

PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS

Courtesy is but flotsam in a sea of e-mail

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Dear Susan,

As someone who is very selective about applying for new positions, I get annoyed when companies don't bother to drop a line to applicants that says "Thanks for your interest. The position has now been filled." Companies can keep massive databases on their customers and spam the hell out of them with e-marketing. So as a courtesy why can't they send out a message to job applicants that lets them know where they stand?

- *One-in-a-Million*

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Dear Million,

With its capacity for almost instantaneous sorting, you'd think the Internet would have made match-making a breeze for employers and job hunters alike, much like online dating. But instead of the meticulous vetting that usually occurs on dating sites, candidates are likely to dispatch their CVs indiscriminately, sometimes using electronic distribution outfits for maximum coverage.

"It's a nightmare. They [online submissions] cause all sorts of problems," sighed Ottawa high-tech headhunter David Perry.

There's reason for his woeful tone. Before three layers of filters were installed, Mr. Perry was inundated by almost 4,000 e-mails a day from job candidates, many of whom casually enter the race because they think there's little to lose and much to be gained by broadcasting their availability.

Not only do prospective employers now receive hundreds of résumés from people who are not qualified for the position, they sometimes receive multiple submissions a week from the same candidate, according to Toronto-based Colleen Albiston, president of ZSA Recruitment, a legal recruiting firm with offices across Canada. The volume of e-mails, along with the frustration of unsuccessful candidates are two reasons why employers call recruiters in the first place, she said.

The Web's speed and capacity for volume has engendered what might seem like insouciance in both parties. Certainly the lack of politesse goes both ways. The "crowd" behaves in ways that obscure the needs of the individual - for example, your desire to know where you stand. And the possibility

of creating a database glosses over the fact that a living, breathing person must key in and evaluate the data. It may be 40 years since 2001: A Space Odyssey came out but Hal, the sentient robot that has feelings and decision-making powers, is still a ways off.

Another reason why employers are reluctant to inform unsuccessful candidates is perfectly human - people just hate saying no. If the employer never calls you back, "you didn't cut it and they didn't know how to tell you that," Mr. Perry said. Most employers want the freedom to play the field until they're ready to commit. Then they're strictly monogamous, he said, and don't want to have to justify their choice to anyone. After all, it takes time and finesse, not to mention a good grasp of the legalities, to tell contenders why they're not worthy.

And that's why you need to protect yourself from this snub. Get as much information as you can about the job before you apply. Know what you want, do as much online research and comparative shopping as you can, ask what the recruiter or hiring committee is looking for, and don't step forward unless you're qualified and the responsibilities and range of compensation feel right to you.

"I can count on one hand, the number of candidates - CEOs included - who ask a few qualifying questions first," before agreeing to an interview meeting, Mr. Perry said.

Most people get stars in their eyes when they see an interesting job posting or when a recruiter comes knocking. And then when there's silence, they all want to know why "nobody loves me." One reason is that you have to fall in love for the long haul, too. And how would that happen if you don't show enough interest to Google your new honey and ask a few crucial questions?

Dear Susan,

I work in my company's small satellite office. As it's an open space, I can see that our managing director spends a lot of time on the Internet. He manages his stock portfolio, bought a car and has an avatar on a gaming site. It makes me wonder whether I should let on - and why I should work a full day if he doesn't.

- *Wage Slave*

Dear Slave,

Like someone who jumps the turnstile at the subway station or jumps the queue for theatre tickets, your boss is what evolutionary psychologists call a free rider - what you or I would call a cheater.

These folks coast on the group's efforts. While they're riding along, they contribute little of their own resources. Employment implies a bargain: You invest your time and skills for several hours, and get rewarded for your effort.

So what about the slacker? According to the evolutionary psychologist Leda Cosmides and anthropologist John Tooby, both at the University of California at Santa Barbara, humans have evolved specific and finely tuned neural mechanisms that allow us to pick out the cheaters in our midst. That feeling of intense interest with an added twist of pique, is what makes squealing feel so immediately rewarding.

The danger, of course, is that your accusation might be false. But what's more likely is that you'll be scapegoated for your trouble. Even with legislation designed to protect and lionize whistleblowers, the long view shows that they tend to pay a steep price. Sherron Watkins of Enron, and Cynthia Cooper of WorldCom may have been crowned by Time magazine as people of the year, but by then they'd lost their jobs, as have the vast majority of whistleblowers, according to news reports.

It's a Darwinian scenario that anthropology tells us we've learned to avoid. According to Professors Cosmides and Tooby, such high stakes are one reason why the Ache, a traditional group of Paraguayan hunter-gatherers are leery about finger-pointing when someone returns empty-handed. No one knows whether he's just had bad luck, or spent his day snoozing under a tree. And an open accusation is a grave act that will permanently ostracize the "shirker" - a death sentence in a society where fresh meat is hard to find and is always shared among the group. However, experiments show that the Ache are quite able and willing to castigate a free-loader who hasn't pulled his weight

in the fields. Crops are just not as key to the group members' joint survival; the cost-benefit analysis is less dire

So far you've judiciously refrained from voicing your suspicions. When the stakes are high, most of us sense that it is better to just deal with it - or seek a different work environment - than to blow the whistle on the boss. It's not that one must always turn the other cheek, but that tattling - or following the cheater's lead - carries risks to you and to everyone else.

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

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