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Educated Woman, Postdoc Edition, Chapter 14: Interview Excursions

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United States
28 March 2008



Last month, I was, shall we say, [a little pissy](#). I was feeling like I'd been faking my confidence, success, and so on my whole life. That tantrum passed, and I managed to bounce back and find enough confidence (and a real smile) to shine through my first few interviews.

It helps immensely to be interviewing for a job you actually want. I know that's common sense, but sometimes we get so desperate that we'll interview with whomever is willing to talk to us.

Sometimes it's not about desperation but misrepresentation. Someone I know decided to attend an interview for a job he didn't really want. It turned out to be a good decision, because at the beginning of the interview he learned he was simultaneously interviewing for another job, one that would

make him happy. He faked it through the other portion of the interview, ducking and weaving to avoid the "which would you prefer?" question lest he be perceived as ungrateful. He may have been too clever and political for his own good, because postinterview communications mentioned nothing about his preferred position. He's still in negotiations for the job that, he says, is likely to make him want to jump out a window or throw himself in front of a train.

Another friend, still working in the lab where she finished her Ph.D., was told to expect an onsite interview only to learn while waiting for the travel arrangements to be made that the position was already filled. Still another postdoc friend and his wife have the classic two-body problem. Each has been on several interviews in the past 2 years only to have searches closed, learn they were second in line, or be offered only 1-year positions. Searching for jobs in these tight economic times, inside and outside academic science, is no picnic.

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I've experienced my own share of rejections by e-mail and by post. "We're sorry but we don't believe you are qualified for this position at this time," wrote one consulting firm. I tell myself that I didn't really want those positions anyway; sometimes it's true, sometimes not. And success isn't always success: I've attracted interest from a career site for scientists in my field; clearly, they didn't read my objective statement, which says that I want something *outside* the traditional scientific realm.

Some of the applications I sent out on a wing and a prayer landed interviews. So let the career shopping begin!

Consistent with my recent drive toward authenticity, I sat down and thought about what is important to me--as opposed to what's *supposed to be* important to me--before I started interviewing. My list of priorities goes something like this:

- The opportunity to work as part of a dynamic team
- A variety of responsibilities and projects that expand what I know how to do
- The opportunity to utilize my current analytical skills while improving my communication, leadership, and management skills
- Enough money that I don't feel like I'm back in graduate school
- Pride in what I do and hope that somebody who isn't me might someday find it useful
- Laughter.

I feel I ought to explain the last two items on the list.

Pride. For years now, when I've told people what I do, they've often looked at me as though I were from Mars, and in fact, I feel a little bit like an alien at those times, which isn't a warm-and-fuzzy feeling. But lately, while on a plane or in an airport on my way to an interview, I *want* to talk about it when I'm asked what I'm up to. It feels good. It has been a while since I could say I was *really* excited and proud about something.

Laughter. I need more of it in my life, because really, life is not horrible, even if it is a little strange sometimes. I had a friend who, while I was writing my thesis, would let me hide in her office and tell me stories that made me laugh until I nearly cried. It took the edge off even the most stressful situations.

During the first minutes of my first interview, I could have used some of that laughter. Eventually, it came. I could hear my voice cracking as I told the panel about my interests and some of my ideas for the position. As the hour wore on, I relaxed, partly because I got a good vibe--and even some laughter--from the people in the room; laughter *really is* a good thing. I kept smiling and after a while felt like I wasn't faking my fabulousness; it became real! I didn't overstate my abilities, I emphasized my willingness to learn (because the position would be a stretch for me), I made eye contact with everyone in the room, and I came up with some creative answers on the spot. When I lost the jitters, I was in my element. It has been a *really* long time since I felt that way.

Rain follows sunshine. My second interview was for the position I thought I was most qualified for. It was also the interview in which I thought I performed best. I received an immediate rejection. Even rejection can be a gift. Upon further examination, I realized I wasn't that excited about the position after all; maybe it showed during the interview. Still, I thought I gave great answers and had some good ideas. It was a learning experience.

One question that came up in all my recent interviews is whether I'm really ready to leave the bench. The answer (as readers of this column will realize) is a resounding "sure" and solid "yes." It would be nice if I could remain close to science, promoting it, writing about it, translating it into English. I'm open to all possibilities, but I'm definitely ready to leave the bench.

At the moment, only one of my current supervisors knows what's up. He has provided guidance and support and hasn't criticized me for wanting to leave hands-on bench science. Having that kind of backup--someone who allows you to come to your own career decision without trying to sabotage you, guilt-trip you, or impose their will in some other way--has been

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a breath of fresh air.

And so the waiting game begins. I haven't yet heard from all my interviews, and there are a few options on the table that I haven't interviewed for yet. I hope something will come through.

I'm so ready for something new that I can taste it. Mmmmm ... tastes like ice cream.

Comments, questions, cravings? micella.phoenix.dewhyse@gmail.com

Micella Phoenix DeWhyse is a pseudonym. Any resemblance to an aggregate of surfactant molecules dispersed in a liquid colloid is purely coincidental.

Comments, suggestions? Please send your feedback [to our editor](#).

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