



Keep It Real

Remaining authentic in a world of job-search copycats

By **David G. Jensen**
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SCIENTISTS AND ENGINEERS SOMETIMES reveal how scary the job search feels to them when they talk to recruiters. Often this comes couched in complaints about “how the job market works.” It’s true that the job search does take us out of our comfort zones.

But not all of that fear is justified. A lot of people believe the successful job seeker has to put on a new face and act in some pre-programmed manner — the ‘interview persona.’ They believe that to be successful in the job search, they must be artificial. This might mean pumping themselves full of books with titles like *100 Snappy Answers to Tough Interview Questions*, and then responding like a used car salesman, knowing their answer before the question is even asked.

If you are uncomfortable with this aspect of the job-seeking process — that is, if you don’t like acting phony — you can relax. It is entirely possible, and in many ways preferable, to develop a job-seeking style that reflects your core values and allows you to be authentic. While you may need to change the way you look at some things, it isn’t necessary for you to change like a bad actor to suit the circumstances. There’s no need for subterfuge and misdirection, as it isn’t a used car you’re selling. “Suiting up” for the job search doesn’t mean stepping into someone else’s skin!

The Right Start to the Job Search

You make your first important decision about conducting an authentic job search when you sit down to prepare your résumé and cover letter. Will you, as so many others do, lean towards exaggeration — or even stretch the truth more than a little? I hope not. I look at thousands of résumés a year and I’ve come to realize that 10-15% of them have at least one area of purposeful inaccuracy. Some of them, of course, are worse than others.

It’s hard to make up credentials, because they’re too easy to check out nowadays. The most important listings on a résumé — degrees, publications, awards — are easily verified in the age of the Internet. You can’t fake a paper in Science or Cell. What you can do — and what some do too often — is attempt to gain an advantage by exaggerating your role in a project.

It’s not all that easy to detect this subtle subterfuge on a résumé. But if a hiring manager detects it, or picks it up in a later reference call, she’ll throw the packet in the trash immediately. *Guaranteed.* It’s a bad idea.

The crux of the “authenticity” problem is that the job search is all about fit. You are what you are and the company’s needs are what they are. Your success depends upon bringing the two

together. So what is the best way to connect what you are with what they need? I say it’s this: Represent yourself accurately, but remember that you are presenting your credentials to someone who has a problem they need solved or an issue they need to have addressed. Show how you’ve handled similar problems in the past. Connect what you’ve already done with what they need done, and you’ll be much further ahead than someone who simply uses a boilerplate CV or cover letter in

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response to every open job. And you’ll be light-years ahead of someone who exaggerates and gets caught.

The authentic job seeker knows herself inside and out because she realizes that her job is to market *herself* and not some fictional alter ego. She regularly conducts self-reviews, taking conscious note of strengths and weaknesses.

Networking: Long-term Value Vs. Short-term Gains

Just about all of my articles in “Managing Your Career” refer to networking. Networking is the number-one tool for building momentum in the job search. But having been on the receiving end of networking calls for many years, I can tell you that it is very easy to spot an *authentic* networker — who, regrettably, is in the minority among the networking masses.

The authentic networker knows that networking is a two-way street. His approach accounts for the long-term nature of networking. I know when I am speaking to an authentic networker when he or she invokes the law of reciprocity: “I’ll

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scratch your back, if you scratch mine." While this remains unsaid, it has to be present in every contact. Networking calls can't sound desperate and one-sided. I've taken too many calls from people who obviously look at networking strictly a tool to land a job. And there's nothing worse than being someone else's tool!

The authentic networker asks me what he is doing right or wrong in his search, and then closes with a comment that makes it obvious there is some give-and-take going on:

"By the way, I'm a bioprocessing specialist, with a background of mammalian cell scale-up into very large bioreactors. If I can ever help you with one of your searches, even if it is just to identify some of the major names in our field, please give me a call. Perhaps I'll have someone in my acquaintance who would fit the job you are trying to fill."

In contrast, the majority of networking contacts close in this way,

"Thanks for the information. I'm going to send you my CV and then follow-up with you in a week to see if you've received it, and check to see if you have any leads for me on my job search."

Sure, both approaches work sometimes; you might even say the former is just a more sophisticated pickup line. Even so, it shows a respect for what I do that the other caller seems not to care about. (I always wince when I hear, "I'll call and follow-up," because it can sometimes mean that I'll be getting a "follow-up call" every week from this person, who is simply using me as a human version of an Internet job agent.)

I'll typically ask an authentic networker for a résumé or CV (it's much more effective to send one when asked!) and make a note in my database of that person's special area of expertise in case a suitable opportunity comes across my desk.

Interview Day: On Edge and On Stage

At this point, you've written an industry CV or résumé that portrays the real you, but with a slant towards the needs of a particular hiring manager. And, you've been networking for the long term, nurturing contacts, doing your best to make yourself available as a resource for those contacts, as well. And then — hopefully — along comes interview day.

I'm not even going to try to tell you that you can go into a job interview and relax, totally comfortable just being yourself. No one is comfortable in this process — except perhaps for a few die-hard sales types, the ones that have their slick pitches down to a science. So the point isn't to be comfortable.

So don't aspire to comfort: aspire to *being real*. There is something powerful that emanates from a job applicant when he or she is speaking from the heart. As a professional interviewer, I can spot the difference immediately, and the value I place on this palpable honesty is far greater than any advantage gained by spouting off a prepared answer they believe

I want to hear.

Here's how one senior scientist described his interview day after a recent seminar I gave at an industry meeting:

"The whole day felt like it was being played out on a stage. I'm there in my business suit, nervous and uptight, waiting in the lobby for someone from Human Resources to hand me some forms to fill out," said this frustrated scientist. "Then the action moves inside an office, where questions about my past and how I would handle myself in a given situation are leveled at me.

"It's obvious from the start that the day is contrived, both in what they ask me and in my responses," he continued. "The process seems to be directed to screening me out, as if I were applying for admittance to some kind of private club."

That "club" analogy is actually closer to the truth than you might think. With the numbers of applications companies get, the process is more to screen out than "let's find a reason to hire John." In order to avoid being *screened* out, you've got to *stand* out. How do you accomplish this? One way is to be yourself while everyone else is putting on a mask.

Here are some suggestions for the authentic job seeker on interview day:

- Even though you are going to speak from the heart, you'll need to know in advance how your heart feels about certain things. Answers to obvious and common questions like, "Tell me about yourself," or, "What do you like most about the job we've been discussing?" benefit from a bit of preparation — in the moment, you may even choose not to use those prepared answers, but it's great to have them in reserve. Don't be so over-prepared that you sound like a recorded announcement. It helps to have a frame prepared, into which you can add commentary when asked.
- Realize that as much as you don't like it, you are entering a competitive scenario where others are working very hard at "selling" themselves to the employer. If selling isn't in your nature, counter it with a strategy of your own. Review your strengths and marketable skills right before the interview and remember to push beyond your comfort zone to discuss these when the opportunity comes up. *Be real*.
- If your meeting with HR becomes a behavioral interviewing session, answer those questions sincerely, without trying to guess what the interview is looking for. (Behavioral interviewing, for the uninitiated, is what I refer to as the root canal of interview day. Lots of "How would you handle this situation?" questions, combined with out-of-the-blue zingers like, "If you were a vegetable, which one would you be and why?" This is where HR people get to play junior psychologist.) ■