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## CAREER DEVELOPMENT : ARTICLES

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**TOOLING UP CAREER ADVICE**



**Dave Jensen**

### Surviving Tricky Situations: Interviews That Went Wacky

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United States  
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Most people are pretty sure how their interview is going to go. And even though they don't know if they'll land the job, they usually have some confidence in how the day will be structured. Most of the time the interview meets their expectations, minor differences between companies notwithstanding: They give a seminar, they meet the prospective boss, and they interview with a variety of company staff.

But should you prepare for interviews based only on this "normal" interview process? No way! It is my belief that you would be shortchanging yourself if you weren't ready for things to fall a bit off-track on occasion. A major part of success--any success--is flexibility. And in order to be flexible in your interviewing, you'll need to be ready to bounce in just about any direction depending on how

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Scientists are often shocked to find that some interviewers fail to follow the "rules." These unwritten rules, which deal with interpersonal behavior and how each party should interface with the other, are an important part of the framework of an interview. There are also formal rules that deal with questions that can and cannot be asked. These have been developed to protect the interviewee from any sort of discrimination based on age, race, or sex. But when one or the other of these sets of rules is broken by a company or by a person in their employ--as happens more often than you might think--the interview environment can take a turn into uncharted territory.

#### How the Rules of Interview Day Can Be Broken

Not all good jobs are wrapped up in a bow with a perfect interview day. So, rather than see you get zapped out of your comfort zone and blow an important interview, let me prepare you for a few of these scenarios.

**The Rule:** On interview day, you will meet people who are potential teammates, and they will all be courteous and interested in knowing more about you.

**The Reality:** Susan took comfort in knowing that she had done a good seminar. The practice she had

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put in had paid off, and the slides looked great. After a few relevant questions from the audience (which she sailed through!) she had been invited to start a round of individual meetings with the director and three scientists from his department. One of those scientists, Dr. Kalnikov, invited her into his cubicle, where things suddenly went awry:

"With such an obviously bright mind, why would you want to work here?" he asked as they sat down. She thought he was joking, but as she looked at the fellow fidgeting with a stapler on his desk, she knew that he was sincere. He followed the strange opening with a number of other sarcastic and biting comments, sending her on to the next interviewer after 30 minutes of this. His last comment as she headed out the door was indicative of how the session had gone, "I don't know if you'd be happy in our group. You may need a more academic orientation under a strong principal investigator."

**The Rule:** You'll have the opportunity to spend individual time with each of the interviewing managers and scientists and get your own questions asked.

**The Reality:** The meeting with the HR person--the only unknown in his day at ABC Biotech--had gone well, and William felt a sense of satisfaction that he had made it past this portion of the interview intact. Other than this, the interview day would consist of talking to people who would be aware of him and with whom he could talk about science. He didn't quite know what to expect, however, when the HR person led him to a conference room and asked him to be patient for a few minutes until "they" could make it down to the meeting.

Five minutes later, William felt his agitation increase as he sat down with six people at the conference table. The group leader made some small talk to get everyone comfortable, and then they did a round-robin introduction to describe their functions and how they interfaced. Moments later, and without any real reduction in discomfort, they began asking William a series of prepared questions. "This certainly isn't what I expected," he thought as he struggled to make the best of the situation.

### More Wacky Interviews

- The applicant got a call just 48 hours before the interview in which she was asked to change the topic of her seminar from her prepared material to an impromptu subject. Apparently the company wished to see how well she could do on a topic of greater interest to them.
- One candidate was asked to wait outside the HR manager's office while he completed an "important phone call." So she sat in the hallway for over 45 minutes--while the HR person took a 3-minute call and then ate his bag lunch.
- The interviewee was called at his hotel before the meetings began to be told that the interviews would take place in his hotel room and in the coffee shop. The company research labs were being audited.
- Fifteen minutes before the interview day began, the CEO stormed out of the lobby and into his car. He had been fired by the board.

**Rule Three:** There are certain questions that cannot be asked because the company could be charged with discrimination and unfair hiring practices.

**The Reality:** Mona did her Ph.D. in Singapore. She had friends and family in South Asia, and she was excited about getting closer to home. The position she was interviewing for was with a Japanese pharmaceutical company interested in a Singapore-based regulatory specialist. While she wasn't trained in regulatory affairs, she spoke three languages and was a good fit with all the cultural aspects of the job. Her prospective boss, Mr. Takahashi, invited her to take a seat and then surprised her by asking her what she considered an inappropriate question:

"Mona, are you married?" he asked. She answered him directly, which seemed to satisfy him, but the entire interview was filled with questions or comments that didn't feel right. Mr. Takahashi wanted to know what she liked to eat, what her impressions were of American politics, and whether she was prepared to work long hours. At the conclusion of the meeting, he even asked her how old she was. Red in the face, she tried to make the best of it because the job remained of strong interest. "The weirdest day of my life," she thought....

### How to Succeed No Matter How Wacky the Interview Gets

In my first example, Susan got stuck with what I'd call an "oddball interviewer." While many applicants would totally sour at such a bristling encounter, Susan did well. She acted as professionally as possible and moved on to the next interview segment, which was with a colleague of Dr. Kalnikov's who was much more cordial. As Susan discovered, people like Kalnikov are not truly representative of the company. And because they come in all stripes, the only universal rule is to move past them and hold judgement until you see the whole picture.

In William's case, the company was fully aware that he was being caused some discomfort. He had

planned on a fairly traditional interview and was absolutely devastated to find himself in a [panel interview](#). Companies like to see whether you are quick on your feet, and they can do this in a variety of ways--they're not just trying to stress you out. If this happens to you, remember that you are on exactly the same footing as everyone else who has been through this interview. Once you realize that you are on the same ground as your competitors, use your natural desire to succeed to strive for your best performance.

Mona had the rude shock of finding that people of other cultures do not always respect the rules that define [legal interview conduct](#) in the United States. But it could really have been anyone ... even people born and raised in this country will sometimes throw illegal questions out during an interview. My advice has always been to handle these questions directly as far as you can be comfortable, and then once past that you should point out politely but firmly that the question doesn't really seem relevant to the job.

### **In Conclusion**

Do you see a common thread in these examples about how important flexibility is to the interviewee's success? These "tricky interview" situations can come up in a myriad of ways, and the better you can avoid getting locked into any one particular interview scenario the more successful you will be. Push through professionally and with a smile on your face.

But after going through any one of these experiences yourself, your first question may be, "Would I want to work for this company?" My recommendation is that you do *not* allow yourself to ask this question until after you get home from the interview. Remind yourself that no matter what happens during the day, you will not get flustered and you will strive to win a job offer. And getting a few offers will work wonders for your mental health and the positive attitude that is required during a job search!

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