

The Psychology of "Job Search"

This seldom realized but critical component of your job search will make or break you.

By Daniel Scrivner

May 7, 2014

You've probably experienced this feeling before (I know I have)...hundreds of applicants applying for the same job, rising debt and anxiety over bills, past experiences of rejection and chronic worry taking over in a very common but perfect storm – completely incapacitating a person's ability to job search as they are overcome with a sense of fear or failure. Suddenly a sense of doom takes over and runs a person's life. This scenario is played out every day by the thousands, sabotaging a person's prospects as they struggle to find work and provide for their family. The average person speaks 9,000 to 30,000 words daily, and we also tend to speak to ourselves throughout the day as well, sunrise to sunset. This "self-talk" is often critical and can be damaging to a person's sense of identity, as well as their chances of success. Body language, tone of voice, gait...are just three components that have a role in expressing this self-talk to others, usually unintentionally.

If you are interested in learning more about how often we speak, ABC News completed a study that showed that on average, men and women comparatively speak 16,000 words per day (<http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/story?id=3348076>). Either way, you get the point. It's a heck of a lot of words per day. And much more when it comes to our self-talk; "we are all conversing with ourselves at an incredibly fast rate of speed – perhaps 10 to 20 times faster than we can speak out loud. The average person tops out around 500 words per minute" (http://www.sharoncamarillo.com/spirit_and_self/will/001_importance_of_self_talk.php).

How about you? Can you recall a time, perhaps this week, or even today, when you told yourself something negative? See if you can identify with a few of these stories – I know I can.

In the remainder of this article I will highlight several true short stories; however the names of the individuals have been changed to protect their privacy.

Over the last ten years I have worked with hundreds of applicants that came from varying backgrounds and many that went through one crisis or another while they hunted for their careers, or in many cases, searched for survival jobs that would enable them and their families to live. In this emotional roller-coaster of a job search, a person's day can easily be filled with anticipation, let-down or rejection, financial stress, a personal sense of loss (if they were let go after a long period of time spent sacrificing themselves for their once cherished position) and sometimes divorce.

I recall one applicant who said that his wife had given him one month to find work or she would leave him. This sort of deadline does nothing to further his chances of success; on the contrary, it worked to only further derail Jim in his job search. Every interview and every consultation was impacted by the feeling he had of impending doom. His demeanor was clear to others. He looked unhappy, stressed out, and potentially worse because his body language projected these advertised traits (though he tried to hide his fears). These traits were reinforced by Jim's self-talk.

At one point in my experience, I recall being asked to work with someone that was described to me as unwilling to follow through with tasks, and someone that appeared to others to have a poor attitude. In an interview and career assessment, I quickly realized that Collette didn't have a bad attitude, she simply had been defeated. She was a single mother who had to care for several children who required a great deal of time and attention. She was limited in what she could accept because of her circumstances, and she was used to hearing "no". I never saw her crack even a half-smile. She was clinically alive at this point, having been repeatedly kicked and kicked by life. She broadcasted negative energy, anger, sadness and hopelessness. The fact is she unintentionally projected this with everyone she spoke with. Think of a billboard that glows and draws the attention of everyone. Except in this case, it was not a positive marketing trait. Rather in Collette's place, it read very plainly, "don't hire me."

Another applicant I worked with had a great resume. Tom dressed sharp, wore the right clothes and said the right thing during an interview. Months went by. Still looking for work I met with Tom again and discovered what was going wrong. His handshake was weak and his demeanor matched his handshake. He was lacking confidence and was racked with guilt over a very distant mistake he had made at a young age. When he spoke about this incident, it caused him great pain and shame but it seemed so far removed and distant from his current situation in life (and quite frankly I had heard far worse stories from others before...). He was an adult now and had a family he was trying to support. Because of his strict upbringing, he had never been able to forgive himself. So naturally, his self-torment came through loud and clear. Except the problem in our job search is that some employers read a weak handshake and limited eye contact as at best, a lack of confidence, and worse, deception. Trying something new, I told him that if I could look him in the eye and tell him that I forgive him, then surely his God, whom he said he believed in, could also forgive him. This moment changed him. You could immediately see a weight come off his shoulders. A simple act of self-forgiveness (acknowledging others have forgiven him as well) worked to create the greatest change in his job search. His posture, his handshake, his eye contact, and his confidence were all impacted. He found work in his field shortly thereafter.



Sarah was also a single mom who had just come through a difficult separation. She was looking for work and trying to provide a home for her children. Her barrier was fear. Every conversation became centered on the "what-ifs" of life; "how will we pay rent;" "my car is not going to last;" "what if I don't get this job." Every time we conversed, I noticed her eyes would dart back and forth as she thought of every possible crisis or onset of bad news that would

somehow inevitably doom her chances of employment and possibly hurt her family. It was as if she was in a horror movie, hiding in fear while her eyes quickly darted back and forth to find the monster before it was too late.

Negative self-talk directly influences how we see ourselves (our identity), and can cause a great deal of harm if it is not handled directly when it occurs. "I'm a failure;" "I can't do anything right;" "we are going to end up homeless;" "I'll never amount to anything" are just a few of the very

many and very common things we say to ourselves. Moreover, sometimes our negative self-talk can lead to blaming others for our perceived persecution in life; “they won’t hire me because of my age;” “they only see my disability;” “they are just advertising this position because they have to. They will hire from within.” These types of examples of self-talk play out every day and largely dictate how we see ourselves and our day.

When offering career advice to others, I often state that writing a resume, practicing interviewing; really any aspect of prepping for your job search is useless, unless you address this very real issue first and foremost. Because how you see yourself, your confidence and identity, your belief in whether or not you will succeed, as well as your preparation and follow through; all of these things and more will be sabotaged unless you have an active plan to deal with negative self-talk and unless you address the psychology behind your job search. Here are a few tips for how to help you take a proactive role in setting the tone and agenda for your job search:

1. Grieve the loss of a past job and move on (if you continue to remain centered on a wrong committed against you or a mistake you made, you will never succeed in getting what you want). I recognize this is easier said than done.
2. Accept that you will face rejection. Anticipate it but look at it as a way of eliminating the jobs you are not supposed to have. Have the attitude, “I have been told no before and this helps me narrow the search further.”
3. Look for points of happiness and look for opportunities to express this happiness or gratitude to others. Be the one that causes the room to light up when you enter. I don’t mean faking happiness. I’m talking about a genuine account of what you have to be happy about and projecting that with others while also looking for the best in other people. Please read the example in the last short story.
4. Surround yourself with only positive people. These are people you speak with weekly (sometimes a job hunting group or leads group works best, but really any positive group will do). Have you ever been around someone that just simply sucked the life right out of you? Don’t be that person. And just as important, don’t socialize with that person. Everyone around you must be positive. This is a rule you must adopt and you must not allow this to become optional. It is central to your job search.
5. Plan breaks from stress that allow you to unwind and focus on something fun, fulfilling, and healthy for you and your family that doesn’t cause you a lot of stress. In other words, do you have an outlet for your stress? Walks in the park or around a lake, board games with the family, a connection with a friend, perhaps over coffee.
6. Write down all of your regrets, mistakes, etc... on paper and then burn it. Forgive yourself. You can’t look forward if you are still focused on the past. You must have a forward leaning, positive outlook (and you can train yourself to do it).
7. Monitor your body language. Watch your posture. Watch your handshake and eye contact. What do you eat? When do you sleep and how much? How planned out are your days (a must!)? Do you smile? What does your smile say about you? Do you slouch or walk with a limp that is not due to a disability, but perhaps chronic frustration? What conclusions might others draw or assume about you because of your body language?

8. You must learn to have faith that you will be ok, that your needs will be met, that you don't have to look with darting eyes for the monster in the room. Again, you must learn to train your mind to accept that you will be ok. Because you will be ok. I have never seen anyone fail in their job search except when they limited their contacts to Facebook and started their day after 10 AM. After all, there is competition in your job search.
9. Watch your intake. What type of music do you listen to? Is it upbeat or positive? Is it peaceful or fulfilling? Perhaps country music, filled with melancholic loss of family, house and dog, is not the way to go. What do you watch? Same rule applies. Think of yourself as an Input/output (garbage in, garbage out) vessel. Simply put, what you intake will influence what you project.
10. Know what you bring to the table. Know your skills. When I ask someone what they are good at, typically someone who is out of work and in crisis will only come up with a few (10 at most). I argue that most people possess 300 or more different skills. Be knowledgeable about what you are pursuing, what the job market looks like (are your targeted jobs in demand? What is the average salary for your experience) – visit <https://fortress.wa.gov/esd/employmentdata/> for information on identifying where you fit in the market.
11. Prepare a list of alternate phrases you will tell yourself in response to a negative self-talk. Have an active plan to combat these poisonous words or phrases or they will stick to you. As a general rule, it takes 10 positive comments to remove the weight and power of a negative one.

Perhaps some would suggest I'm an idealist and that if you are going through crisis, you are inevitably going to project negative body language and that the "psychology" behind your job search is "hooley." Perhaps this last example will help to assure you that it is possible.

Tammy had helped her husband with a successful business that was well known in the area. Following a massive medical trauma, and while she cared for her husband in the hospital, their business was robbed. How low does one go to rob someone while they are in critical care? They subsequently became homeless due to his medical bills. While he stayed in a nursing home, she dutifully looked for work and housing without a car – having sold that for medical bills as well. I recall her walking from point A to point B, all over town, appointment to appointment, interview to interview.



What struck me about her were her positive energy and smile. Here was someone that was watching her husband go through the most difficult circumstances of his life. She had lost her home; she was without a car and had even pawned some family possessions so that they could survive. I asked her once why she was so happy, always emanating positive energy. After all, she had all the excuses and reasons in the world to project negativity. She simply stated that if she took time to ask "why?" that if she took the time to list her problems and worries and focus on how devastating her year had been, that it would take that much longer to get to where she needed to be. She was right. When I go

through difficult circumstances, I remember Tammy, and how she handled her crisis with grace. If she can beam happiness and positive energy in the midst of the worst crisis a person can deal with, surely any one of us can train ourselves to do the same.

Over the many years that I have assisted applicants with looking for work, I have conducted hundreds of interviews to help employers find the right applicant. Within 30 seconds, an interviewer will often make an assumption about an applicant that will dictate the outcome of the interview and the applicant's prospects. Too often, this is based on a person's body language that is directly linked to how a person views themselves. Take some time today and analyze, really analyze, if you have addressed these critical components of your job search. Life is too short. Pursue happiness, surround yourself with positive people, and expect a better tomorrow. Remember, your right job is just around the corner.

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