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Business Basics

Why Job-Seeking Is Just Like Dating

Susan Adams, 02.23.10, 5:15 PM ET

What's the best book ever written about looking for a job? According to one career counselor with two decades of experience, it's *The Rules: Time Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right*, that throwback dating manual published in 1995 that feminists love to hate. Hugely popular, the 192-page volume by Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider exhorts women to "let him take the lead" (rule No. 17), "don't talk to a man first" (rule No. 2), and "don't call him and rarely return his calls" (rule No. 5). The main point: Play hard to get.

How does this apply to looking for a job? "It's about developing a strategy that creates desirability," says Roy Cohen, 54, a New York career counselor and executive coach who used to handle outplacement for Goldman Sachs. Cohen has penned an upcoming book, to be published in June by FT Press, called *The Wall Street Professional's Survival Guide*.

In Pictures: Dating Tips That Could Get You A Job

According to Cohen, many of the rules in *The Rules* work well for job hunters. Example: rule No. 7, don't accept a Saturday night date after Wednesday. In other words, don't make yourself available at the last minute. Many job-seekers have picked up the phone at 11:30 in the morning and gotten a hiring manager who says, "we realize we have time to see you, can you come in this afternoon?" Especially nowadays, most desperate candidates are inclined to say, "Yes! My calendar is open!" Wrong answer, says Cohen. "You need to create desirability and attractiveness," he explains. "You do that by appearing slightly unavailable."

Don't lie, he advises. But by mid-morning most folks have some sense of how they're going to spend the afternoon. Stick to your plan and tell the potential employer you can meet the next day. "All of a sudden, if you say you can come in, you're compromising, you're giving something up," explains Cohen. Instead, he suggests, "you just say, 'I wish I were free this afternoon, but I can't. I can move my schedule around for tomorrow or the next day; how does that sound to you?'" That way you're offering an option but still giving the impression that you're busy and in demand.

What about rule No. 2, "don't talk first"? Cohen suggests a modified version of this directive. If you sit down for a job interview and an awkward silence ensues, consider saying something like, "It's great to be here, thank you so much for spending time with me," he says. It's important to appear socially skilled while at the same time allowing the interviewer to set the conversational tone. "You don't want to say or do something that might position you in the wrong light," says Cohen. If you allow the interviewer to take the lead in your conversation, he adds, "you demonstrate that you are prepared to perform for him."

Even in the current grim hiring atmosphere, it's important to show employers you have many options cooking, that you are busy and desirable. But what if you've exhausted online job boards, company postings and recruiters in your field and come up empty? Pick a company you want to work for, then tap all your networks, from LinkedIn to your college alumni association, to find a way in. Study the corporate culture; inquire about the area in which you want to work; forge relationships with people on the inside. "It's just like dating," says Cohen. "You can't establish the rules before you're even in the game."

Unlike *The Rules*, Cohen says the rules of job searching apply to males and females in equal measure. Example: A male client of Cohen's is looking for a job as a hedge fund portfolio manager. He's in conversations with three different funds. The one he least wants to work for is urging him to accept an offer. Cohen is helping his client figure out how to slow things down with the eager employer. The client is calling the other companies and saying, "Things are heating up for me right now." Meantime, he's telling the hot-to-trot fund he's excited about the offer but he needs to tie up some other loose ends. Says Cohen, "sometimes it makes sense to eliminate a suitor because he's not quite right."