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## MANAGEMENTMANAGING YOUR CAREER

# How to Jerk-Proof a Job Search

Figuring out whether a future boss will be a pain depends on smart questions, in-person context clues

*By Tara Weiss*

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In job interviews, potential employees and managers tend to be on their best behavior. So how can a job seeker discern what their potential future boss will really act like on a day-to-day basis?

It is a question that has gotten tougher to answer, say recruiters and people who have taken jobs in the past three years only to discover their new manager is a problem. With much of the interview process moving to video chats during the pandemic, this has closed the window into people's personalities that a face-to-face encounter can provide.

To jerk-proof your job search, arm yourself with skillful, direct questions that can help you figure out whether a boss is merely telling you what they think you want to hear, say recruiters. And push to do it in person as it can give you more clues about people's temperament and interactions with colleagues, say recruiters and workers who wish they had more carefully vetted their future managers.

Alyse Dunn wishes she had been more versed in the art of interviewing the interviewer before she founded her own firm. Looking back, there were clues that the manager for one of her prior roles might be a jerk.

The boss seemed kind and professional, but she also seemed inordinately focused on how long Ms. Dunn expected to stay with the organization if hired, she says.

Companies frequently desire low turnover, so Ms. Dunn didn't think much of it at the time. Once hired, Ms. Dunn's new boss frequently yelled at and belittled her. When her manager threw an object at the wall out of frustration, Ms. Dunn quit. That's when colleagues told her about all the people who had the job before her and told her that she had lasted longer than most.

“I wish I would’ve asked how long the last few people hired were in the role,” says Ms. Dunn, now chief executive of CareCopilot, an app that offers rewards for caring for the elderly.

Tessa West, a professor of psychology at New York University and author of *Jerks at Work*, has collected many stories of workers who learned their would-be manager was a jerk, sometimes too late. There was the college professor who turned down a job because the managers were more interested in getting to the bar for drinking than discussing teaching philosophy. Recently, a paralegal told her through tears that the hiring manager had promised a vibrant in-office culture; in reality, she is the only one who works in the office on most days.

When being interviewed, always ask what the essential skills are for the role. Ms. West says to specifically ask about the skills that your performance review will take into consideration. Alarm bells should go off in your head if the boss’s response includes any of the following sentiments:

- “We’ll know it when we see it.”
- “A good culture fit.”
- “My gut instinct.”

When the boss can’t articulate the most important attributes of a job, that can make it almost impossible for you to be successful because you don’t know what the expectations are, Ms. West says.

Ms. West also recommends asking sharp questions about how best to communicate with the manager, especially for people who will be in a different office or time zone. Ask: “When do meetings start?” “How quickly do you expect replies to your emails?”

Michele Darley had years of experience as a recruiter specializing in sales when she was referred for a new job with more authority. After an initial meeting, the manager asked her to come in with a detailed recruiting plan to demonstrate how she would approach the job.

During that meeting, Ms. Darley recalls, the manager told her several times that micromanaging wasn’t their style. Once she took the position, the micromanaging began almost immediately, she says. The manager peppered her with questions about details that Ms. Darley considered minutiae and questioned how Ms. Darley could prove she was working eight hours a day, Ms. Darley says.

When Ms. Darley, now a senior sales recruiter at Fusion Connect, left that role, she chalked it up to a valuable lesson learned. She says she wishes she had asked the manager: “What does micromanaging look like to you?”

Another good source of information is the manager’s direct reports. Ask to speak with a few current employees. If the hiring manager won’t put you in touch, Ms. Darley says, that is a red flag.

Some chief people officers say their continued reliance on video interviews is mostly out of convenience. Candidates don’t need to travel, take part of the day off work or arrange child care. But it is easy to forget how much you can learn from an in-person meeting. Unlike video chats between strangers, which tend to be strictly business, the social niceties required to meet for a meal can let you know how likable a person is and whether it is easy to make conversation.

**‘I instantly felt a greater sense of connection and could see myself working with them long term.’**

— Melanie Naranjo, after Ethena’s founders came to where she lives to meet her

Asking to meet in person is perfectly acceptable, recruiters and people officers say. It will also let you see how they interact with people who may have less power than them, for instance, their staff or waiters, and whether they are engaged during the conversation or obsessively looking at their phone or answering emails. This works both ways. Executives can also pick up on more intangible qualities about potential hires when meeting in person, too.

Melanie Naranjo asked for face time more than a year ago when considering whether to leave a job she loved to take the post of chief people officer for Ethena, a compliance training firm. The company’s two founders traveled from Brooklyn, N.Y., to New Jersey where Ms. Naranjo lives, to meet at a coffee shop after several rounds of video interviews.

She saw their willingness to travel to her instead of, say, meeting somewhere in the middle as a sign that they were willing to go the extra mile for employees.

“I instantly felt a greater sense of connection and could see myself working with them long term,” she says.

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