



print edition

PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS: FITTING IN

When you're all alone in a new crowd

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Dear Susan,

I'm an accountant with 17 years in the financial services industry. I was successful and had a close group of co-workers who became friends. Like many of them, I recently had to find a new position, and I now work in a tiny office with mostly much younger people, which feels like a big come-down. Aside from some introductions, there hasn't been much of a welcome. Is it up to them to integrate me, or is this my problem? I feel left out of the loop and wonder if this job is for me.

- *The Outsider*

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Dear Outsider,

Almost nothing feels more lonely than feeling isolated while in a crowd. Everyone seems to be part of something bigger - except you. And that sense of existential isolation is exaggerated when we start something new.

When first arriving at a new school, a new job or even an established working group, who hasn't suspected that the people who got there first seem to have a secret language that binds them together?

The good news is that it's normal and human to feel physically uncomfortable about being left out in new situations. We're social creatures, after all, whose ancestors survived by dint of co-operation. Along with other primates, we've developed mechanisms that warn us - especially in novel circumstances - when the group might not be on our side. Those loners and mavericks who weren't attuned to those warnings may have met their doom, perhaps while they were not paying full attention to their social environment, according to evolutionary biologists. Meanwhile, those who evolved an acute sensitivity to social cues were the ones who survived.

That universal sensitivity to exclusion is why being ostracized feels like the ultimate form of punishment. From prisons that impose solitary confinement to religions that excommunicate heretics and nonconformists, it's a given that the pain of exclusion is experienced as torture.

Like hunger or thirst, feeling lonely and left out rings ancient alarm bells that our survival is in question and that we'd better act now. That's what I learned from John Cacioppo, a psychology professor at the University of Chicago, whose book, written with William Patrick, *Loneliness*, builds a compelling case for social connection as a basic human drive (and to the importance of being tuned in to when that drive's not being satisfied).

His experiments show that lonely people can be of any age and don't necessarily lack social skills. Like you, they usually know how to make friends. And contrary to popular belief, they're not necessarily shy or depressed. But their loneliness makes them less likely to use their social skills to reach out and be open to new experiences.

"When we're lonely, the social expectations and snap judgments we create are generally pessimistic," he wrote in the book. He explained in a phone conversation that loneliness makes a person feel "a low-level threat that leads to an egocentric perspective - to not seeing the world from a different point of view." For the isolated, he said, it's more: "I'm thinking about me, and what you might do to me."

So, the bad news is that loneliness can distort your perceptions of your co-workers and their intentions. You may feel that you're excluded or not right for this job, even if that's not really accurate.

Compounding this misperception is the fact that you're surely stressed out about proving yourself, and focused on just getting things done, not forging connections. You're also grieving the loss of status and connection at your old job, and thus probably neglecting the small gestures that will allow you to integrate. And you're likely underestimating the timetable needed to establish new bonds.

Here is a strategy for feeling a greater sense of comfort in your new workplace:

Take time to connect with one or two of your new colleagues outside work hours. Invite someone for coffee, tea or a beer.

Engage in the office chit-chat that allows you to know something about co-workers' spouses, their kids, their concerns and their interests.

Recognize when you're imputing nefarious motives to others. This may be your loneliness talking.

Don't expect to be everyone's buddy. "It's not the number of relationships, it's the quality," Prof. Cacioppo said.

Make an effort to see the friends you've made elsewhere. Don't expect to put all your social eggs in one basket.

These small moves will soothe some initial feelings of dislocation. But perhaps most important is to cut yourself some slack. You need time to acclimatize, and your colleagues need time to get to know you. Humans developed social instincts over eons. It won't take that long to build trust with a new group, but it's still a slow process.

Dear Susan,

My background is in quality assurance and CNC (computer numerical control) programming in metal fabrication, which involves programming robotic systems that operate and self-monitor 24/7, even when no people are on site. Despite my technical expertise, I am frustrated with my online job search. How many "quality management" ads have I opened, only to find they are for food, gloves or cars. There are also different types of computer programming for CNC, yet this information is rarely in the ad. This must be true in all fields. Why don't recruiters use more precise language so that they don't get swamped with inappropriate applications, and job seekers don't waste their time applying for the wrong positions?

- *Needle in the Haystack*

Dear Needle,

Most recruiters are not just looking to fit a peg into a hole. True, they want qualified candidates, but they also want people who add value to the company through their network, their ideas, their commitment, their life experience. And to find the right person they cast a wide net. This is the purpose of screening. Whether it's a blood test for prostate cancer or an Internet posting for CNC programming, the principle is to make a wide sweep, hoping the unique, hard-to-find specimens will be caught along with those you throw back.

That's the short answer to your question, but you're really asking the wrong one. What you need to know is how to target your job search so you find the one you want. This requires a more pro-active tack than simply applying for jobs that are posted on the Web, however they're titled.

It's a truism that most vacant positions are not advertised. Provincial employment websites estimate that 80 per cent of the job market is hidden, while Ottawa headhunter David Perry believes that openings that are not advertised count for 90 per cent of available positions.

"It's a reverse iceberg," he wrote in an e-mail, a theme he expands on in his book, *Guerrilla Marketing for Job Hunters*. Co-written with Jay Conrad Levinson, this manual strips away the hype of job-seeking in the Internet age. "Determine which companies you want to work for, how you can add value, and why they should hire you," reads one of the book's no-nonsense statements, one that holds true for industrial whizzes such as yourself, as well as for newly unemployed high-tech gurus and investment hotshots.

Come to think of it, have you ever thought of applying your quality assurance expertise on Wall Street?

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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