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Hiring

The Rise of the Rude Hiring Manager

by Anne Kreamer

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When his three-hour board interview ended with an offer to join the executives for a beer, 35-year-old Martin* figured he'd nailed the job. He had spent the last two months interviewing for a position as director of operations at a sporting goods company. His resume was spot-on — he'd spent five years as a sporting goods sales rep and several years as an operations manager doing "everything from ordering for shops, to speaking with dealers, to sales." Senior management at the new company knew him, his successful track record, and the companies he'd worked for. Slam dunk, right? Wrong.

Martin had participated in five interviews, between which he managed myriad back-and-forth e-mails and deliverables. At the company's request, he created and submitted a five-year business plan and a master list of vendors and buyers. He was asked to explain his strategies for expanding distribution and introducing new products to market. At the time, Martin had felt uncomfortable about offering so much proprietary information to a company for whom he did not yet work, but colleagues who'd more recently been in the job market told him, "This is how the interviewing process works these days — you jump through hoops." Martin decided he wanted the job, and if he had to give up the keys to the car to get it, he was going to hope for the best.

But after months of interviews and assignments, Martin said, "Instead of making me an offer, they told me they had to make a 'really tough decision' and 'decided to move in a different direction'" — that direction was giving the position to the most junior board member, who lacked any hands-on experience. "We hope this won't affect our relationship," they told him. And with months of his "life down the drain," but knowing that he worked in a small community, Martin felt obliged not come off as a sore loser. "But the fact of the matter is, I got taken." His goal today? "To ruin this company."

Maybe you're thinking that Martin just didn't know how to play his cards right. Or that maybe, in the end, he simply wasn't the best candidate for the position. But Martin is not alone. His utter frustration over the hiring process is pretty much par for the course these days. This type of behavior is happening more and more often. Ask five acquaintances about recent hiring experiences and I bet you'll encounter one friend who personally has suffered something similar. Data compiled for *The New York Times* by Glassdoor found that an average interview process in 2013 lasted 23 days versus an average of 12 days in 2009. And time-consuming assignments and auditions for candidates as chronicled in the stories here, and here, and here, are the new normal.

This problem is the result of several factors:

Fear of decision-making. Back when I was hiring people as an executive at a large business, I'd solicit candidates, look at a batch of resumes, decide who had the requisite skills on paper, and then interview the top three or four. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes. I had my standard set of questions that probed their personalities, attitudes, ambitions, skill set, and prospective fit with the company ethos. If two potential hires seemed close, I'd have a breakfast with each and then make a decision. And I personally wrote everyone who didn't get the job. This wasn't rocket science.

I can't pinpoint exactly when the hiring process went off the rails, but I believe it began in the late 90s, when cost cutting became a mania and headcount was slashed to the bone, requiring every employee to do the work of many. With so little margin for error, every hire became a fraught decision, and the fear of making a mistake loomed larger and larger. To protect themselves and validate their choices, managers began to seek more and more "evidence" of their thoroughness in vetting their hires. New hurdles were added until someone interested in a director-level position, such as Martin, is now routinely required to submit the kind of analysis and proposals that were once the province of in-house executives or paid consultants.

A culture of rudeness. Rachel, a 60-year-old former news producer turned freelance marketer, was introduced by a friend to the CEO of "a fast growing 'deep content' company with clients like GE and Xerox." The company seemed like a good fit for Rachel's portfolio of skills, and employed a large staff of experienced journalists, artists, and web designers. After a brief phone conversation, the CEO wanted to meet with Rachel "ASAP." During their first in-person conversation, Rachel and he discovered shared viewpoints, and after talking for an hour, the CEO asked Rachel to meet with his editorial VP. But first, the CEO gave Rachel his card. "This is my direct line,"

he said, “and I return every call on this line. Call me by the end of the week.” Rachel did as requested. Six weeks later, after several awkward interactions with the CEO’s assistant, he finally took Rachel’s call.

> CEO: “Hi Rachel, I’m too busy to talk today.”
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> Rachel: “I understand —maybe Monday?”
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> CEO: “Well, I can’t commit to that right now, either. And I need to tell you, it doesn’t *inspire* me that you’ve been calling so much.”
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> Rachel: “On the day we met you asked me to call you two days later. That was six weeks ago. I’ve called less than once a week.”
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> CEO: “Well, every time you call your name doesn’t go to the to top of the list – it moves to the bottom! This doesn’t mean I’ve lost interest in you and your work, but it’s *not cool* to do what you’re doing.”
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> Rachel: “I understand. I won’t call again. Thank you.”

The colleague who set up the initial contact told Rachel: “There is no bad intent here — like me, he gets 300 emails a day and works 18-hour days across five continents. It’s not personal.”

I wrote a book about emotion in the workplace called *It’s Always Personal.* And no matter what others say, it nearly always is. People hiring today have precious little time to read, process information, and respond to even urgent issues like staffing. But this comes at great peril to their organizations and to the rude employer. Instead of fostering good will among the prospective hires they interview, enemies like I-live-to-see-this-company-destroyed Martin are made.

My time is more important than your time. An author I know was approached by a publisher to write a book for which the publisher had decided there was a market. The writer was asked to write a proposal, but wasn't told that he was only one among many other people from whom they'd solicited proposals until midway through the process. That process took "months and months and months," he says, and "it was always a hurry-up-and-wait situation, where they made me jump through hoop after hoop — every one of them a last-minute-need-it-immediately kind of thing. And then I'd hear nothing for weeks." When his proposal was finally accepted, they wanted the finished book in six weeks. "It took them about eight months to make a decision to accept the proposal — which, by the way, was *their* idea in the first place, and which *they* had approached *me* about — and then they expected me to just whip the entire book out of thin air in six weeks? What's *wrong* with these people?"

This is happening to almost everyone I know looking for *any* kind of work, even those who have been invited into the process — freelance, contract, full-time. The prospective employer/client needs everything *now* and then it's radio silence for days, weeks, months — leaving the prospective supplier/employee in the unenviable position of feeling like they must beg for feedback. During the last decade, it became acceptable behavior to simply not answer e-mails. But that's the worst kind of ego-sucking, demoralizing power play imaginable. We're all busy. That's no excuse for disrespect. And the awful truth? I don't think the employers have a clue. Fearful of losing their own jobs by making a wrong choice, they've lost perspective on what matters.

So what's lost amid all these changes?

At a time when the buzzwords in corporate America are *innovation*, *disruption*, and *game-changers* — *all* actions that require recruiting the best talent in the marketplace — organizations, instead, are artificially creating bureaucratic inefficiencies that are inexcusably cumbersome and that result in the creation of legions of antagonists. It's a waste of human capital, it's a huge waste of everyone's productive time, and it damages the reputation of an organization and the individual doing

the hiring. Jobs are scarce enough, and the general economic vibe is insecure enough that companies and managers believe that they can be cavalier about how they treat people outside the organization — but in this thinking lies madness. Now that 20th-century-style employer loyalty and benefits are a thing of the past, employees return the disfavor, churning through organizations at a rapid clip. If a typical new hire is only going to stay at a company for two to four years, why sweat the decision so much? Be responsive. Act fast. Trust your gut.

Employers need to streamline the hiring process, calling upon both common sense and basic good manners. Here are six easy actions:

- Make the process transparent from the outset for prospective hires
- State the timetable for making a decision
- Offer updates if the process extends beyond that timeframe
- Limit the "tryout" requirements — proposals, plans, original work — and make the deliverables clear at the start of the process
- Make the timeframe for submitting any materials reasonable — 3 to 5 business days, never *tomorrow*
- Make certain that *everyone* who's being considered for a position is given the courtesy of a definitive response within the stated timeframe. Just as e-mail has compounded our daily load, so too does it liberate us from making those hard calls person to person. Use the tool to your advantage.

The wildly successful actress/producer/director Lena Dunham perhaps said it best in a recent interview: "I'm never going to be the person who lets e-mail and voicemail sit for weeks — I'm going to be the person who responds, even if the answer is no." How refreshing.

**Names have been changed*

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