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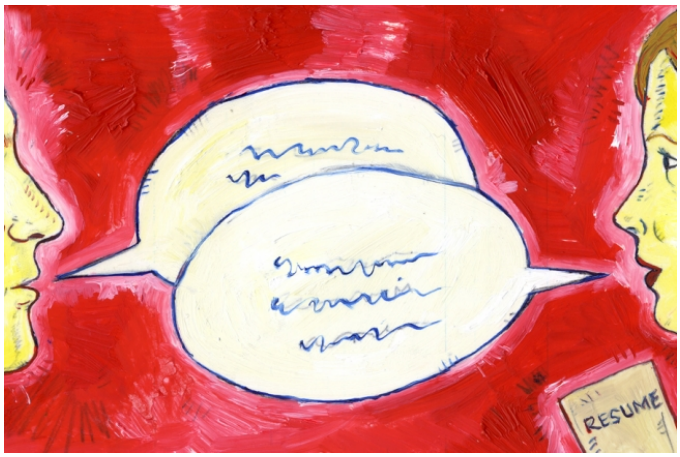
ADVICE

# Show Them You Really Want the Job




*By David D. Perlmutter* | JUNE 17, 2012

During a humanities search at a regional state university, one candidate's CV and letters of recommendation pushed him to the top of the shortlist. His papers had won honors at national conferences; he had been awarded a prestigious fellowship; his ratings as a teaching assistant were high; he already had solid publications; and his references spoke of him as "our best student in decades."

At the campus interview, the young man was indeed as brilliant in person as he was on paper. But during the final meeting to decide which candidate to recommend for the hire, doubts arose. They were best summarized by a phrase that in the current academic-employment market can kill a candidacy: "I don't get the feeling he really wants the job."

So he didn't get the offer.

Showing that you really *want* the job entails more than just really wanting the job. An interview is part Broadway casting call, part intellectual dating game, part personality test, and part, well, job interview. When there are 300 applicants for a position, many of them will "fit" the required (and even the preferred) skills listed in the job ad. The decision, thus, has to include intangibles, and at the top of that list is your ability to show that a department's love for you, as expressed in a job offer, is returned in kind.

I don't think I've ever felt greater stress than during the period of my life when I was an A.B.D. candidate on the academic market for the first time. Total strangers in faraway lands and institutions were making decisions about my future. In six months or so I

would find myself in a new city, perhaps a new continent, on the tenure track—or stuck in my current apartment working retail.

I started out applying only to positions in my specific research niche. As time passed, and panic set in, I applied for jobs in more and more subfields. Fortunately, that strategy worked. I got a wonderful tenure-track position at a terrific program, in a subfield that had not been my previous focus.

In retrospect, I had not fully thought out who I wanted to be as a researcher or teacher: I learned that on the job. Today, few Ph.D.'s get such an opportunity. The tough academic market means that, by the time you are A.B.D., you should know what you want from a job and be able to communicate it in cover letters, interviews, presentations, and Q&A's.

What follows are some ways that successful job candidates have demonstrated their commitment. But first a note on nuance. In romance or in hiring, desperation is never an attractive trait. No one hires out of pity. Moreover, if you come off as frantic, they will begin to wonder if you really want their job or just any job. (You may well just want any job, but they don't need to know that.) The goal here is to show why a decision to hire you makes sense for both parties.

**Align the elements of your application.** In an employment workshop I ran recently for our department's doctoral students, I emphasized the importance of the initial page of their CV. It's the page that search committees will most likely scrutinize first and may not look beyond. So make sure it defines you well and accurately for the position in question.

If you are applying for a research-intensive position, then your dissertation title is a crucial element of self-definition. The committee will ask: Does the title fit who you say you are? This last year, my department was able to hire two terrific young scholars in the area of sports media. What made it a slam dunk for us was that their dissertations and most of their research focused on sports media. Make it easy for search committees to see the relevance of your work to the position.

Likewise with your references. As I wrote in a previous column, even the most effusive mentor can deliver an "unrecommendation" that sinks your candidacy. Imagine your reference giving an impassioned booster speech about you to the chair of the search committee—and talking at length about a completely different job than the one you applied for. Help your supporters get their stories straight.

The aligning process can also be a good test of whether you really fit a position. If you have to twist yourself into too many knots, the job is not for you.

**Focus on what is attractive about a job; repeat often.** You will rarely be asked outright, "So, do you really want this job?" But other questions will serve as indicators of your feelings, such as, "What makes our position attractive?" You need pithy and plausible answers. And if you're not asked such questions, bring them up. Repeat them in several different places and venues. For example, explaining how you fit the job is a sine qua non for the opening paragraphs of your cover letter. Make similar points in your job talk and bring them up again in small group meetings.

Why so much repetition? Over the course of a campus interview, you may meet key faculty members or administrators, like a dean, only once. The question, "Why do you want to join us?," has to be answered for each of them in turn.

In forming your answers, make sure they make sense. If you are a candidate for a research post at a major research university, maintaining that you are attracted to the opening because you want to work in a "relaxed, intimate" atmosphere is not credible.

The order in which you rank the attractive features of a job should correspond roughly with what the institution is seeking from you. In the employment workshop I held recently, students assessed various ads for assistant professorships to see what would be a good fit for them. When you see certain key words and themes that are important to you repeated in a job ad—as many as four or five times—that's a heavy hint that the department considers them vital. In your application materials, make sure you clearly express how you fit a department's needs.

Avoid irrelevancies. It is fine to joke at dinner with a search committee in Portland, Ore., about how your love of salmon is one of the reasons for your interest in the position. But do not repeat it in the real interview.

**Tailor, tailor, tailor.** The most common advice for candidates lately is to tailor an application to the position and the institution. If that task becomes overly burdensome, you may be applying for too many jobs. But custom-fitting your application is among the strongest indicators that you really want the job.

Years ago, I served on a hiring committee where I met the world champion of tailored applications. She had studied our department, our mission, our strategic plan, our faculty bios and publications, even our graduate-student profiles and aspirations. She knew us all by face and name. We were so impressed that anyone would go to all that trouble that there was little chance we would not hire her.

The more professional details you show you know about people—as opposed to mentioning personal information that makes you seem like a stalker—the more credible you are as a potential colleague.

**Fit the future.** As chair of a department at a professional school, I engage in a considerable amount of outreach to alumni and industry. Over and over again, employers contend that they are looking for young people who will "add value" to their companies or institutions. They do not want someone who will just fill a position and clock time. They want creative, entrepreneurial, "think different" young people to help them pathfind an increasingly indeterminate future, especially in the media world.

Academic hiring seems to be going in that same direction. As the relative number of tenure-track faculty positions decreases, more importance is attached to each one. I have actually put it this way to all the candidates in the six hires that have occurred during my tenure as chair: "We want someone who will help lead us into the future." In other words, we don't want someone who will just comfortably fit into a slot, but rather someone who will challenge us with new ideas.

Obviously, this is an area that requires balance. Don't tell the search committee you want the job because you hope to reform the entire curriculum to your liking. Do tell them that you are looking for a position in which you can join with a department to achieve its mission and goals. Radiate excitement about the possibilities.

**Say you want it—and why.** It is not enough to exclaim, "What a great position, faculty, department, and town. Sign me up!" Don't be generic. Give details that show you have thought through the why of the want: "I see a strong fit with my teaching experience and the new expansion of your program into the same area. I think I could teach these classes and develop new ones." Or, "I would love to work with Professors Tinker, Evers, and Chance. I can also expand your area in X." Or, "I like the team approach you have to service projects. I work well in that kind of system. Or, "I grew up in a town like this. I always saw myself settling in the same kind of place." And so on—with greater detail. In a sense, you are providing the talking points for their "permission to hire" letter. As always, though, be truthful. Be prepared to back up your case.

Getting a job on the tenure track today involves a combination of luck, talent, skills, accomplishments, and strength of degree and references. But one intangible over which you can exert some level of control is making sure in your own mind that a job you apply for is a job you actually want. Then you can effectively persuade your future colleagues of the same.

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