

# The Job-Interview Game

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By DON BERLINER

"What do you see yourself doing in 25 years?"

I was trapped.

How could I tell him I hoped to be retired and lounging on a sailboat somewhere in the Carribean? Somehow I knew that was something he just wasn't waiting to hear. Yet he and I both knew that my still tender age of 26 and my general temperament ruled out my staying with this particular job for a continuous 25 years.

Obviously I couldn't tell him that. What then? Think fast.

"Well, I have been thinking of working my way up through the systems analysts' ranks and going into management. By the way, how long have you been here?"

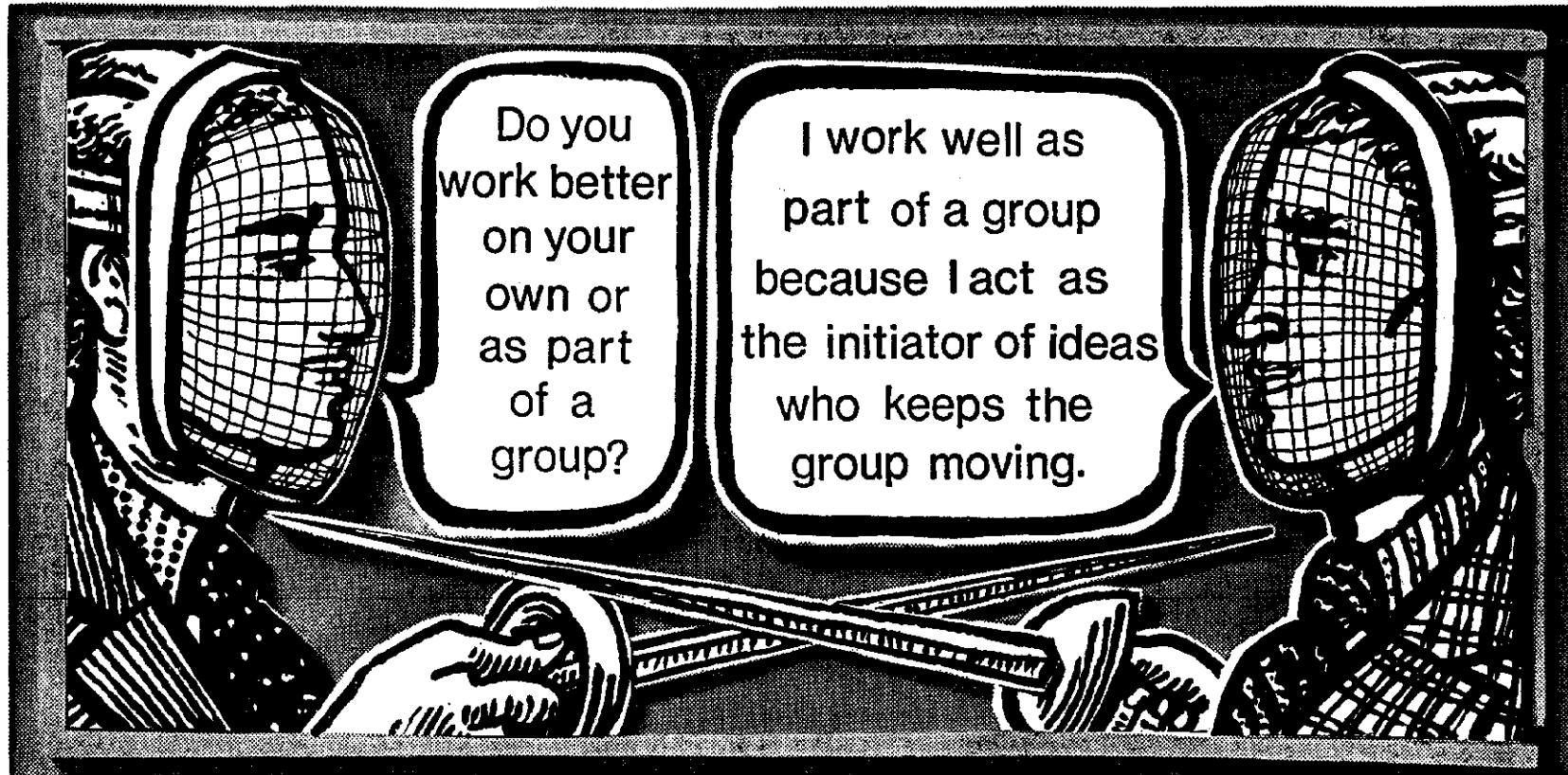
Not bad. After all, I had succeeded in implying I was enthusiastic, hard working, ambitious, a half dozen other appropriate Boy Scout traits and a good conversationalist since I had neatly thrown the ball back to him.

Of course, this last attribute was purely accidental since all I had attempted to do by turning the conversation over to him was to get myself off the hook. For a relative beginner at the interview game, this was a fairly good move.

The professional would recognize this instantly, as really just part of the regulation bag of tricks — the standard turnover.

The interview game is a real-life exercise that uses knowledge acquired from many fields, like applied psychology and sociology. Knowledge of your own particular field may or may not be useful also.

You must become a mast-



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er of the put-on, the come-back, the turnover, the one-up, the me-too, the unsaid and a touch of the putdown. The ability to think on your feet (or on your behind, actually) is a tremendous advantage.

One of the first mistakes I made playing the game was to leave one job before getting the next one. This led to embarrassing questions during an interview like: "How come you left your previous job?"

Trapped again, right? It doesn't look good to say you were fired. If you just say you quit, you are branded an undependable drifter. Per-

sonality conflict? Well, it takes two to conflict and maybe that means you don't get along with people. Pay too low? This company probably doesn't want someone who is that ambitious. So what do you say?

Just listen to this. "At my previous job, I just wasn't challenged enough. So, instead of remaining bored in my work, I decided to leave and seek out a more exciting environment."

In other words, you were not fired! You left not because you are a drifter, a crumb or a money-grabber, but because you were seeking that almighty challenge.

Good going, but there's more.

After some questions about your background (perhaps even applying to the job under consideration), you might hear a question like: "Do you work better on your own or as part of a group?"

Now this can become a little tricky. The correct answer could go either way. Some jobs are clearly research positions requiring a self-starter and someone who works well as a loner. Other positions will obviously require much personal contact and group problem-solving situations.

In either case the answer is simple. But, as usually

happens, the job has not been well-defined for you yet and they are trying to trick you into revealing your preferences before they reveal theirs.

Although it is preferable to have the job description previously psychod by listening carefully for any hints, a useful, admittedly somewhat weaker, defense makes careful use of some me-tooism.

"I work well as part of a group because I act as the initiator of ideas who keeps the group moving. Incidentally, this really makes it easy to adapt to working alone also since I generally

tend to be quite receptive to my own ideas."

You just completed a double play faster than the Mets ever could.

"Have you been having much trouble finding a job?" they ask fairly frequently. Once again, there is the implication that you are unwanted.

This calls for a reply coated with a bit of the unsaid. "Actually I have just been trying to be a little selective in choosing the next step in my career."

Oh, wow, there was more than just a bit of the un-

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said there. First, it sounds as if I have gotten at least several job offers that were not up to my expectations. This indicates my desirability. Second, it implies that my next all-important step will be quite a permanent one (note the reference to career rather than job) working for whatever company is lucky enough to get me.

Finally, since I take these decisions so seriously, once I receive an offer from dream company, presumably I will run to accept it (without taking the minimum of three weeks they took to decide). This reply was carefully selected to present maximum impact with minimum effort.

Somewhere further along in the interview, the rules call for a long pause, perhaps a cough and shifting in the chair, and a short muffled question sneaking out to trap you: "Uh . . . what salary are you looking for?"

Here you've been carefully avoiding that hallowed subject since we all know it's more important to be interested in the joys of the job itself rather than the compensation.

In fact, even your résumé has been stripped of all dollar signs. (You mean, you are going to pay me for doing something I enjoy?) However, the time has come to finally face the issue, if only reluctantly.

Whereas it is probably true that a beginner quotes a figure too high for his first interviewer (mine commenced a severe coughing fit), several months in the job market probably brings that figure down too fast. It is important not to drop too low in the other direction.

This low-high dilemma can

be soothing somewhat by the careful use of a salary range. "I was looking for something in the 10 to 20 thousand range." This way you cover all bases. You don't price yourself out of the market and, at the same time, you imply that you indeed have much confidence in yourself and are always looking upward.

There comes a time during any interview when you begin wondering what the other guy thinks of you. Besides your answers to his questions, this depends very much upon your physical appearance. After all, if answers were all he wanted, he could have saved everyone some time by speaking to you on the phone.

The old how-to-take-an-interview manuals thought they were all clued in to the key factors — neat suit, color-coordinated tie and shirt, shined shoes, immaculate fingernails, clean combed hair and so on. But this doesn't get to the real meat of the appearance issue.

A neat suit is fine, but just make sure it's not too jazzy-looking. A good rule of thumb is to wear clothes that are in the genre of at least two seasons ago. When you walk in, you want your suit to proclaim "I'm with it, but not flashy; I'm modern, but not faddish; I'm conservative, but not stuffy." All these things, all at once.

I was once gliding through an interview of my own and, in all honesty, acting a little too confident in my replies. After almost 30 minutes, it looked as if the interview was close to finishing. At this point, the interviewer leaned toward me and asked a seemingly simple question that proved to be a conversation stopper: "What about your appearance?"

My brain and vocal chords switched places in a vain search for some connecting path to each other. Can you imagine how taken aback I was by the possibility that something looked wrong? Just the small trace of doubt in his voice had finished me.

Had I glanced in the mirror that morning, I might have been able to recover. I hadn't the slightest idea that he was diplomatically referring to the presence of a small beard and moustache on my face.

All he expected me to do (as I learned from later similar occurrences) was to recognize the necessity for keeping it well trimmed and also be aware of the extra efforts I might need to overcome the apprehensions of any beard-wary higher executives or clients. And for this I had panicked by stepping on the brakes and going into a tailspin.

There are differences in interviews that occur quite often. There is the let-me-tell-you-all-about-the-company person vs. the tell-me-all-about-yourself interrogator.

The first one tends to do 90 per cent of the talking. Whether out of egotism, overwhelming nervousness (on his part) or beaming pride in the company, he goes into a thorough description of the job, the company organization, the advancement possibilities, your future coworkers, future boss, boss's boss, boss's wife and any other items he deems interesting.

Here you have to be truly adept at the continuous head nod, the short grunt of approval and an occasional "uh-huh." He figures he knows about your background from the résumé you sent him beforehand. So all he needs to do is to keep talking long enough to get a thorough visual impression of you.

On the other hand, the tell-me-all-about-yourself interviewer asks lots of open-ended, essay-type questions like you used to have on high school English and history exams. Instead of "describe the causes of World War I," it's "tell me about your education."

Another interviewer pair is the boss and the boss's boss dilemma. This is the situation in which the first one doing the interviewing is the guy who would be your immediate boss on this job.

He knows all about the job you applied for and is very concerned about your qualifications and especially how you get along with others (particularly since he is going to be the primary "other" involved).

Lay your background on him. Show him your easy-going personality. And stay away from that aggressive, success-oriented stuff. You can bet your last résumé

won't get you a hot-shot shooting for his job.

This contrasts with the interview with the boss's boss. He is not all that concerned with your background. Since he has been around longer than the lower-down boss, he realizes that most of the real useful knowledge you get is on the job anyway. He also knows you will not survive in his company's executive jungle if you're easy-going.

You know what you've got to do. Flaunt that aggressive, career-oriented, success-seeking nature of yours. Give him something he can be proud of.

Now we come to what seems to be the most difficult part of the interview for many job-seekers. Up until now, the interviewer has been jabbing questions at you from every direction. Suddenly, he slows down and hands you the microphone. Time to move to center stage. The tables turn, causing a grinding of gears deep in your stomach.

The director says to the potential new star, "Do you have any questions about anything?"

Now there's a true show-stopper. This one could make or break you. As any military commander realizes, it's better to be on the offensive than always on the defensive. So this is a great opportunity.

This is a natural place to insert any issues that were left out on the interviewer's part — anything dealing with salary, fringe benefits, vacation time or, more importantly, your future place within the organization.

Go ahead, turn things around, act like you are the one who will still be around in 50 years and inquire whether the company will have room for your future aspirations and subsequent movement within the organization. Find out about the company's conduct in matters that may have nothing to do with the job you seek (its extracurricular affairs).

Ask about some of the vital statistics (age, earnings, what it has been doing for the last hundred years or so, companies it has merged with — or broken off with). Ask him if they have been having any trouble filling the job? And, if so, why? Find out why the person who filled the spot before is no longer in it.

In short, not only can you mount a campaign to secure victory, but you can use this splendid opportunity to put the company in the same spot that they just had you in. Ah, this is poetic justice supreme.

Mr. Berliner, who has been an operations research analyst, is presently looking for something that is more of a challenge.

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