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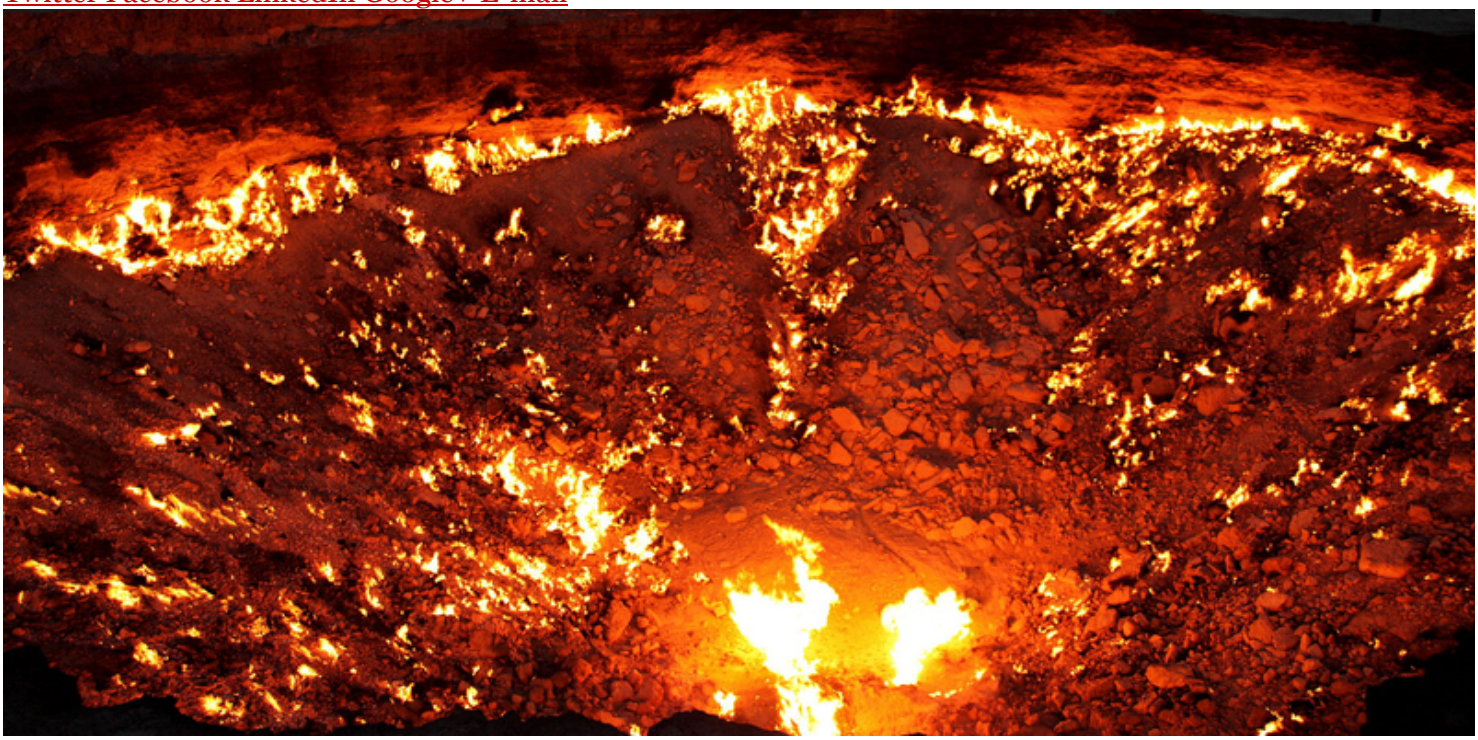
Academic Job Hunts From Hell: Why You Weren't Picked



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There are two major downsides to not getting that tenure-track job you applied for. The second one is the less obvious but may be the more pernicious in the long run: No one will tell you why you weren't chosen.

Indeed, most departments go no further in their explanation to the rejected candidates than: "We considered all factors listed in the position's required and preferred qualifications."

Yet in some searches there may be direct or inferred leaks of information. Early in my job-seeking career, a friend in a hiring department that rejected me revealed, "Most people felt your research area did not add anything new to our overall coverage." An acquaintance who lost out on a position said she was told, "Some of the older faculty felt you didn't dress formally enough for the campus visit." Another colleague suspected that he didn't get a position because he had let slip his wife was pregnant with twins; he could see the chair of the search committee visibly (and falsely) calculating that "they wouldn't have gotten much work out of me the next few years."

But generally, your attempts at intel gathering will draw a blank. In this series on the dark sides of the academic job hunt so far we have dissected fake searches, bad fits, inappropriate questions, scheduling challenges, interview snafus, contract-negotiations woes, and multiple-offer challenges.

Now we turn to the most bitter result — when you actually have struck out on the market. I will survey the wide range of reasons that offers are not rendered. My intention is to demonstrate that, while some factors were in your control, many were not, so you can take heart in having done your best. The next (and final) essay in this series will look at rebooting your search tactics after a failed job hunt.

It was a fake search. Fake searches are commonplace for senior administrative positions, but the percentage of bogus searches for assistant professors or postdocs is unknown. People — ranging from the final administrator (dean, director, chair) in charge of the hire to the entire department — may have already made up their minds about whom they want to hire (either an internal or external candidate). As a consequence your presence in the pool or even as a campus visitor is simply a fig leaf for HR demands. As I wrote in the earlier column on fake searches, there are many poker tells — including unusually specific job ads, hostile treatment, and rushed hiring processes — but it can still be difficult to detect if it's all for show.

Note that a search might not be an outright fake but rather a "favored" call. That is, the search was created with the hope and expectation that a particular candidate would apply and — barring someone more amazing coming along or the front-runner massively screwing up — the fix is in. So you might have gotten the job but the odds were stacked against you.

Or, you may not have been hired because your advisers, your department, or your subfield were out of favor — through no fault of your own. For example, a social scientist I know related that he will never support a hire from certain doctoral programs because he thinks they produce

"lazy, arrogant, full-of-themselves jerks." In all fields bitter rivalries might result in the advisees of one luminary in one program being persona non grata at another.

The people running the search were incompetent. Most academics are extraordinarily competent in certain narrow subjects, such as medieval French history. But their skills vary wildly in areas like hiring, evaluations, management, and interviewing. If they were perfectly consistent, every candidate would be evaluated with equal scrutiny and search committees and administrators would always act responsibly.

But more than two decades of witnessing and participating in the hiring process have convinced me that mistakes occur so commonly that the anomaly is a search that runs smoothly.

A few examples: In the old days, when all submitted materials were in paper form, it was not unheard of for applicants' files to get misplaced or miscopied. Now I have to wonder — with hiring software that enables us to scroll through up to 500 applicants — whether members of the search committee are paying as much attention to the "Zibriskis" as they are to the "Andersons." Data overload affects the attention span of committee members. If only five minutes or less is devoted to the analysis of a complicated online portfolio, it is quite easy to miss relevant details and underrate a candidate who should be scored higher. Another scenario is that people got so busy and distracted they let the search season slip by without taking action.

In short, you may very well have not gotten the job because nobody was really paying attention to the items in your CV that might have propelled you to a campus visit. So long as you made absolutely clear in your CV and your letter how you fit the position, there was little else you could have done.

You weren't qualified ... for this position. I once heard the chair of a search committee pronounce that a candidate was "terrific — but not for us at this time for this position at his price." Indeed, there is a reason job ads list those "required and preferred" qualifications: They are valued. So you may be a wonderful scholar, teacher, colleague, and so on. But if the department requires applicants to have experience teaching "World History 101," and you've never taught such a course, you could well be knocked out in the first round, however much experience you have teaching other courses.

In such cases, sometimes you could have made a difference with better forethought. Tailoring applications may be painful and slow, but it can swing search committees your way on borderline issues. For example, suppose the department really needs someone to cover a particular class but you have never taught or TA'ed that class. You could raise your plausibility index by mentioning similar courses you have taught, or areas of study that might help you teach it.

Remember that if committee members appreciate you for other reasons, they may be willing to massage your qualifications — if you give them some arguments and evidence to work with.

You were overqualified. Almost a decade ago I wrote an essay, "You Were Too Good for Us," about those times when top-flight credentials actually work against you.

At first you might be outraged that, in an intellectual pursuit, being the highest-achieving candidate would drop you out of contention, but consider why it happens: A tenure-track opening is posted in a small humanities department at a small college in a sub-premium locale. The department's faculty members teach a heavy load, often covering courses outside their original area of focus, and place high stress on collegiality and mutual loyalty. Along you come in the hiring pool, the product of a top doctoral program, already publishing smartly, winning big fellowship awards, and carving out a hot new area of research.

See where this will go? Or rather not go? They simply don't believe that you truly want to live in their small town, teaching four courses a semester. They suspect you are just desperate for a tenure-track job and, if hired, will be back on the market seeking something "better" elsewhere. So your mega CV is actually a red flag indicating that courting you may well be a waste of the department's time. In any case, you don't get the job.

You didn't "fit" them. A professor near retirement at a regional private university in the West told the following story: "For my job interview, the good old boys [on the senior faculty] took me to their 'ranch' to see if I could shoot. As I was originally from up north, they thought I couldn't handle the Texas paradigm. Male-dominance behavior had some other faculty members all in a tizzy as they thought I was going to just bow to their masculinity. Unfortunately for them, I was already quite the competent pistol shooter and they bowed to me. I got the job."

In a reverse example, a southerner who interviewed for a New York institution swore to me that a member of the search committee aggressively pursued his knowledge of wines as a test of his big-city sophistication.

You can imagine other, less overt, tests that you might fail and not even know it. Just be aware there is one question that many faculty members ask themselves when they meet you on their campus: "Will this person match up to our culture, mindset, and aspirations?"

Of course, fit can be a sensible umbrella term for an objective reality. My own campus just achieved Carnegie's top research university status and has even greater ambitions of boosting our research profile. At the same time, we pride ourselves on the quality of our teaching and student engagement. The result for job candidates who apply to our institution? Well, if you come off as a hotshot researcher, great. But if you also leak a disregard for undergraduate teaching, that will count as a strike against you. Candidates who lean too heavily in either

direction just don't fit who we are and who we want to be.

You committed a nuclear error. In a 2009 column, "Avoiding a 'Nuclear Veto' in Hiring." I used that phrase to describe a situation where, even though a majority of faculty might be in favor of hiring you, one particular professor is so dead set against you that, to avoid a fight, the others relent and move on to another candidate. In hiring decisions as well as politics, a passionate minority can carry the day over the initial support of a passive or indifferent majority.

Likewise, I know of many instances when candidates were rejected because they committed a "nuclear error." That is, they said or did something objectionable or even offensive that someone in the department took as evidence they were unqualified or unfit to be hired. The gaffe was objectively small but the consequences were fatal.

Nuclear errors can occur anywhere. Perhaps you confide in the real-estate agent that your spouse doesn't really want to move here so you might just rent for a few years to see how it goes. The head of the search committee hears of your remark and passes it around as an indication of your "not being serious about wanting the position." Or, during your research talk, you mention you were pursuing a particular body of theory but find it didn't really help for the questions you were studying. It then turns out that the senior scholar in the third row was one of the co-originators of the theory and took your utilitarian argument as blood libel. And then there are the endless possibilities for setting off opposition by making a joke — or what you mistakenly think is one — that someone in the room finds insulting.

Your nuclear error may even fall under the sartorial realm. At least when I was on the job market 20 years ago, senior professors very much judged me by the formality of the suit I wore as much as by the content of my teaching presentation. I am fairly sure that if I had shown up without a tie and in Topsiders, someone would have thought I wasn't ready to be a tenure-track professor.

There is no safeguard against making a nuclear error except to be very careful about tangents, jokes, thought balloons, speculations, and off-the-cuff remarks that might be taken amiss.

In reality, there are innumerable individual localized reasons why you may not have been offered a particular position. In the next and final essay in this series, I will explore the strategy and tactics of rebooting your job hunt. But an essential point to keep in mind is that luck is indeed a factor, especially in an era of overcrowded markets, distracted committees, and nuclear errors. In the (future) words of Capt. Jean-Luc Picard of the starship *Enterprise,* "It is possible to commit no mistakes and still lose. That is not weakness; that is life."

So it's OK to be unhappy with the outcome of your search, and it is inevitable that you will take

it personally. You should, however, be aware of the factors you can control versus the ones you can't.

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