

DILEMMAS

The persistent prevail with consumers' rights



SUSAN PINKER
PROBLEM SOLVING

Dear Susan,

Dear Susan, I am a married family man in my early forties and have spent the first part of my career working in a bank. In addition to being licensed to sell mutual funds and having expertise in personal finance, I have become interested in consumer-related issues. I've discovered that consumers are often targeted for the purpose of being sold products and services, and are often exploited in the process. How can I learn more about consumers' rights so I can make the switch from banking to consumer protection? Also, who can do a full assessment of my skills?

-- Conflict of Interest

Dear Conflict,

You're facing two challenges. The first is to offload the cynicism you acquired in sales before you embark on a new career. The second is to penetrate the arcana of government hiring, as that's where you'll find most jobs in consumer protection.

The sour note that prompted you to cast around for career opportunities outside the banking industry should be kept to yourself -- no one wants a recent hire with an axe to grind. Would you be attracted to a new flame who blathers on about her past boyfriend's faults? If you're asked about why you're switching tactics, talk about serendipity.

After all, novelty is the byword in the field you are interested in. The idea

of consumers having specific rights has only been on the books in Canada for one generation. Since then, a busy little industry has mushroomed around the issue, although one sliced up by overlapping jurisdictions and industries. There is really no map, but one website agglomerates all the information and agencies under a single umbrella: Industry Canada's Office of Consumer Affairs (consumerinformation.ca). This site has links to just about every consumer association and agency in the country. So, every time you happen on a menu that says "contact us," you should do just that, but, only after you've thoroughly explored that organization's website.

Thanks to its first proponent, Ralph Nader, self-education is the mantra of the consumer movement, and it's a handy modus operandi for a relative outsider, such as you. You don't need an Ivy League law degree such as Mr. Nader's to become a consumer advocate, but you do need dogged persistence.

According to Barry Yeates, an Ottawa-based specialist in government recruiting, the same principle applies to breaking into the ranks of public service. It's not your degree or who you know, but what you know and whether you can demonstrate it on command.

Even getting to that audition stage requires a lot of homework and patience. "What is extremely critical is that your academic credentials have nothing to do with whether you're hired or not. Not an iota. It's passing their tests and their interviews," Mr. Yeates said.

He described a competency-based hiring and promotion system in which the first test of your skills is scaling the

biannual recruitment campaigns posted at <http://www.jobs.gc.ca>. Entry-level positions are advertised twice a year, September and January; other jobs pop up regularly under "current positions available."

If you have a foreign degree, it has to be vetted first by an agency called the Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials (<http://www.cicdi.ca>). Your skills can then be evaluated by one of the many consulting and coaching agencies set up to help people get government jobs.

Mr. Yeates' Foreign Service Counselling is one of these but there are many others, almost all run by former civil servants who now deconstruct the process for others, even those already working within the castle walls.

The system is supposed to be transparent but I can see why the uninitiated would need a guide. Just as government controls who gains access and who knows what, so should you be judicious about revealing all.

Stick to a personal history canted toward the positive. One version could be that the contact with clients in your first career unveiled a new area you knew nothing about when you started. Now, you want to know more and do more. After all, if you hadn't worked at the bank, you wouldn't have accrued your financial bona fides, nor would you have had the chance to discover your new interest in informing and protecting the financial underdog.

Dear Susan,

I am an academic scientist who runs a large research lab, with grad students and post-docs from all over the world. The religious practices of some of the junior scientists are starting to be a nuisance. While one group has appropriated our

meeting room to pray five times a day, two other students have asked to make their workspace kosher for Passover by flaming their bench with a Bunsen burner (we do research on yeasts). Can I just say no to religion in the lab.

-- The Grinch

Dear Grinch,

You probably could just say no, but you may not want to do it so baldly. The legal perspective -- on which I am no expert -- is that you have to accommodate these requests if saying no would result in discrimination; that is, if these students and employees would be unable to work because of their religious beliefs.

I'm also not a religious authority, but it seems to me that praying and eating kosher food do not have to take place within direct view of the petri dishes. Religious activities could happen somewhere else, say in an

empty classroom, in an employee's apartment nearby, or in a kosher restaurant. You could keep the lab as a secular space in the same way that offices are now smoke-free. Someone can work and be a smoker. He just can't do both in the same place at the same time.

But I'm more interested in how you might keep the peace than in legal hairsplitting. There's a way of saying no that allows everyone to keep their self-respect. For example, you could say: "No. I'm the principle investigator and if I don't lay down the law there will be chaos." Or, you could say: "Good science means our experiments and meetings must run predictably and smoothly. Still, it's important to me that you be able to practice your religion, so let's find some alternatives."

The difference between the two is that hewing to a core value allows you to say no

in a positive way, says William Ury, a Harvard University negotiation specialist and author of a new book, *The Power of a Positive No*. Having negotiated between Russians and Chechens, among warring factions in the Middle East and between political rivals in Latin America, Prof. Ury knows a few things about conflict. His view is that you don't have to resort to "the three As" -- attack, avoid or accommodate -- in order to deflate it. Instead, you can say no peaceably as long as you frame it by first saying yes to a principle that's important to you. Follow that with an expression of cooperation and mutual respect, and you're home free.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.
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