

The Peak Interview

New Insights into Winning the Interview and
Getting the Job.

by Bill Burnett

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Sometimes you think something is going badly, and later, you discover you were completely wrong. That happened to me a few years ago in a face-to-face job interview. I was working in San Francisco when I got a call from an executive recruiter in the Midwest. He was calling about an international job in Chicago. It was in my field, and since I had international experience he wanted to know if I might have any interest in talking to him about the job. I said, “Sure.”

About a week later we had a phone interview that I thought went fine. The recruiter ended the call by saying he’d be putting names forward to the hiring company in a few days, and I should hear directly from them if they had any interest. This was early August.

I didn’t hear anything and by early September I’d forgotten about it. Then in mid-September the phone rang. It was the recruiter, “There’s been a hold put on the job, but it has opened up and I’ll be putting names forward in a couple of days, are you still interested?” I told him I was, and he again said that I should hear directly from the hiring company if they had any interest.

September ended with no call. Then in mid October, the recruiter called again. It was the same conversation as in September: "... position on hold... submitting in few days... should hear from hiring company directly... are you interested?" As it turned out I was interested. Now, more interested than before, because I'd just been laid off.

October ended. November came and went. By now I was highly engaged in a job search. Christmas came and went, then just before New Years Day the recruiter called: "... position on hold... submitting in few days... are you still interested?" I was in the top six or seven candidates for the job, he said, and since he would be in San Francisco on a different search assignment in a couple of days, he was wondering if we could meet face-to-face over breakfast.

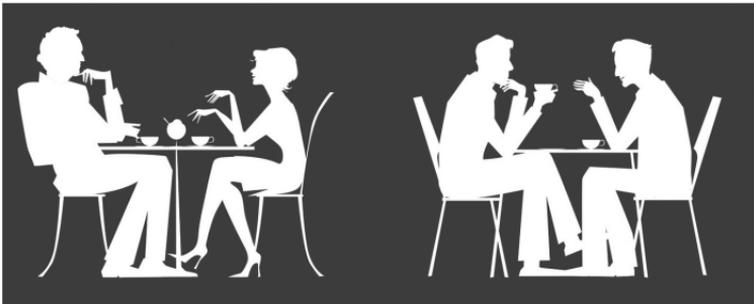
Now if you're in the top six or seven for a job, it usually doesn't mean you're the number one or number two best candidate. It means you are either number six, or more likely, number seven. If he was only putting forward four or five names, I wasn't really in the running for this job. Nevertheless, I knew that any job interview experience was useful, he was a professional recruiter, and this would be good practice. I said, "Yes, I'd love to have breakfast."

We met for the breakfast interview at 7 a.m. in the little cafe in the Campton Place Hotel just off Union Square. It was early for the elite clientele who stay in

the Campton Place, so he and I were the only two people in the little restaurant.

I think he forgot that he'd told me I was in the top six or seven because he started the interview by telling me that he would be putting forward one or two candidates for the position as soon as he got back from this trip.

We chatted briefly, and he had managed to ask a couple of interview questions when in walked Gene Hackman, holding hands with a very attractive woman.



The couple settled at the table right behind me. The woman and I were sitting back to back. This allowed the recruiter a full view of Gene Hackman less than ten feet away. The recruiter leaned toward me and whispered, “I can’t believe it, Gene Hackman is my favorite actor of all time.” The interview then became a conversation mostly about movies, with the recruiter doing most of the talking. He did manage to ask a couple of work related questions, but as I answered them his eyes kept drifting over my shoulder to focus on Gene Hackman. I thought the

interview was not going well. In fact, I was beginning to believe it was a complete waste of time.

Then the recruiter looked at his watch, said he was sorry but he had to run. Just before we left, the recruiter politely stopped by Mr. Hackman's table to tell him how much he admired his work. Mr. Hackman was very gracious. They chatted for two minutes and we left. At the entrance, I thanked the recruiter for breakfast, he shook my hand and said I should be hearing directly from the hiring company.

I thought Gene Hackman's presence in the room ruined my interview. I could not have been more wrong. Recently I spoke with the recruiter. He remembers Gene Hackman, but nothing else about the interview, including that he was interviewing me. Meeting Gene Hackman was clearly a Peak Moment for the recruiter. By the end of this book you will understand why that Peak Moment made such a difference.

Shortly after the breakfast meeting, the recruiter put my name forward, and I was offered the job. We now live in Chicago thanks to the Peak Moment Gene Hackman created for the recruiter.