

LOOKING FOR WORK

All You Can Do is Your Best

Welcome to the one and only chapter in which we'll actually act like an employment book.

But first, a story behind the quote at the beginning of this book...

In 1986, in between college and graduate school, I was on my way home from four months bumming around Europe, the majority of which was spent inside *Eastern* Europe (known back then as being behind the Communist “Iron Curtain”). Believe it or not, I'd gotten used to living there, amidst the drab-looking architecture, autocratic policies, and the somewhat awesome lower requirements they had towards socialization. So in addition to all the emotional re-adjustments when I re-entered what we used to call “the West,” it was difficult to process what felt like an assault of increased social nuance and fashion diversity—sensory overload to be sure!

As my mother lived in London at the time, I headed home on a boat that had left the Dutch coast for England. I was miserable, leaning over the side, just looking at the water, when I felt a finger tap my shoulder. Turning, I came face to face with an old man, who reeked both of

booze and poor hygiene. But instead of asking for money, he spoke seven words, “All you can do is your best,” and then, without waiting for a response (or asking for money), he walked away.

Best advice I ever got.

What I like about the phrase is twofold: number one, it is obviously an expression that is comforting. But it’s also challenging—what *is* your best? Let’s see it!

Lying

“Lying?” Now, why is a discussion about “lying” an appropriate segue into a chapter on securing employment? Because it’s a concept, a sensation, and an interpretation that seems to plague our spectrum world’s potential for employment.

So much of what is essential to finding and keeping a job revolves around behaviors we refer to as “professional.” There’s professional appearance (good clothes, hygiene, etc.), professional attitude (staying positive even when you don’t want to), and professional behavior (the unwritten rules about what’s expected from us as we relate to one another in the workplace). All of these scripts are adaptive—for no one’s born that way. These are tricks that the majority of the business world demands from those who choose to inhabit it.

To a higher percentage of neurotypicals this resonates as “no big deal,” because they pick up this behavioural code a lot more instinctively than we do, and because they don’t initially see as much harm in adapting. But to us, so-called professional behavior can often feel like lying. It’s not who we really are and this bothers us more.

As spectrum folks, we get ideas into our heads, and when we do it becomes tough for the rest of the world to get us to see things differently. Sometimes these ideas of ours are brilliant, and sometimes they're just flat-out stupid. But whether the logical scenarios inside our brains are wise or dumb, our commitment to them is indisputable. We're not irreversible, no; we can be shown that our way of thinking might not be as brilliant as we thought. But we are fierce debaters for our ideas, and we have to remember that no one is under any obligation to debate with us. Some might have the energy to engage with us in an argument over who is more logical, until either a) we see that our idea might be one of the dumb ones, or until b) they see that our idea is brilliant. But most of our ideological opponents may simply tire of arguing with us because they are not as passionate about defending their counterintuitive idea. And then, whether we have a smart or not-so-smart idea doesn't matter, as we now have a damaged working relationship that needs repair. This is often the beginning of the process wherein we are eventually let go from a job.

There's been new developments, yes—the notion of hiring people on the spectrum for their gifts, and in spite of our relative social challenges—this is a new wave of thinking that has lately gotten a tremendous amount of press. Many of us have written articles on the subject, and lots of new non-profits have sprung up to help with the process, like ASTEP, Aspiritech, the Non-Pareil Institute, and the Danish “Specialesterne.” But this hasn't yet translated into behavioral pluralism at the workplace by any means yet. The unemployment numbers for spectrum folks are still enormously high. Lastly, I've listened to more than one speaker (often a well-known spectrum

person like us) tell an audience that they can't fire you just because they don't like you. That information is false. They can, and they do.

So we behave in ways that feel like lying. When we believe that the boss's way isn't as productive as our way, we simply need to listen to the boss, and do things their way. In the rare instance where the boss asks for our opinion, so long as we are respectful of the boss's way of doing things (even if we think it doesn't work so well), and so long as we can present our ideas as an alternative, and not as if our way is "the correct way," then we can answer the boss's question without getting in trouble, and might even elevate our status in said boss's eyes. That's one way we stay employed. But bear in mind that is the rare boss who will ask us what we think of their methods.

Awful, right? Well, sometimes yes and sometimes no.

For starters, sometimes the boss's way *is* the better way due to factors that we don't yet know about. Remember, in addition to having brilliant, unconventional ideas, we also get things wrong a lot. And, for the rest of the world, "professional behavior" often resonates as a required, universal standard for courteousness towards others in a work environment. This conceit—fake or not—makes life easier, not harder, due to the behavioral anarchy that many subconsciously fear would exist if these standards weren't in place. With all the talk about our difficulties on the job, such reassuring predictability reduces co-workers' anxiety about us, and therefore *makes them more pleasant to be around* as well.

But until we learn this new language, these behaviors resonate with great negativity as "professionalism" requires us to act in a way, or say things that, if we were truly being who we are, we would never do.

Lying is hard for us: we're not usually very good at lying, and we rarely understand the logic when others are asking us to lie. But most of the time we *can't* just be ourselves at work. Take for example, the job candidate who gets an interview. When she meets with the company representative, she says nice things about the company. She got these ideas by reading about the company on the internet, and in truth, *she doesn't really care* who they are as a company—she might even *dislike* what they do! But she badly needs a job. So she says she loves what the company does. Technically, she's lying. If the company she's interviewing for is a large one, she might say, "I also really want to work for a large company because of the security," whereas if she has another interview at a small company the next day, she might, in that interview, say, "I really want to work for a small company because of the potential for growth." Technically, she's lying to at least one of them, and maybe both. But she can also be perceived as being truthful with both of them. If both have advantages, and she's merely communicating them, then she's not only being smart, she's being truthful.

And indirectly, if a job requires a dress shirt, slacks, and good shoes—whereas at home we would never wear these clothes because we find them to be uncomfortable—we feel like we're lying by never complaining to colleagues or supervisors about how much we hate wearing them.

But these are all lies that are OK, and that I would wager most everyone tells or engages in. It's a trade. We get money to live on in exchange not only for our labor, but for our assimilating to their expectations of us. Like so many things in spectrum life, "acting like we belong" is essential—we don't have to "belong," we just sometimes have to pretend we do.

One of the greatest jokes about the business world is that they often worry about hiring employees with disabilities because they're intimidated by the accommodations that might be necessary to make the relationship work. Well, some day, as all the progress in behavioral pluralism that we've made continues to spread, those employers will start to see that *we've been making three times the accommodations* to fit in. But until that dreamy day, assimilating in these areas is a repugnant sacrifice we make if we want the job.

Trust me though, the more times we tell these particular lies, or refrain from telling truths, the easier it gets, especially if the job provides us with enough money to live a happy life. The moral indignity of "lying" dissipates, and in most cases inevitably disappears. When people refer to stuff like this with the phrase, "That's just how the world works," they're right. It's just an easier lesson to swallow if you're not on the spectrum. Often, these behaviors that feel unacceptable to us—but in fact are *very* acceptable—are referred to as "little white lies," or "stretching the truth."

Think of it as advertising. Most of us know that a TV commercial stretches the truth—the product that's being sold might be liked by some people, but it certainly isn't as universally *loved* as they depict in the commercial. So too do we need to advertise ourselves sometimes. Or think of it this way: *you* be the interviewer, and let's pretend that I was to get an interview with you. I go in, and tell you, the interviewer, "Well, I'm not really interested in what your company does, but I'm three months behind in rent," I probably wouldn't get the job, right? If there was another equally qualified candidate for the job, who stated that they were *very* interested in what the company did, and

didn't share information about how unstable their lives were, who would you give the job to?

The easiest way to rationalize this (so we don't show others that we're clearly lying, and then tick them off) is to find those smaller truths that exist within the lies. Of course you want to work for that company! You need a job, right? So talk about why they're great in ways that make sense to you. The woman in my earlier example suits us herein: if the company has been around a long time, then *talk about* how great it is that they're stable—as that means they won't go out of business while you're there, and you won't get laid off because the company does poorly. If they're a brand new company, *talk about* how that means that the opportunity for growth is immense should the company take off. Herein, you're not lying.

Your résumé

Having a strategically-designed, clean résumé is essential for above-minimum wage positions, and a good idea nonetheless for any job. But there's a right way to do a résumé, and several wrong ways. For starters, any HR professional will tell you that one typo, any amount of writing that “rambles on,” or résumés that utilize creative formatting (font choice, layout)* will be instantly disqualified.

Understand that HR professionals, in large enough companies, get hundreds of résumés every day. They're not initially looking for the best candidate. Their first step is to *get rid of the greater bulk of those résumés that they*

* *Some design professions, like graphic designers, are herein allowed a little flexibility.*

can trash, because in their culture, that makes their job easier and more efficient, and any one of these three red flags will instantly find your résumé in their trash folder. Spellcheck your résumé twice, be economical and concise in your writing, and paradoxically, if you want to increase your chances, make your résumé just as boring looking and economically informative as everyone else's. Let your value show only through the experiences you've had, and the accomplishments you made within those experiences.

Also, unless you're an academic applying for an academic job—a university or clinical professional with a lot of published papers/articles to your credit—or someone aged 45 or older with a long professional career, keep the résumé at one page. And keep what's on that page relevant; include only jobs that demonstrate a work ethic, and those past positions that show you are qualified for the position you're seeking. You are not under any obligation (and it is often not wise) to list every job you've ever had. If you're looking for work in more than one field (often *very* wise), it's perfectly normal to have a different résumé for each field, each one strategically designed to show that particular industry why you're qualified to work there. So what if you're that academic with many published articles...but applying for a corporate management position? Unless the management position is directly related to the field in which you published articles for, those extra pages of academic credits on your résumé will hurt your candidacy much more than they will help.

And if you have a large period of unemployment in your history, it would be good to fill up those years on your résumé with something, even if it's volunteer experience. If you can't list any volunteer experience,

charity/community work, or continuing education classes during the unemployed years, then just be prepared to answer a question about what you were doing during this time. It may seem like a stupid or annoying question to answer—wherein you want to angrily say, “What do you *think* I was doing? I was looking for a job!” because it was such a depressing time for you. But interviewers have to ask it to protect themselves. If your résumé has empty years, just politely tell the interviewer you were looking for work during that time.

And while most résumés get delivered by email these days, if mailed by a postal carrier, use quality bond paper to print your résumé and cover letter. Regular photocopy paper sends the signal, truthful or not, that you don’t care enough about getting the position.

One long-standing trend that appears to be on its way out is the habit of listing your physical address at the top of your résumé. Thanks to email it’s not needed anymore. Replace your address at the top of your résumé with a URL for your LinkedIn profile, and below that, your Twitter handle, if you have these. Corporations especially will want to see both.

Also, if applying to a large company, use keywords.

“Keywords?”

Keywords are most thought of as an internet phenonema. When you create a YouTube video, for instance, there is a section when you are creating the video where you can write in keywords. These are words that search engines use to find your link. For my *Huffington Post* column, in addition to keywords for the topic, I always utilize the keywords, “Michael John Carley,” “autism,”

“Asperger’s Syndrome,” etc. So that a search engine like Google will read that, and it will lead to greater traffic and more readers when people search the internet using those same words.

But in this case, the keywords should be what I like to call “corporatespeak” words, such as “implemented,” “successfully,” “sold,” “maintained,” “integrated,” “obtained,” “secured,” “awarded,” “developed,” “trained,” etc. If they’re appropriate for your résumé, it is to your advantage to use words like these as many HR departments in large companies run résumés through word recognition software. The software, called “Applicant Tracking System Software” (ATS), has been programmed to read how many words a company likes to see—the keywords they’ve programmed ATS to search for—that exist in each résumé. Often this will determine whether or not your résumé gets read. But be forewarned that, although corporate companies in general utilize much of the same language, each company will have its own set of desired keywords.

In general, corporatespeak is good to use in your materials as it tells the business that you can speak their language. It may seem daunting at first, but corporatespeak is *not* a hard language to learn, and it’s so pedantic that we spectrumites can often learn it very fast. In Barbara Bissonnette’s book, *The Complete Guide to Getting a Job for People with Asperger’s Syndrome*¹, she provides an excellent example of this by showing two ways of communicating achievements on a résumé or cover letter: 1) a normal way, and 2) through corporatespeak...

1. “*Wrote articles*”

or

2. *“Interviewed information systems managers, and wrote 15 feature articles on data center management”*

1. *“Created direct marketing packages”*

or

2. *“Creating direct marketing campaigns that increased sales by 16 percent” (p.91)*

Taking from Barbara’s sound method for college-educated professionals, let’s create a substitute for manual labor (one that’s admittedly *way* over the top so that you get the idea):

1. *“Cleaned hotel rooms”*

or

2. *“Utilizing contemporary cleaning methods and products, successfully restored temporary residences of upper-management clients to their fullest potential of hygiene, sanitation, and appearance”*

Your cover letter

Cover letters are almost always requested. But create cover letters even when they’re not requested. They’re an opportunity to indicate that you can write, that you’re in control of your emotions where it counts, qualified for the job, and excited about working for that company.

That said, you can also derail any interest in you through a *bad* cover letter.

What are the features of a good cover letter?

- It contains no grammatical or spelling errors.

- You discuss only things of interest to the person reading your letter. Don't tell them how you lost your last job (even if they may ask you this in a later interview), but do tell them why you're qualified for *this* job based on your work history, and why you'd like to work for their company.
- Avoid anything negative, most especially how unhappy you might be because you are out of work. These aren't charitable people reading your résumé. Their job is to hire someone who will be a great fit for the job, and who will stay at the company for a long time. If the reader, as they peruse your cover letter, is wondering to themselves, "Why is he/she telling me this?," you're probably not getting an interview, and as heartless as that HR professional might sound to you, it is not their job to show heart, especially when the success of their hires determines whether or not *they* stay on the job. Few people want to hire someone who appears sad. I agree with them on that. I may pity the person but I sure as heck wouldn't hire them.
- Keep it as brief as possible. Keep it at one page, with a preferable number of 250 words, and 300 at maximum.
- Address the person who will be reading your letter (a few jobs don't tell you the name of the person who will be reading your résumé, but most do). So put their name, title, company, and address at the top of the letter, beneath only the date. After a paragraph, add either "Dr.," "Ms.," or "Mr." (some like to preface their letter with the word "Dear").

Example:

June 20, 2015

Jane Smith
President
Assimilated Plastics, Inc.
600 High Rent Rd.
London, SE6 5FV

Dear Ms. Smith,

(letter begins)

Include your signature at the bottom, with your name typed out underneath the signature.

(letter finishes)

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael John Carley". The signature is written in a cursive style with some loops and flourishes.

Michael John Carley

Your cover letter, like a résumé, should not explore creative fonts or font sizes. You can never go wrong with the following three font types: Times, Helvetica, and Arial, and 12 point font size on a cover letter is standard.

OK. So why can't I be creative in designing the look of my résumé or cover letter?

As stated before, if you're a graphic or web designer, you can get away with a little deviation from standard norms. But large companies especially are looking for folks that, dare I say it, will fit into their mold. By keeping to a standard résumé and cover letter style you send the signal that you're the type of person who will do what they want once you're on the job.

Also, creative fonts that you use might not be in their computer systems (in which case your formatting could look awful when they open the document from their email). If converting to pdf format, Adobe doesn't have the capability to space out the characters evenly in every font library, causing similar visual problems that make for a suddenly messy looking résumé.

References

Some employers will ask for references—people that you have worked for in the past who believe in your abilities. Having three or four people to refer interested employers to is always a good thing. But there are some hard rules about this. For starters you need to *ask* people if they wouldn't mind being listed as a reference. Don't ever list someone without their knowing. If an employer calls your reference, he or she might not only refrain from saying nice things about you, they might be so annoyed with you for not telling them you were listing them as a reference that they say *bad* things about you instead. Ask also how your reference would like to be contacted, as some may feel fine having both their cell phone numbers and email

addresses on your reference list, while others may choose only one of the two.

Don't ever list family members or neighbors as references. Not only does this tell the employer nothing about your qualifications for the job, said employer will most likely wonder, "Is this is the best he can come up with?" and interpret that no one believes in you professionally. Therefore, the employer won't consider you as a candidate. If you have no one to list because you're just out of school, it's fine to list academic or school personnel as your references. But if you have a work history, and absolutely no former supervisor or colleague at any prior workplace is willing to be listed as a reference, it means you may need to consider disclosing your diagnosis in your cover letter, or that your best bet for employment will be through self-employment (a topic we'll soon cover herein).

Also, make sure the person you want to use as a reference really likes or believes in you. While I was running GRASP we once looked into a PR firm who provided three references for us to call. One of the references—believe it or not—had nothing but bad things to say about the PR firm, so they were out of consideration.

Time out! What if reading all this makes me angry?

You wouldn't be alone. You want to be appreciated for who you really are, and you might be sick to death of all this acclimating to them. Again, such assimilation is a trade we sometimes make—a deal with the devil, so to speak—to get paid. And sometimes, if we've just been through an emotional wringer all throughout our lives...we just