

Interviews are also about picking the right boss

Job applicants often worry so much about making a good first impression that they forget to check out the personality of their potential bosses.

By Mary Ellen Slater

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New jobs are always risky. Even if you hated your last job, there is a chance that this one, somehow, could be even worse. And there's nothing you can do about it.

Except there is. It's called the job interview. While we spend most of our interview energy worrying about how to be the candidate of choice, we forget that we have a choice of our own to make: our next boss.

"Too often, we get caught up in an attitude of 'pick me, pick me, pick me,' when we really should be giving more thought to whether a place is right for us," said Bill Pullen, a career coach in Washington.

Few things have more impact on your happiness at work than the person you answer to every day. And while experienced workers might feel they have more leverage to be discriminating, it's really the younger ones who should be most careful. "Your first boss, if they are a good mentor, is worth the biggest salary in the world," said Robin Ryan, a career counselor in Newcastle, Wash.

Here are a few signs to watch for during your next interview to help you find a boss you respect:

- **Meetings with all the right people.** If you don't have an interview with the person who will be your direct supervisor, watch out. "I would never take a job if I had not met the person who would be my boss," Pullen said. It doesn't matter if the employer gives a seemingly innocent excuse for why your prospective boss isn't on the interview schedule, such as an illness or vacation. Offer to come back and meet with the boss on his or her return. The not-so-innocent scenarios include a boss who has just been sacked, or worse, one who the human resources staff is afraid would scare off prospective employees.
- **A willingness to talk about himself.** It's not appropriate to grill the interviewer about his qualifications, but it's perfectly acceptable to ask about his education and experience, and how he wound up in his job. You're trying to get a sense of whether you can learn from this person, Ryan said. Also, ask about his management style and what kind of employee he works best with. Weigh that against what you know about your own personality.
- **A positive vibe about the person who held the job before you.** Ask your prospective boss about what happened to the last person who held the position for which you are applying. Did he get promoted? Leave the company for a competitor? Head back to grad school? Does this trajectory match where you would like to go? Also, what's the prospective boss's attitude about this person? Does she seem proud of her former charge? Did she help him move into the new job? If the last person was laid off, consider that a major red flag. "If the company is replacing someone who had 10 years of experience with someone fresh out of school, that's a sign the business is in trouble." Be wary.
- **A strong career of his own.** You want a boss who is considered a rising star, Ryan said. "Ask around to see what sort of reputation he has within the company, as well as his field." Is he getting regular promotions? Does he have a strong internal network? "You really want to be near the movers and shakers, if possible," she said.
- **Encouraging nonverbal cues.** Was the person on time and attentive? Did she look you in the eye? Is her attention focused on you during the interview? If not, don't get your hopes up.
- **A good hunch.** A big part of finding the right job is pure chemistry. A job may seem great intellectually, but if you have a bad feeling about it, there is probably a reason, even if you can't articulate it. It's a mistake to overlook that. "We're not trained to listen to our instincts." And that's too bad, because our gut can often tell us when a situation is trouble long before our brains can.

Most important, you need to adjust your mind-set during the job search. "You want to shift your perspective from desperation to something more equal," Pullen said. "You'll come across as more powerful, more professional."

And you're more likely to find a job you really love.