having a hard time getting my calls returned. I'm hoping that the two master's degrees I acquired in the interim haven't made me less attractive.
To help my resume makeover, I bought books on the subject. One says a good resume is the key to opening doors. Another, which was actually a better read, explained that I should never send a resume to anyone until after an interview.

This is where the dichotomy began. I'd have to live uncomfortably between these two camps -- no resume at all vs. resume is all -- until I could create a vehicle for communicating my worth that made me feel comfortable. The resume-is-all camp is split on the question of chronological vs. functional format. Only professionals seem to like the functional format. Everyone else tends to find it confusing.

I sought advice from two professionals in my network -- a friend in the human-resources field and a career counselor. While their recommendations were completely contradictory, they both agreed that reading my resume was "an awful lot of work."

And so the revisions resumed. I played with chronological and functional formats. I tried creating an objective, but it was either too specific or too general.

Reading some general objectives can be a riot. I remember scanning them on candidates' resumes when I was hiring. They read something like this: "A challenging position that will utilize my skills and experience to create value for the company." What good is a statement like this? It implies that some people would like unchallenging positions where they don't create anything for anyone.

Specific objectives can be even funnier. Do employers really believe that it's kismet when a candidate's objective exactly matches the job description? "Hurray! We can all go home. We've found Mr. Right!"

It all boils down to creating a picture with the correct words, using as few of them as possible. What are the correct words? You can't reveal too much personality. Forget humor, because it might backfire. No group affiliations. Since prospective employers have their own particular tastes, the safe thing is to be entirely neutral. Plain vanilla. Does the vanilla candidate really ever get the job?

What about key words? I read a frightening account of a company that takes a red pen and draws circles around words in an applicant's resume that match words in the job description. The 10% of resumes with the most red circles make the first cut. An acquaintance recommended stuffing every conceivable key word into an online resume using hidden text. That makes a lot of sense to me. Using this technique, I can score a hit for every possible job in the world. Imagine the goodwill generated each time an employer views my resume and sees that I have no actual qualifications for its job.

On several occasions, I have woken at night from a sound sleep, having had a vision of the perfect wording for a job-description bullet. "I didn't allocate, I formulated!" "I instituted, not initiated!"

Distilling the advice of these many experts into a subset of what I hoped were higher truths, I reworked my accomplishments. I told myself that, because of word processing, I didn't have to destroy anything in order to experiment. I added an objective, a summary, and a list of applicable key words. I removed the list of programming languages and software. I fleshed out my job bullets to identify a challenge, show how I solved it, quantify the results and report the wondrous outcome ("Thus, the world was saved").

I flirted with a hybrid functional/chronological format. Then I showed it to my wife's stepmother. "Too many words," she said. She's a Ph.D. (My closest resume advisers -- my wife, her father and her stepmother -- are all Ph.D.s.) So, I eliminated bullets, leaving only the most tantalizing. When I was finally done, I barely recognized myself. Although an employer might instantly "know" who I was
from the resume, I no longer did.

I've since removed the objective, kept the summary and the keywords, restored many of the job bullets and the software list and put the whole thing back into chronological order. I can cut many things, but removing jobs is like cutting away pieces of my soul. I think back to jobs that were displaced from my resume long ago, and wonder how they're doing now. Did they find work on someone else's resume? With great pain, I forced myself to remove two earlier jobs that were slightly out of line with my later experience. I removed them because they completely stumped my HR friend. "Whoa," he said upon inspecting my resume. "Now I'm completely confused about who you are. You're making it very hard for me."

In the middle of this, I sent away for some sales materials from a resume service. When they arrived, I found the marketing effort to be quite impressive. The package included a CD with multimedia testimonials. Some of the service's satisfied customers apparently have received multiple offers overnight at salaries two to three times higher than what they previously made. When I looked at the enclosed resume samples, I thought they looked tacky and contained lots of puffery. I know someone who paid $4,000 to have her resume done professionally, and it still looks like crap. But, what do I know? Still, I'm suspicious when someone proclaims that he's "dynamic."

So I now have a resume that I sort of like. But since I understand that I'm supposed to tailor my resume for each job application, I already have dozens of permutations. As soon as I get a job, I'm going to hire a staff to keep them organized.

-- Mr. Johnston lives with his family in Princeton, N.J.

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Chapter 3: Defining Your Objective
When Options Abound

By Tim Johnston

Job-search experts say that the key to success in any job search is to know exactly what kind of work you want to do. They also advise that job seekers select their positions carefully to reduce job-hopping. These are fine ideas. Last year, I'd tell out-of-work friends: "Take time to figure out who you really want to be. Choose your next job carefully. Enjoy the time off, because you won't have this flexibility again."

Now that I'm unemployed, I just want a damn job.

Figuring out exactly what kind of work you want to do is a great idea. But what if you're happy doing any number of things? At my core, I'm a generalist. I like challenges, like to solve complex problems, build something and then move on to the next thing. Give me your nastiest challenge, the one that keeps you awake at night, and let me go -- I love it. I know precisely what I want to do; I'm just not sure where and for whom.

I decided that I should follow my own advice. About a week after I was laid off back in January, I completed an online career assessment. The results showed that my strongest interests are in communications, business administration and management, entertainment, information management and analysis, and social service. Wow. This was an eye-opener that really narrowed the choices for me. I've worked in all of these fields, and I've always liked many different types of work.

Because of my diverse experience, the process of creating a 15-second elevator pitch is absolutely excruciating. Any particular one must omit 80% of my experience. A few days ago I tried a pitch on several fellow job seekers at a local job club I've joined. It was general enough to capture all my experience. "I'm an entrepreneur and intrapreneur, who likes to create or build ventures and programs using my leadership, consulting, marketing and IT skills." Their interest was piqued. "What's an intrapreneur?" they each asked. (For the uninitiated, intrapreneurs advance independent, innovative projects as employees within a corporate environment.)
Since I don't want to limit my search to a single industry or function, I've been applying for jobs that seem to use my most saleable skills. If I were 27 and single, consulting would be perfect for me, because it uses everything I've got. But now that I have a child, I can't imagine spending 50% to 90% of my nights away from home. Most recently, I was director of marketing and business development for a nonprofit that creates Web-based courses for physicians. So I'm sending resumes to companies that do pharmaceutical marketing, technology-based education and consulting. So far, I'm not having much luck. The problem seems to be that employers look at what I've done in their industry and are puzzled by my other experience. I can't leave it out, or I'd have years missing from my resume. Can I say I was traveling?

My fellow job seekers and a career counselor I've spoken with say I have to do a better job of "connecting the dots" for hiring managers. I have to help them understand why I've done the many things I've done. Because my work experience isn't linear and doesn't show a clear progression from one position to the next with gradually increasing responsibility and salary, I'm something of an enigma. I do my best to connect these dots in cover letters, but if hiring managers skip the cover letter and just read the resume, I've got problems. I can make sense of it all in an interview, but I've got to first get the interview to do that.

While I'm proud of my experience, I'm also frustrated by it. As the job market tightened up in the past few months, I've come to believe that the most important skills and experience in work and in life -- communication, understanding, empathy, analysis, synthesis and flexibility -- are entirely transferable across jobs and industries, and it's diverse experience that builds these very skills. Technical skills and particulars can be learned on the job. When International Business Machines Corp. hired Lou Gerstner for its top job, he had no experience in the computer industry; it worked out OK for them. Just like Lou, I've moved from one interesting challenge to the next rather organically (layoff excepted) and across industry boundaries.

Have I "managed" my career? Not really. And perhaps I'm paying the price for not carefully constructing and managing a plan. I've spoken with people who've carefully constructed their careers. They envy my diverse experience and suspect I've had much more fun than they have. I sometimes think they're better off because it's easier for them to find a job, and they have a single-mindedness that I wonder if, at 41, I'm supposed to have. But I also love to just see what happens.

Last month I went to an old friend's second wedding at the Buffalo Club -- in Buffalo, N.Y. The club is a throwback to another era; a time of game hunting and cigars, when men were men. Teddy Roosevelt ran the country from there as William McKinley lay dying next door from an assassin's bullet. As the hour grew late and the room filled with cigar smoke, I found myself at the bar with an investment adviser in his 50s who had had plenty to drink. We chatted a bit, then he asked me about my work. When I told him about my job search, he explained that providing investment advice was his cover for counseling people on matters of the soul.

We talked about meditation and the meaning of life. I didn't have to worry about finding a job, he explained. I simply had to spend a lot of time in silence, listening to my inner wisdom, and the problem would resolve itself. Then he passed out.

So I'm trying to spend some time in silence as I work on connecting the various dots of my experience for employers and creating 10 or so context-appropriate elevator pitches. I'd really rather just have a job.

-- Mr. Johnston lives with his family in Princeton, N.J.

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Chapter 4: What Gets Results When Job Hunting Online

By Tim Johnston

This week I got my first nibble in my job search. Three of them, actually, all within a three-hour period, three months after being laid off. Three interviews. I could barely catch my breath. Perhaps my luck is changing. What did I do that caused these three prospective employers to respond? If I can find a pattern, perhaps I can replicate it, and the world will start calling me. Could it be the result of posting my resume on the right job site?

It's easy to look for jobs on the Internet. From the safety of the dining room, I can hunt for openings on any of the estimated 40,000 job sites and never have to interact with a human being. Because there are so many sites, looking for a job online can become a life's work.

Fortunately, not all job sites are created equal. Here are a few tips on how to weed out the duds.

The two biggest sites are Monster and Hotjobs. I've posted my resume on each of these and look for new listings daily. But forget the notion that just posting your resume on a big site will lead to anything. Monster, for example, boasts 15 million resumes in its active database. How many resumes pop up each time an employer runs a search? What are the odds that the right person will see your resume? Babe Ruth is more likely to recapture the record for single-season home runs.

Handy Tip: Diversify your job-search methods, or you'll never work again.

I reasoned that having a presence on smaller, more specific sites might increase the odds that someone would someday find me; I could use technology to do some of the heavy lifting for me. I looked for sites that specialized in M.B.A.s. MBAjobs.net comes out near the very top in most search engines, and is, by its own admission, the "world's foremost specialist forum for M.B.A.s." While it lists only four jobs in the entire U.S., job seekers can use the employer features free of charge to find other M.B.A.s ready and willing to work in any country in the world. I selected "Vatican City" from the pull-down menu. No M.B.A.s there. Another great thing about this site is that you don't have to
worry about cutting and pasting your resume -- it doesn't accept them. Employers know only where
you live and where you got your M.B.A. Unless you went to Harvard, don't wait by the phone.

Handy Tip: Avoid sites with no jobs and those where the information you provide
about yourself is too brief to be of use to an employer.

Many job sites seem to be dying a slow, painful dot-com death. I arrived on the home page of one
such site and entered my search criteria. No jobs were found. After several progressively broader
iterations, I created a search that would return every job posted on the site -- all one of them, as it
turned out. It was a position posted in 1999 for a registered nurse in Plano, Texas. Fascinated, I sent
the Webmaster an e-mail, hoping to learn why or how the site continued to exist. No response.
Perhaps the site prepaid for 10 years of hosting before it went bust.

Many other sites have jobs from a single employer. At Myjobsearch.com, you can find all sorts of
jobs, as long as you want to work at a McDonald's unit in southern Utah.

Handy Tip: Avoid sites with jobs posted before you were born and those with no
employers.

Other sites have plenty of jobs, but they all seem to be from the same five companies. This is fine if
they're companies you want to work for.

Handy Tip: Review the list of companies that use the site before you bother to
register, look for jobs, or add it to your daily list of sites to check.

Then there's the issue of intermediaries: Recruiters, agencies, call them what you will. Now that jobs
are hard to come by, recruiters seem more afraid than ever of being bypassed. I see the same job
posted by multiple recruiters on multiple job sites; some of the details are changed, which makes it
more confusing. One recruiter called me with "a program-manager position in Philadelphia." We've
since been through four rounds of e-mail and voice-mail tag, and I still don't know anything about the
job. Some recruiters also call themselves consultants. A search for jobs in the consulting industry on
Vault.com yields a mixed bag of postings -- from temp positions to construction jobs -- because the
agency that posted them said its industry is human-resources consulting.

The only people who have actually contacted me because they saw my resume posted online are
recruiters with leads that go nowhere, people trying to sell me something, and Amway-style
multilevel-marketing financial-services sweatshops that want me to join 40 other people at a seminar
to hear about a great opportunity with unlimited growth potential.

There are wonderful recruiters in this world; some are even friends of mine. I'm just not sure they're
trolling for people on job sites.

Handy Tip: The best recruiters don't hunt for candidates on the Internet. Don't
waste your time with the trolls. If they indeed had a good opportunity, they
wouldn't be calling you.

So how did I get the three interviews?

No. 1 is with a consulting firm looking for a marketing manager. I actually found this company by
reading articles on a consulting Web site. After following a bunch of links, I stumbled onto the site. It
wasn't advertising any jobs. The company intrigued me, so I mailed a letter and resume to the head of
recruiting, then I called and left a follow-up message, and he later called me back.
No. 2 is with a publishing company looking for someone to create content for educational programs. I responded to a print ad that my wife came across in The New York Times. The only contact information the ad provided was a post-office box. I used the Internet to track down the phone number for the company, called and tried to get a name of a contact with no luck, and ended up sending a resume to my old friend, Dear Sir or Madam. The chief executive officer called me about 10 minutes after I got off the phone with No. 1.

No. 3 is with an advertising agency. It actually had an opening posted on a job site, but it wasn't right for me. I went to the company's site, got the president's name and sent him a letter. His head of human resources sent me an e-mail asking me to call him about a different position A.S.A.P.

Only one of the three nibbles had any connection to a job site.

The Internet is great for research, but I'm learning to limit and focus the time I spend online. When I had my own consulting business, I loved the convenience of working from my home office in my bathrobe. Some days I wouldn't get dressed until noon. Now that I'm unemployed, sitting around in my underwear is depressing. Spending too much time online can lead to sitting around in your underwear.

Handy Tip: Allot only as much time to perusing job sites as you would to being depressed. At least get dressed.

-- Mr. Johnston lives with his family in Princeton, N.J.

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Chapter 5: Money Is a Touchy Subject
For Jobless Professionals

By Tim Johnston

I've avoided writing about money thus far for several reasons. First, unemployment doesn't do good things for one's finances. Second, the rules of our culture dictate that it's crass to talk about money. Third, issues of money are closely intertwined with all sorts of psychological baggage.

For me, there's a certain unreality about money. For example, no matter how much I earn, I always seem to have about the same standard of living. I know there are many people far less fortunate than I for whom every penny matters. I also know an immutable law of prosperity: The less you own, the less you have to lose. So it's best to travel light. (When my first marriage ended and we sold our house, I had to dump two-thirds of my property to move into a small apartment. I didn't miss any of it.)

There are real, concrete issues as well. My wife and I have several thousand dollars of monthly expense before we buy so much as a loaf of bread.

For starters, we're locked into an apartment lease in Boston, which is one reason we're staying with my in-laws in Princeton, N.J. With the Boston rental market as soft as ripe Brie, we may have to pay out the entire lease, which expires in September. When we call real-estate agents to inquire about prospective tenants, they say, "You're still paying rent? Leases are broken all the time." Yes, they're broken frequently, apparently because a lot of people don't care about their credit rating or are willing to risk ruining it. We can't afford that.

Health insurance is nonnegotiable, especially since I have a family to protect.

Then there are school loans. Though I received a substantial scholarship for my M.B.A., the cost of living in Boston was so great that I'm carrying more debt than I've ever had. The federal government is kind enough to let me defer payment on my student loans, but the interest still accrues. I wonder if...
they can repossess what's in my head?)

Day care for our daughter, Hannah, we reasoned, is a necessity. Without it, my wife, who is a freelance editor, would never get any work done (we need her income), or I'd spend time taking care of Hannah rather than looking for a job. And Hannah wouldn't be able to play with other children regularly. My in-laws are chipping in to help with this expense, which makes me feel alternately loved and ashamed.

Not only do I have to think about the money we're spending; I also have to think about the money we aren't saving. If I listen to financial experts such as syndicated columnist Jane Bryant Quinn, I should be saving $200 a day for my year-old daughter's college fund. (OK, maybe it's more like $200 a month.) Even when we're flush, we aren't socking away this kind of money.

If you believe these financial gurus, every American is supposed to put away a couple hundred a month from the time we're 10 years old. If we don't, we'll have to live on the street because Social Security and Medicare will be bankrupt. I love reading the columns in which a 23-year-old asks question about money or investing, and the expert's response begins something like, "Don't worry. It's not too late to start saving for retirement." What planet are these people from?

Which brings me to the psychological baggage. Taking money from family makes my wife and me feel like children again. We'd rather not do it, but we don't think we have a choice. I'm also taking money from the unemployment office, which is easier than taking money from family, except that every person who comes in contact with the checks or the postcards that I must submit every other week learns that I'm unemployed. Since we're establishing residence in a new state, there are countless forms to complete. As if to taunt me, each form asks for my employer and work phone number. Even the checkout person at the supermarket where I applied for a discount card knows I'm jobless.

I went to see a doctor for a routine checkup. I left the employer portion of the form blank. The receptionist shouted across the waiting room: "Who's your employer?" I shouted back: "I'm unemployed." People buried their heads in their magazines. When I have to actually say the words, I get a variety of responses. Some people plow ahead as though they haven't heard what I said. Others turn a sad face. The people who have been there offer cheerful support. I've raised not caring to a high art; how else could I write this column? I see articles on a regular basis claiming there's no shame in being unemployed these days because of the millions of layoffs. And yet there's a nagging voice that tells me I am what I produce -- no more or less. Is this a male thing?

Finally there's the issue of need vs. worth. Should need determine salary or should worth? Need is sort of nebulous; if the best things in life are free, how much does anyone truly need? Does anyone really need a BMW? It's much easier to estimate worth. Job-hunting books encourage us to "monetize" our value to the company when negotiating salary. That sort of pure free-market thinking allows CEOs, movie stars and athletes to command millions, because they generate more than that in revenue. Teachers, therefore, really don't deserve a living wage.

The chairman of AT&T Corp. was paid $4 million in salary and bonus last year while the company's stock declined in value by almost 40%, prompting the board to call for the first reverse split of a Dow component. Yes, the telecom industry has had a tough time in general, but shouldn't the chairman be held accountable for at least part of the problem? I'm sure I could do an equally poor job for millions less.

-- Mr. Johnston lives with his family in Princeton, N.J.

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Chapter 6: Candidate's Novel Strategy For Interviews: Be Yourself

By Tim Johnston

I've been reading books and articles about interviewing, and they can make me nuts. The authors seem to suggest that if I wear the right thing, say the right thing, and act and react the right way, I can force people to give me the job I covet. I should be able to win every time, which makes me think that every time I begin an interview, my entire fate is in my hands.

Do people really memorize stock answers from these books and try to deliver them so that they sound fresh and natural? Do the suggested strategy games and cute attention-getting tricks really work? In an anecdote from one book I read, the kid in the mailroom of an ad agency sent the CEO a dead fish with a clever headline attached. Of course, he got the job he wanted. Today, this type of stunt seems a little spooky. If you've read anything about interviews at consulting firms, you know how strange the questions can get: Should I be prepared to tell an interviewer why manhole covers are round and how many ping-pong balls will fit into a Boeing 747?

Certainly, I want to put my best foot forward in an interview, but what does that mean? I don't get nervous very often in interviews, and, as a former actor, I feel confident that I can carry off any number of personas implicit in the suggestions of various interview experts. But my core question is this: Should an interview be a great performance, a completely candid and spontaneous exchange, or something in between?

Let's face it: Many times, the success or failure of a particular interview is completely out of our hands. At a recent weekly meeting of JobSeekers, a local support group I've attended for the unemployed or those soon-to-be, a recruiter told the audience of 60 that he eliminated anyone who came to an interview dressed in a brown suit or wearing an unusual necktie. Why? Even he could not articulate the reason.
Other interviewers' standards may be just as arbitrary. Right out of business school, I had an interview at a well-known software company; I could tell I was finished before that interview even started. With my resume in hand, the interviewer's opening observation was, "You've done a lot of nonprofit work. Why would anyone want to do that?" I responded with something about passion for mission, vision and service. Then it got worse.

He told me about two positions for which he was considering me. "In job No. 1, you'll never have enough resources, and you have to constantly browbeat overworked, depressed people into producing more. In job No. 2, you'll deal directly with clients who are usually angry and disappointed, and who will always want more than you can provide. Does either of these sound appealing to you?" This is what I call a nice setup. If I said, "They both sound great!" I'd seem like a liar or an idiot. And if I got a job by being someone other than myself, would I eventually hate it? My response was, "Well, you make it very difficult to resist, but thanks very much for your time." I didn't know what was going on there, but I thought it best to cut my losses and move on.

**Luck and Chemistry**

The best and worst thing about interviewers is that they're human beings. Each has his or her own biases, which means that luck and chemistry are important factors in a successful interview. The interviewer must like you. Still, I figure that there are some universal "don'ts." I assume that making jokes about death or Star Trek is unwise. So, too, are behavioral extremes, such as begging or crying. But within these boundaries, there's a lot of latitude. So how do you decide what's appropriate?

For my own sanity, I try to keep it simple. In an interview, I:

- Am relaxed but alert;
- Maintain eye contact;
- Smile warmly;
- Listen carefully and enthusiastically;
- Do my research beforehand;
- Try to ask intelligent questions;
- Make occasional notes; and
- Follow up after the interview with a thank-you letter.

Other than that, I'm pretty spontaneous. So what about results?

I recently had three interviews after a long dry spell: an advertising agency, a publishing company, and a consulting firm. I thought they all went very well, thank you.

In my meetings at the advertising agency, I was so relaxed that I think the hiring manager was concerned: He asked me about my energy level. He may be used to talking with business-development people who are always wound up. From my acting experience, I can be completely comfortable and relaxed in all situations. I'm alert, attentive and have fire in my eyes, but I'm not strung out. Maybe certain interviewers need to see some evidence of jitters to believe you really want the job. I knew I wasn't getting a callback when I saw the position posted on HotJobs.com after my
first interview. The posting said they were looking for someone with more direct agency experience. Perhaps. But perhaps being completely relaxed isn't always a plus.

**Cursing Skills a Plus**

My first interview at the publishing company was with its president. He actually told me that he liked me because I always looked him in the eye. I think he also liked that I swore. He'd brandished the f-word when he called me to set up the interview, so I let loose with a couple words of my own. This could easily have backfired, but I was able to carry it off, because I normally swear like a sailor anyway. For two and a half hours we had a great time envisioning the future of the company. After a second interview with him and another with the vice president, the president told me that he really liked me, that I had more vision than any of the other candidates but that I lacked the right background for this particular job, and that he wanted to keep in touch. He was concerned that I might have a learning curve. In this tight market, he wanted a perfect fit. We had great chemistry, and I still didn't get the f-ing job.

At the consulting firm, I interviewed with its HR consultant, who was looking for a marketing director. He actually spent the first 10 minutes making fun of the schools I'd attended. (I'd learned from the firm's Web site that its main selling point was the Ivy League pedigree of its consultants.) He said I'd done well on the hour-long reasoning test I'd just taken: "If you hadn't, we wouldn't even be talking. If you're stupid, we can't use you." I passed the screening interview but didn't make the cut to see the president; I don't have Ivy League credentials, which apparently isn't OK with him. Strategy and posturing didn't matter here; I was done before I started.

Actors often turn themselves inside out trying to be what they think the casting people want. After all, they're actors. But the irony is that successful actors are usually successful because they bring their true selves into the roles they play. I'd be thrilled if interviewers could tell me the truth about why I didn't get the job, and if I could believe that what they tell me is the truth. But I've been on the hiring side; I never told applicants that they weren't hired because I thought they were crazy, strange, stupid or seemed lazy. Various interviewees were some or all of these things. So I know that I'm unlikely to get the truth. And if every interviewer is different, each will react differently to various tricks, stunts and cute answers. Which makes it almost impossible to put together a performance that works consistently.

After this past round of interviews, I can conclude that simply being myself sometimes works, sometimes doesn't and is sometimes irrelevant. But it's definitely the role I play best.

--- *Mr. Johnston lives with his family in Princeton, N.J.*

*Talk to Tim about his job search. Join him and other readers on CareerJournal's discussion board.*
Chapter 7: Day of Discouragement: Tim's Time at a Job Fair

By Tim Johnston

I went to my first job fair in 2000, while I was still in business school. A job fair sounds festive; I think of cotton candy, rides and carnival barkers. When the economy was hot and employers were receptive, that's how it felt. Walking through a job fair was like walking down the midway -- corporate recruiters leaned out from their booths to lure me with toys and chances to win a Palm Pilot or laptop. They all wanted my resumé. "Be sure to call me when you graduate," they'd say. It was fun to be desired.

Last month, I got an e-mail about another job fair. Of the more than 40 recruiting companies, most were pharmaceuticals and a few were information-technology consulting firms. After months of trying to get people to take my calls and respond to my letters and e-mails, access to a room full of recruiters seemed like an excellent use of time and energy. I was craving face time.

And this job fair was different. Participants would be screened and selected to interview with recruiters on the spot, I was told. If I e-mailed my resumé and made the cut, I would receive a confirmation number within 48 hours. A day and a half had passed when I received another e-mail. I'd been accepted. I thought for a moment that perhaps the screening business was a gimmick to boost attendance, then I chided myself for my cynicism. Why would they do that? In a buyer's market, it made sense to screen to get the most appropriate people. The e-mail explained that I'd need to bring paper resumés because the interviewers would not have access to my resumé on site. I made plenty of copies on good paper.

On the day of the event, which ran from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., I wanted to arrive early. Beat the rush, and see recruiters while they're fresh. From a list of participating companies, I selected the one I was most interested in and planned to target it first. When I pulled into the hotel parking lot at 10 a.m., it was already difficult to find a spot. In the large lobby of the hotel, the line to enter the job fair was already as long as a football field. I took my place at the end. As people continued to arrive, some walked past me and disappeared. Apparently, the line for those who had not preregistered was much shorter than the one for those who had. This unfairness caused those around me to start getting crabby. And it was only 10:15 a.m.

By 11:20 a.m., they were really crabby. We hadn't moved an inch in more than an hour. Rumors would occasionally drift back from the front of the line. Apparently the organizers had some problems. At 11:25 a.m., they gave up trying to do whatever it was they were trying to do. The line began to move quickly. They collected our confirmation e-mails as we moved toward the doors of the exhibit hall.

As I entered the room, I watched the other job hunters. Some were walk-running like children at a swimming pool as they tried to find their target companies; others stood still, looking around. I could see the horrible moment of realization on people's faces. Some understood immediately; others tried to cling to their hope and illusions. Eventually it struck me: There would be no interviews with recruiters. There was no plan and no order. This was a free-for-all. We were preselected to be chumps.

I collected my wits and set off to find my target -- an IT consulting firm. I was able to talk immediately with a recruiter because I was one of the first to arrive at her table. She looked at my résumé, said it looked great, and thanked me. She said they could use someone like me and that they'd keep me in mind. She seemed impressed with the research I had done on her company. I asked her if she had any questions for me. She said no, and that she'd be in touch. That's it. Mission accomplished. I was free to wander at a leisurely pace. It was now 11:35 a.m.

**Anxiety and Body Heat**

As I turned away from the table and back to the room, I saw that it had filled up considerably. In fact, I could no longer see any open space. Standing shoulder-to-shoulder, hopeful job seekers had formed lines to reach the various company tables. It was like Disney World at Christmas without the security and order imposed by stanchions and ropes. At least at Disney, you know you're eventually going to get somewhere and that the wait will be worth it.

I worked my way to the end of a line of a large pharmaceutical company. I had applied for several jobs at this company through its Web site to no avail. I wanted to understand what went on behind the scenes. The room -- full of anxious bodies -- was getting hot. The woman in front of me turned around and shot a suspicious look at me, perhaps wondering if I was standing within her zone of personal space by choice or by circumstance. I turned around and smiled at a large man behind me who was sweating profusely. "I just want to know which companies are hiring fat people," he said.

Finally, I reached a recruiter. I asked him how résumés were processed. "For each job posted we get 100 to 150 per day for the first few weeks," he explained. His advice was to apply for lots of jobs. That way, your application will be fresh, and someone might eventually notice you.

A desperate woman nearby was trying to get another recruiter to look at her résumé. "I don't want that," the recruiter told her. "If you give me paper, it will take three weeks to scan it into the system. It's better for you if you go to our Web site, look at the open jobs, and submit your résumé online." I wondered how long it would take for the recruiter to scan the résumé with her eyes?

**Consolation Prizes?**

As I drifted away from the table, I began to notice job seekers grabbing freebies and tchotchkes. What poor taste, I thought. That's like going to a business function and eating or drinking too much.

I looked for another line to join. As the room continued to fill, confusion built as lines intertwined. Seekers began accusing those simply trying to get around the room of trying to cut in line. "Is this the line for Merck?" "No. It's for Bayer." "Sorry! My mistake. Excuse me. Pardon me." The room got hotter; people got sweatier.

I found a table with no line. "You must be lonely," I said to the recruiter. She smiled. We chatted for a few minutes while I read her literature. She was trying to fill a single Ph.D. position in West Virginia. "Well, I have absolutely nothing to offer you," I said. We continued to chat. When I left, she wished me luck. "I hope you find the perfect job!"

I squeezed my way through a door into a lobby to get some air as someone was shouting, "Women and children first!" In the lobby, a line of new arrivals waiting to get in extended as far as the eye could see. This was futile. Should I just leave? No. I wasn't about to quit while everyone else was still working hard to make something happen.

Back in the exhibit hall, I discovered that I could learn more by listening to job seekers talking with recruiters than by waiting in line for a turn myself. "We're just here to point people to our Web site." "You might want to try our Web site." "I don't know what positions we have open, but if you'll go to our Web site..." On and on it went at table after table. For the one rube in the room who had never heard of the Internet, I'm sure it was revelatory. But I had already been to the Web sites and had submitted resumé after resumé into the sucking black hole.

That's when it hit me. The job seekers grabbing the freebies and tchotchkes -- they weren't crass; they were brilliant! These freebies were all that any of us would take home that day. I began to grab. From Wyeth, I got a bottle of ibuprofen. Ah, sweet success! I eyed dental floss on the Johnson & Johnson table. As I made my way around the line, I could feel the eyes burning on my back. Was I cutting in line to talk to a recruiter? Did I have some special connection or knowledge? Once I passed the recruiters, I dropped off the radar of those in line, and grabbed my waxed mint floss. I'd had enough. I was satisfied.

Walking through the hotel lobby to the exit, I saw the end of the line of those still waiting to get in. I walked up to it and addressed five or six people. "You're at the end of a very long line. I've just come from inside. Is there anything you'd like to know?" They were perplexed. "It's hot, crowded, and they'll mostly tell you to go to their Web sites," I explained. A woman at the end of the line looked at me with pity. She understood my plight, but she was different. "I have a confirmation number. I was preselected," she explained.

-- Mr. Johnston lives with his family in Princeton, N.J.

Talk to Tim about his job search. Join him and other readers on CareerJournal's discussion board.
After You've Hit the Wall

By Tim Johnston

Well, I've done it. I've "hit the wall." I've reached a point in my job search where I don't have much new to try anymore. Do more of the same, I've concluded, just try to ride it out.

I've been unemployed for almost seven months. When I first heard about people who were out of work for 12 or 18 months or more, I couldn't help thinking that maybe they were the problem. When we moved into my in-laws' house six months ago, I thought we'd probably be here for one or two months. I've been wearing the same three shirts ever since. Maybe it's time to get more clothes out of storage.

I continue to skim advice columns and books and am tempted periodically to try some new "technique." I try a few little changes here and there -- a new cover letter, a new phone approach -- but I'm unable to discern from the resultant data that these work better than the other methods I've been using. I'm playing more of a volume game these days, which is either desperate or brilliant. A couple of months ago I used to spend up to a day crafting a job-specific resume and cover letter after thoroughly researching a company. Now I have three or four cover letters and resumes that I personalize with contact-management software and send to various employers at the rate of three or four per day. I do seem to be getting more responses -- usually rejection letters. The quality of the rejections seems to be improving; now they're more effusive, e.g., "I was very, very, very impressed with your credentials."

Extended unemployment has its difficulties as well. I'm sometimes concerned about overstaying our welcome at my in-laws'. They'd never agree, of course. But occasionally, when we eat dinner together, I feel tense. Maybe it's the heat wave, which has made everyone in New Jersey a bit crabby. Perhaps it's my own fear that I'll never work again, which occasionally bubbles to the surface when I'm tired or temporarily lose hope.

As I look at the stubs on my unemployment checks, I know this benefit is due to run out soon. I think the payments end in August, but I could try to get them extended. Of course, I simply could call the unemployment office and ask how to get an extension, but I don't want to just yet. I don't really want...
to know when the payments stop. I also have this fantasy that I'll call, and the clerk will say, "You haven't found a job yet? What's wrong with you?" The call will also lead to an audit, where the office will call everyone I've sent a resume to and verify that I applied for work. Each of the prospective employers then says, "You mean he hasn't found a job yet? What's wrong with him?" While this fantasy probably belongs in a Twilight Zone episode, it does cause me to wonder whether I really have done all I could do.

The Upside

While I can think it's my technique that keeps me from landing a job, it's equally easy for me to read The Wall Street Journal every morning and tell myself, "It's the economy, stupid." With each executive arrest, bankruptcy filing, earnings restatement, and Dow drop, I find myself taking stock of all that's good about being unemployed.

I'm thrilled to have spent all this time with my wife and daughter. We've lived many years of weekend adventures together during these past months. We've been to zoos and museums, parks and fairs, mountains and lakes. I've been an integral part of my daughter's daily life for the past seven of her 17 months. I understand all of her vocabulary. She expects to see me when she wakes up, at every meal and at bedtime. If I'm not around, she asks for me. When I pick her up at daycare, I can watch her interact with the other kids until she sees me and lights up. My wife and I have grown closer, too. We've worked through some difficult issues that we might have sublimated for years had we been apart every day. We're a stronger family for it, and I love her more because of it.

I'm ecstatic about some of the jobs that I didn't get. There were quite a few that I didn't feel right about. I couldn't say exactly what was wrong with them, which means that I might not have been able to justify turning them down. For example, there was a privately held company that creates assessments to match people to jobs. The interview went well, and everyone was very friendly, but I somehow picked up signals that the owners, a family, were tyrants. There was a bit of a "Stepford" quality about their niceness. That, plus my potential supervisor's "zero tolerance for errors," had me praying that they wouldn't call me back.

As long as I don't have a job, the excitement of the unknown remains. Where will we end up? How will it all work out? Somewhere there's a job I'll absolutely love. Each day I'll solve challenging problems at a rapid pace. I'll contribute to making lives better for many people. That job will be so energizing that I'll feel guilty taking money for doing it. But I'll tell myself that we have to have money to live, so we'll take it. It will pay a ton, so we'll be donating much of it to charity. So great will my passion for that job be that I'll return to my family members each afternoon (perhaps early evening) full of love and energy and able to nurture them.

Until that job comes along, I'm enjoying my totally flexible schedule. I'm wearing shorts and sneakers. I'm seeing movies in the afternoon. I'm sending out resumes. I'm wondering if I'll ever work again.

-- Mr. Johnston lives with his family in Princeton, N.J.

Talk to Tim about his job search. Join him and other readers on CareerJournal's discussion board.
Chapter 9: Passion Is the Secret To Job-Hunt Success

By Tim Johnston

I'd run out of energy and ideas in my job search. What happened next? I got a second wind, which was really a 15th or 50th wind, except that this one was more pronounced than the many little highs and lows that preceded it. They were like cycling through Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's five stages of dying over and over at various intensity levels. But now I'm back in a big way.

Let me digress: A reader posted a message on the discussion board says that it's passion that really sells, and that's what I needed to get a job. This advice brings to mind a quote by the French dramaturge Jean Giraudoux: "The secret of success is sincerity. Once you can fake that, you've got it made."

It's obvious that people want to hire people who are passionate about the work they're doing. What I didn't get until lately is that there's a difference between selling passion about something and just being passionate. It's a subtle difference: The first state requires effort, while the latter is effortless. It's the effortless version that people want, and you can't fake that, or even try to create it with the best of intentions. It's easy for me to forget this fact, because I keep feeling like I need to do something in order to get a job; I need to win over the interviewer.

Just wanting a damn job (a sentiment I've previously expressed) isn't enough to get the job. While I've gone into job interviews with every intention of becoming passionate about the job, I have not gone in being passionate. I've always wanted the interviewers to do at least a little bit of selling, too. I've needed them to convince me that I want to work for them. I have no doubt that many interviews where the interviewee is acting passionate have resulted in successful employment. But an interviewer must feel better when the candidate is already doing and loving the job in his or her own mind.

My true passion lies in nonprofit and educational work. I've just had two interviews at a nonprofit organization that helped me remember what real passion about work looks like. I was surprised by this discovery. I didn't do anything different, yet I was different.
While I've spent most of my life working for nonprofits large and small (and a few small for-profit businesses), I'd grown tired of the inefficiency and lack of business acumen in so many that I'd encountered or worked with in some capacity. Working to serve the noble missions of arts, human-services and educational institutions was a part of my identity. (As an adolescent, I experienced a slight but omnipresent dread that I might end up as a brand manager for Frito-Lay. Why Frito-Lay? I have no idea, and I apologize to all the fine people who work there. It's just that it isn't right for me.)

**Sidetracked**

But I was tempted by the lures of the for-profit world. I went to business school because I wanted to take for-profit business and management skills into the nonprofit arena. Most people in business school did not even understand what nonprofits are. ("Why would any business try to lose money?") I arrived at business school during the heady dot-com days. I was wary, but I felt the undeniable pull of dot-com lust -- a quest for power and wealth in equal parts. It was a dizzy, gold-rush kind of intoxication. Though I couldn't see a viable business model, I thought it might be fantastic to work at one of those places with a nonsensical name. (My wife refers to them collectively as "FishWire.") I had a growing desire to make money and began to think that making lots of it was good. I grew to believe that my idealism was childish and naïve. I sometimes felt stupid for wanting to help people grow.

When I was laid off eight months ago, I decided to exclude nonprofits from my job search. I was fed up. I was ready to make a hop. I'd hoped that it would be to a large public company. I thought that I could prove myself if I succeeded in the "big leagues." But I found it difficult to get passionate about maximizing shareholder value. And that bit of passion has been the missing piece/element in my interviews and applications.

I worked hard to cross over. Then came the tech-sector crash, the perp walks, and the painful, dirty disclosures and discoveries that have permeated and undermined the capital markets -- the "greed on steroids," as Ralph Nader describes it. Not only was I disgusted, but the for-profit jobs I'd been seeking also became more and more scarce.

I started applying to nonprofits again, not out of passion or any kind of selfless desire; they had the jobs. Nonprofits in general weren't downsizing or rightsizing. And the more I talked with people involved in nonprofit work, the more I rediscovered my passion for it.

**Passion Makes Perfect**

In my two recent interviews with a nonprofit, I was so impressed with the work the organization was doing that I wanted to meet with its managers just so I could share my appreciation. When the interviewers asked questions, I wasn't trying to figure out the right answer to get the job, I was trying to figure out the right answer. I felt an inner peace and humility because I wasn't trying to prove anything to anyone.

I got to that place, not by logic or as a result of thorough research, but through my heart. I didn't know any more about these two jobs than about any other for which I interviewed. I simply knew in my bones that I wanted to be involved with what these people are doing, whether or not I got a job. I was already an evangelist for them.

What I've just learned is that if I'm *wondering* whether I'm passionate about something, then I'm not. Would I take a job I wasn't passionate about? You bet I would. But I feel so much better when I'm passionate about what I'm doing. Can everyone have a job that they're passionate about? I doubt it, because there are a lot of lousy jobs out there. I hope that everyone can be passionate about something. And I know that passion about work is very important to me.
I'll let you know what happens.

-- Mr. Johnston lives with his family in Princeton, N.J.

Talk to Tim about his job search. Join him and other readers on CareerJournal's discussion board.
Chapter 10: Tim Johnston's Quest Draws to a Conclusion

By Tim Johnston

If you'd asked me eight long months ago where I'd end up after my job search, I wouldn't have predicted this outcome. I'm now the chief information officer and associate to the chief operating officer of a $100 million nonprofit human-services organization with 3,000 employees in more than 150 programs in nine states. From health care to performing arts to small-business incubation, the depth and breadth of its programming are impressive. So here's a play-by-play of how I came to find myself in this situation; no lessons or message here.

I tried for most of seven months to find something in the for-profit world. And, having spent the major part of my work life in small enterprises, I dreamed of working in a large corporation. Because of the recession, there weren't many openings in the pillars of capitalism. To make matters worse, the narrow and specialized nature of the bulk of the available jobs made me fear that, should I win one, I would become a cog in someone's machine. Visions of boredom, "Brave New World" and Orwell's "1984." (What is a validation specialist, anyway? If you've been looking for work in the past year, you've seen these positions advertised.)

I'd spent a good portion of my career in the nonprofit sector. While my heart remained true to the social missions of nonprofits, my head had grown weary of working in environments where there was never enough money or staff to accomplish the stated goals. For seven months I'd refused to consider nonprofit work. But in a conspiracy between my eyes and my heart, I began to get caught by the nonprofit classifieds masquerading under such headings as "health care" or "education" that I'd trained myself to skip over in The Wall Street Journal and the New York Times. They started to look interesting to me and usually offered broader responsibilities than the for-profit jobs. After a family beach trip over the July 4th holiday and a much-needed respite from the job-search grind, I gave in. Since I wasn't getting anywhere in the for-profit world, I decided that I should consider nonprofit jobs once again.

There are several good Web sites that specialize in nonprofit jobs. Once I started looking in that sector again, I incorporated these sites into my daily list of sites to search. For the first few weeks, I
saw what I considered to be the predictable list of openings. Many of the positions had interesting titles that suggested close proximity to the action, but the salaries suggested that they were essentially volunteer positions. The jobs demanded lots of education and experience, and they offered great responsibility. But the great responsibility wasn't usually matched by great pay. As much as I love the nonprofit sector, I still can't figure out how a lawyer who has argued cases before the U.S. Supreme Court can afford to work for $28,000 unless he or she has already made a million. I'm not so fortunate. In short, I was depressed by most of what I saw. I craved the excitement and responsibility, but I also had to make a living. Since we've come to parenthood relatively late, my wife, Claire, and I have observed that its vicissitudes and associated humble lifestyle aren't quite as charming as they might be when you're in your 20s.

The first nonprofit jobs I applied for were throwaways: They paid so little that I couldn’t possibly have taken them, but the exercise got me into a groove. After applying to five or so positions in the field I'd previously refused to even consider, I saw an ad that was really intriguing. The challenge was audacious and suitably "in your face." The scope of the work and size of the operation implied that the organization might actually be able to pay a living wage. While I can't remember the exact wording, the ad read something like this: "If you're ready to try something new, have diverse experience, are entrepreneurial, can operate in a highly decentralized system, and want to help grow a $100MM organization, give us a try. We're looking for a partner, not someone with all the answers. If you need your own office and a secretary, don't bother to apply." I loved the ad, and it made me laugh. I couldn't even tell what the job was, which suggested that the employers didn't know either. I was thrilled at the possibility that I might have the chance to define the job myself. (Validation specialists, I'm guessing, aren't offered the same flexibility.)

From the e-mail response address, I found my way to the organization's Web site. I still couldn't figure out what it did, but I could tell it was big. I created a brutally honest cover letter in which I listed all my complaints about the inefficiency and incompetence I'd so often seen in nonprofit management. I explained that I wanted to help nonprofits run responsibly. I e-mailed the letter and my resume, and then I promptly forgot about it.

About a month had passed when I got a call from the executive director's assistant. Claire took the message. The assistant wanted me to interview with the executive director and chief operating officer. When I called him back to schedule the interview, I asked as delicately as possible if he could send me some information -- something -- that would help me understand what the organization did. The call came at a good time; I'd had several interviews that week and was feeling good. I was also sufficiently busy that we couldn't find a mutually agreeable time to meet for about 10 days, which allowed me time to think and research the organization.

The package, which arrived a couple of days later via FedEx, included an annual report of sorts and detailed financial information. That's when I began to understand the impressive scope of the organization's operations. I learned about its history. Its values, vision, and mission contained some of the most beautiful language I've ever read. The prose was deeply moving, yet simple and economical, like Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. While I was immediately cynical, I reasoned that if the organization lived even 10% of what it professed to espouse, I would be honored to work there.

So, after a spring and summer of trying to break into the corporate big time (or small time, depending on the particular opportunity), of trying to fall in love with positions I feared might stifle me, I was back where I'd started. I was falling for a nonprofit once again, despite my promises to myself that I wouldn’t go back. I hoped that I could walk into this interview with my eyes wide open.

Next Tuesday, Oct. 1, Tim and his prospective employer finally meet and come to terms.

-- Mr. Johnston lives with his family in Princeton, N.J.

Talk to Tim about his job search. Join him and other readers on CareerJournal's discussion board.
Chapter 11: Tim Finds a Match, Then Seals the Deal

By Tim Johnston

My interview was on a Thursday. I'd had several days to learn all I could about the organization, and I was eager to meet its people and see how they did what they did. I wasn't entirely sure I knew what they did; but their principles had struck a chord with me. I hoped I would be able to use both my head and my heart in the interview.

The First Interview

By the time the day of my interview came, I just wanted to meet these people and tell them how moved I was by their vision and its manifestations. They had created a model of nonprofit efficiency that I'd only envisioned. They let the visionaries control the programs, while they did the part that nonprofit founders are traditionally horrible at doing: running the business. But I wasn't desperate to work there. In fact, I wasn't even thinking about getting the job. I'd seen the organization as an object of beauty. I didn't need to possess it; I needed simply to admire it.

When I arrived, I was struck by the vastness of the central office. Laid out in a huge open floor plan, it looked like the Washington Post newsroom as depicted in the movie "All the President's Men." Just desks and people as far as the eye could see. I saw people of all colors and ages in all styles of dress. This wasn't the standard corporate environment, and that was good. I took an immediate liking to the chief operating officer and the executive director.

They had many questions for me; the volume and variety were invigorating. In so many of my interviews at other organizations, I had supplied the only energy in the room. I was required to entertain a bored and self-indulgent Roman emperor from human resources. In this room, we supplied energy equally. There were no airs and no games.

As they asked and I responded, we shifted into a dialogue. We were brainstorming together about some of their most challenging issues. We were in perfect flow. I felt like we'd been working together for a long time. Two hours quickly passed. I left refreshed and assured of a second
Saturday night I received a voice message from the COO. She apologized for the short notice and wondered if I could attend a meeting on Monday. It was, she explained, a natural opportunity to meet the entire management team. After that, she'd like us to have lunch with the chief financial officer. I was a little troubled by a call on a Saturday night; were there appropriate boundaries between work and personal life? But I was also excited by her obvious enthusiasm about my candidacy. I left a message at her home on Sunday saying that I'd be delighted to meet with them the next morning.

**The Second Interview**

When I arrived on Monday morning, I was ushered into the meeting room and was seated at the end of a table surrounded by about 14 expectant people. They'd all reviewed my resume. Though the questions came from all directions, I was amazed at how supportive everyone was. Usually in a group this large, at least one person has some evil agenda. That person doesn't want to hire me because he or she likes another candidate, is angry at the boss or wants to spite so-and-so. There was none of that. After 30 minutes, everyone filed out of the room, each person shaking my hand. I was shown to a waiting area. The COO would come get me for lunch in a few minutes. During my five minutes on the couch, participants from the meeting approached to chat. I felt very welcomed. During these same five minutes, the COO also somehow got feedback from everyone who had been in the meeting.

**The Negotiation**

The CFO joined us at a restaurant. She had some specific issues to discuss. She ate quickly and left for a meeting. The COO asked me if I was "terribly expensive." "That depends on what you consider expensive," I replied. "Well, that's fair. That puts it back on me," she said. "I want you to work with us." From this point, it was simply a matter of negotiating the details. We went a couple of rounds on salary. We talked about responsibilities. I suggested that the organization might need an information technology strategy plus other things. I could provide them and also serve as the COO's right hand. I didn't want to get pigeonholed in the IT spot. She liked this idea. I knew I wanted to work with her and the organization. I asked for a couple of days to think things over. I took a day, and said I had hoped for a bit more money, but that I wanted to work for her. Her response: She didn't want me to start the job wondering if I'd made the right decision, so she sweetened the offer a bit more. I felt great: She'd heard me, and she cared.

Between the offer and my start date, I spent a couple of weeks looking for a place for my family to live, considering new day care for Hannah and attending to other details. I started two days after Labor Day. What's really great about the job is that the organization needs me, and its employees are glad to have me involved in their projects. At some organizations where I've worked, others have tried to keep me from doing anything; that's more painful than a root canal. My experience has been that in most nonprofits, a self-starter can take on as much responsibility as he or she wants. No one will try to make you small or keep you contained. In this new situation, I've got as much responsibility as I care to take, and I'm thriving. I've also discovered several great mentors. I've rarely had that; it's wonderful.

It's only now, when I'm in a job which is a great fit for me, that I can see how poor the fit for me was in many of the other jobs for which I interviewed. I should mention that I had a contingent job offer from an IT consulting firm. The offer was contingent on a rebound in the IT sector. The salary was considerably higher than what I now earn, but I wasn't excited about installing large software
applications in large companies (even larger than what?). Before I could accept the nonprofit offer, I had to call the consulting firm and pray that they wouldn't offer to bring me on board. I could have snubbed them, but it would have been a dilemma. The IT sector hasn't picked up. "Take the other job," they said. Only luck kept me from taking a job I wasn't excited about. I'm grateful that fortune was on my side.

-- Mr. Johnston lives with his family in Princeton, N.J.

Talk to Tim about his job search. Join him and other readers on CareerJournal's discussion board.

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