

What Employers REALLY Want:

Grasping the Unspoken Rules of the Workplace.

SUMMARY: Unconventional candidates often have difficulty finding and keeping good jobs, even when they have strong vocational skills.

This article suggests one reason: individuals from challenging backgrounds often fail to meet employers' unspoken expectations. It explains why this is so, and offers a number of straightforward strategies to address these issues.

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by Steve Parese, Ed.D., 2011

Developing employment opportunities for individuals with difficult backgrounds can be extremely challenging, especially in today's economy. Even when these candidates have strong vocational skills, many have difficulty finding or keeping good jobs. They just can't get along with their coworkers, won't listen to their supervisors, seem unwilling to follow common sense expectations. Why is this, and what can we do to help?

Remember Erin Brockovich?

As movie goes, many of us cheered as Julia Roberts, portraying an unconventional legal secretary in "Erin Brockovich," triumphed over a large utilities company bent on hiding its harmful practices. As career development professionals however, many of us moaned as we recognized the difficulties of working with such "unconventional" employees.

Recall senior partner Ed Massery's difficulties as he attempted to offer Erin guidance on an unspoken dress code in his law firm:

Massery (nervous): "Look... now that you're working here, you may want to rethink your wardrobe a little?"

Erin (defensive): "Why is that?"

Massery: "Well, I think that some of the girls are a little uncomfortable... because of what you wear?"

Erin (smiling cynically): "Is that so? Well, it just so happens I think I look nice. And as long as I have one a-- instead of two, I'll wear what I like... if that's all right with you? And Ed? You might want to rethink those ties!"

Erin Brockovich doesn't see her boss' suggestion as an enforcement of an unspoken professional dress code. She sees it as a personal criticism of her taste in clothes. As such, she feels not only entitled to reject his advice, but to offer a little constructive criticism of her own as well!

Two things employers really want.

As workforce and career development professionals, we shape candidates whom we hope will find success in today's people-centered job market. When we ask employers what they believe is most important to workplace success, they repeatedly state:

"We'd rather have someone with a good attitude and no vocational skills, than someone with skills but a bad attitude."

But what do employers mean by a good attitude? Two aspects emerge:

1. First, the job seeker with a “good attitude” has strong soft skills: self-control skills, communication skills, social/interpersonal skills, problem solving skills, etc.

2. Second, s/he seems to intuitively understand an employer’s common sense rules: show up everyday on time, don’t argue with your supervisor, use personal time (not company time) for personal business, etc.



Why Don’t New Workers Get It?

Why do many unconventional workers (such as Erin Brockovich) have such a hard time meeting these two expectations? Consider two possible answers:

1. First, more conventional job seekers have often had the benefit of a comfortable upbringing and/or good mentors, and have mastered the interpersonal skills needed to get along with others and work through disagreements.

By contrast, many non-traditional customers have faced challenges of day-to-day existence in more difficult environments, and may have never learned these finer social skills. Instead, many have learned harsher survival skills, which they utilize in stressful workplace situations.

2. Second, most experienced employees intuitively understand that we must adopt a different role at work than we do at home. We understand that different games are played by different rules, and we adapt our expectations accordingly. If a supervisor were to suggest that our office attire was a bit too casual, we might feel slightly put off, but most of us would take it as a professional criticism and go on with our day.

On the other hand, entry-level workers in today’s economy generally lack any significant prior workplace experience, and so have never had an opportunity to develop strong professional identities. They haven’t gained an intuitive understanding of the unspoken professional rules of the workplace (such as “Never argue with your boss”), so instead they rely upon their personal rules (such as “Never let anyone get away with putting you down.”) As a result, they often do the wrong things for what they believe are the right reasons!

Unspoken Rules of Work

Imagine that you hired a young babysitter to watch your two toddlers while you and your spouse went out for the evening. You would offer details on some things of course: where you were going, required bedtimes, permissible snacks, etc. But most of what you would expect would seem like common sense, so obvious that it goes without saying:

“Don’t let strangers in the house!”

“Stay out of the liquor cabinet!!”

“You may NOT spank my kids!!!”

Now imagine returning home after a wonderful evening out. While your spouse drives the babysitter home, you go to the kitchen to fix a snack -- and your jaw drops. You cannot believe the mess that s/he has left behind! You didn’t actually say *“Clean up after yourself,”* but you really didn’t think you had to. In the moment, you are tempted to call the sitter and chew him/her out. But by morning, you have convinced yourself that it’s just not worth the effort, and resolved to simply never hire that particular youngster again.

Employers feel the same way about THEIR common sense expectations. Though they vary from one field or industry to the next, some of the most common ones are:

- A. Be courteous to customers, even when they are unpleasant to you.
- B. Do what you are asked to do, even if you don't really want to.
- C. Don't talk back to your supervisor. If you're confronted about a problem, accept it without getting defensive.
- D. Do your best to fit in. Don't look or act too different.
- E. Don't make excuses when you mess up. Accept responsibility and learn from your mistakes.

When new workers unwittingly violate unspoken rules such as these, many employers don't bother to explain their common-sense concerns. They simply shake their heads, label the individual as having a "bad attitude," and say cryptically: "It's just not working out." Unfortunately, lacking instruction or guidance, non-traditional workers go on to the next job and often make the same mistakes over and over again, never fully aware of what they are doing wrong.

Implications for Career Practitioners

Given these insights into employers' concerns, one major task of career development professionals is to help unconventional job seekers begin to understand and adjust to the social expectations of the workplace.

Findings from the fields of cognitive-behavioral psychology and adult education offers some best-practice strategies:

- Provide direct group instruction in professional interpersonal skills such as managing emotions, problem solving, expressing concerns, and dealing with criticism. While these skills can be coached individually, adults often learn better in small groups. The research suggests that soft skills groups are most effective with groups of 10-12 participants, engaged in 90-minute classes running 2-3 times per week.



- Utilize brain-friendly learning strategies, including bright visual aids, emotionally relevant vignettes, interactive teamwork, skillful demonstrations, and dramatic role plays to teach new skills. Whether commercial or home-grown, a well-organized curriculum is essential to creating continuity between sessions and to assuring measurable outcomes.
- Offer individual coaching and counseling when workplace problems occur. Use these opportunities to process interpersonal issues, practice new skills, and benignly challenge misperceptions without attacking the person.
- Develop meaningful relationships with challenging individuals based on respect for their survival skills and an appreciation for the difficulties of transitioning from one world to another. Use these relationships to add credibility to interventions, rather than operating from a basis of compliance with authority.

With insightful instruction and skillful coaching, new workers can learn how to meet employers' often unspoken expectations and have more success fitting into their new jobs.

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