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## CHAPTER FIVE

### *The Introverted Interviewee*

As we've seen by this point, there are many benefits to be seen by having introverts in our companies on our campuses. They are deliberative and thorough, typically considerate and tactful. But William Pannacker, in his wonderful *Chronicle* article "Screening Out the Introverts" (a wonderful read that I highly recommend for anyone interested in how students view temperament), encapsulates well the concerns that introverts should raise about interview processes in student affairs:

When there are so many job candidates with excellent written credentials, 'fit' and personality take on a magnified importance. One could hardly devise a more brutal process for disadvantaged introverts than the two-day, on-campus interview- involving multiple high-stakes meetings with important strangers, a public lecture, and a teaching

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demonstration, all in an unfamiliar location with little or no time to recharge between events.

For me, Pannacker's detailed account of what the interview process typically entails was exhausting to *read*, let alone live during each of my job searches. Preparing to be away from home for a sometimes uncertain amount of time (travel delays do happen, and they further agitate the already overstimulated psyche of many whom they befall), meeting and interacting with people you don't know or don't know well, and participating in a whirlwind schedule of events with little to no time to collect yourself in between can all weigh heavily on the introvert. Pannacker asks later in his article, "I wonder how those who tend toward introversion [...] have coped with these demands. And what can institutions do to serve their needs more effectively?" If you're not sure, consider how you were interviewed for your most recent position.

I would place good money on the fact that it was at least a half-day process (at the most extreme, two full days!) in which you were paraded around a campus to meet with several campus constituencies, asked several questions, and given little time to recollect yourself in between. As it happens, this system works wonders for the energy level of extroverts. In the presence of people, being able to talk out their thoughts, and little idle time, extroverts thrive. But if this is the extrovert equivalent of plugging a phone into a charger, it is the introvert equivalent of trying to play six games on that phone at one time. Power is quickly drained, and at a time where power is needed the most. Is this any way to introduce new people to our environment? But I'll save further thoughts on that process, as well as a few alternatives, for later.

I took to my friends and colleagues to address Pannacker's first question. Jessi's response was a very interesting one, and spoke about an element of the job search that comes well before the interview- the resume and cover letter

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that hopefully will get one's foot in the door for an interview:

[I]t takes a long time to write/update my cover letter/resume because I feel like I'm not bragging enough, but am afraid to talk too highly of myself for fear it will be seen as boastfulness or making myself out to be more than I am. I finally reached out to a couple people [...] because I knew my cover letter was junk, but it was difficult because part of my introversion is based in a world where it's easier to do [things] myself than interact with others or expose myself to criticism.

Jessi highlights two significant hallmarks of introverts in her response. The first is a tendency to downplay the positive, especially as it pertains to themselves. While many introverts express themselves better in writing than they do via the spoken word (likely because of the ability to work in an asynchronous fashion), many have trouble with the self-promotion that is so encouraged in the job search process. Their tendency to internalize processes and say little unless it's truly meaningful makes bragging feel disingenuous. Moreover, their attentive and observant nature leads them to pay close attention to the good work of others. As such, they are accustomed to their



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work speaking for them, and not having to supplement it with their own words.

A second struggle for introverts is being able to summon the courage and humility to reach out and accept criticism, however constructive it may be. An inward focus means introverts are accustomed to hearing criticism...from themselves. So focusing attention outward and opening ourselves to criticism from others is difficult. We know how to react when our inner voices ask questions we may not be prepared to answer, but what do we do when someone else voices those questions?

However, just as has been a running theme in this book, Jessi's ability to open up beyond her comfort zone led her to challenge these two struggles in the pursuit of success. Another hallmark of the introverted mind is perfectionism, a quality likely fueled by our propensity to turn thoughts over and over in our minds until they have reached near perfection. In the end, that desire for perfection occasionally overwhelms the desire to keep our work private, and we must share to ensure success.

There are many other ways that the natural tendencies of introverts can help the job search process. If you are an introvert preparing to embark on, or are currently in the midst of, a job search, some of these tips may help. And if you are seeking new employees, some of this information may help you understand the mindset of any introverts you may encounter in the process.

### **While Searching For Positions**

**Know your limits.** Jeff P., currently at the Ohio State University, used his knowledge of his temperament as he sought out specific opportunities. "I'm introverted by nature, so I'm intentional about what I apply for," he said when asked about his strategies for the search. Go into your job search with a clear list of what you need from a position, and with an equally detailed list of

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tasks or scenarios that will not work for you. Try to see the potential for an introvert hangover in your future roles, carefully considering how often this position could bring you to that crucial point. As an example, my particular brand of introversion is ill suited for live-on work. I learned that during my time in residence life, and it was confirmed after a summer of doing live-on student activities work. It would have been a poor decision for me to pursue live-on work, because its challenges are so contrary to my nature. I would have done the work poorly and been unhappy.

Be steadfast in determining your needs and non-negotiables up front, and deviate from them only if you have other equally pressing constraints (such as a severely depressed job market, considerable geographic constraints, or other absolute non-negotiable circumstances).

**Talk to your friends and colleagues.** The beauty of the small field in which we work is that connections between colleagues and institutions are quite common. If you can make a connection with someone who works in an office or at an institution that you're interested in, find a way to organically make a connection with him or her and discuss what the climate of your potential new workplace is like. Jessi mentioned the inertia struggle that many introverts feel as they contemplate a change when she noted, "I'm terrified to leave the familiarity of my current situation, and I need to know I'm going to a good fit."

She's far from alone in this fear- *what if I get to my next location and hate it? What if I end up not finding what I was looking for?* Analysis paralysis is a common demon for introverts, and it is especially pronounced during times of decision-making. But with perspective about your prospective new environment, it is easier to start contemplating different circumstances.

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**Research, research, research.** It plays to the strengths of introverts to focus deeply on areas of interest. If your future place of employment is the topic of your research, it will only help you in the process. Use all the resources at your disposal to learn about your prospective institution. Dive into learning about your potential future school with the same exuberance that a prospective student would. Find local press about the institution to learn more about their relationship with the community. See if you can find the student newspaper to learn about what issues are of importance to the students. And count on your networks to help you identify current and former employees. As we all know, our field is small; enlist the social butterflies and the superconnectors in your network to help you find those you could be working with. Just as doing the required reading and homework will spell success for a college course, channeling your likely enjoyment of research as an introvert could spell success for your search.

### **In Written Materials**

In a May 2013 post on my blog, I wrote about my reaction to a Chronicle article entitled “Are You Too Good To Be Recognized?” A few excerpts are below, discussing common problems that happen when introverts are asked to speak about themselves.

To sum up, it discusses how some who exhibit quiet or humble leadership don't get recognized because they don't speak up for themselves, and how some of those quiet leaders miss recognition opportunities because it is assumed by nominators that someone else will speak up for the person. I experienced the latter firsthand in a conversation with my director the other day. He was lamenting the lack of a leadership award nomination for our SGA president, who had served dutifully for several years with the board. Of the staff in our office, he has worked with her the most closely. But when I asked if he had nominated her, he shook his head and admitted he hadn't.

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This fell true to form with an example given in the story: a young woman given an award in her senior year was awarded it with the remark, "You must have several of these." But she didn't. So many people assumed that someone else would recognize her, that NO ONE recognized her.

[...] Whatever the reason, be it temperament or culture, some simply won't speak up to be recognized, even if others might feel that they deserve it. So how is this tension to be resolved? I will not claim to be an authority on the matter, but I have a few ideas.

*Acknowledge it.* Too many contemporary practices of career counseling and office etiquette emphasize the dominant culture's request to speak up for oneself, and "toot the proverbial horn". But alternatives need to be recognized. Not everyone plays that instrument (hence the title of this post). For whatever reason, some simply aren't built that way. Don't treat it as odd or problematic; acknowledge it for what it is.

*Give credit where credit is due.* Although I am not a self-promoter (it doesn't come naturally to me), I do acknowledge good work where I see it. I pride myself on being a prompt gratitude giver, and I like to give it in a way that is comfortable for me and lasting for the person- thank you notes. It's not everyone's style, but I would never want anyone to think I didn't appreciate what he or she did for me.

Why is this post relevant to the discussion at hand? The written materials of an application are your opportunity to speak about yourself in glowing terms, being specific about the quantifiable measures of your success and making those who need to know about your accomplishments, aware. I will be the first to admit, this is not an easy process. But Susan Cain said something wonderful when I saw her at an in-store book discussion: sometimes the things that are difficult or unnatural, we are willing to do in service to

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something we care about. Assuming your job is something that you care about, the temporary push to self-promote could be a little easier to endure.

## While Interviewing

**Channel your enthusiasm for the prospective role.** Jessica P., a recent graduate currently in her search, made an excellent point about any job seeker: “[W]hen I'm excited about something I usually go for it.” Introverts get excited, but their excitement looks a little different from that of an extrovert. Introverts who are excited by the prospect of a position or its duties should channel that energy and convey it strategically over the course of the interview. Judge, Bono, Iles, and Gerhardt (2002) found in their studies that “extroverted employees are significantly more likely to (1) emerge as leaders in selection and promotion decisions, and (2) be perceived as effective by both supervisors and subordinates.”

With this in mind, it will be all the more important to reveal your excitement as the situation or topic of conversation calls for it. When should you “unleash” it? While you should always be attentive and upbeat about a role in interviews, two main constituencies *need* to see that energy: your prospective staff (immediate coworkers), and students. If you must parcel out your energy over the course of the day, ensure that those two groups see the best and most enthusiastic version of you.

Alternatively, unleash your enthusiasm when speaking to people about elements of the job that most excite you. Because introverts truly come alive when working deeply on projects that excite you, the most advantageous time to express excitement may be when addressing projects that will *give* you the most energy.

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**Accept breaks when they are offered; create them if needed.** The days are long when you are on an interview. You may trudge from room to room in rapid succession without attention to your “battery life,” a situation that could spell trouble at an intermediate time. If you sense your proverbial needle is plunging toward “E” and you are headed toward the dreaded introvert hangover, take any breaks that are offered to you to breathe and recharge. If these breaks are not naturally offered, request a bathroom break and make the most of your few moments away. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Even a short moment of solitude can do wonders for your ability to focus and respond naturally. Don't ignore your needs this early in the process; if you do that, it could hinder your portrayal to your potential coworkers. Related to that...

**Voice your needs and style.** Another thing that must be unleashed during your interview is how your introversion and its associated traits affect your work. When asked questions about your work style and what you need to be successful, do your best to artfully integrate information that will help your prospective coworkers and supervisors learn about how you work best. Should you be offered and accept the position, you will have to work in conditions discussed in the interview. Make sure those conversations include frank and open talk about a need for advance notice to get things done, time to decompress, and the ability to create and maintain an environment that allows for necessary recharging.

### **After Interviewing**

**Follow up thoughtfully in writing.** I am an avowed proponent of a well-written thank you card sent swiftly after an interview. This is both an important way to show gratitude for their consideration, and a wonderful opportunity to inject details or pose questions that you recall from the interesting conversations that you had with others over the course of the

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interview day. Use the introverted propensity to remember names and small details as you compose these notes; your thorough and thoughtful nature will be appreciated here.

I also strongly recommend ensuring that thoughtful thank you notes are written to any students you meet over the course of your interview process. Reference the conversations that you had with them, wish them luck in their academic endeavors, and show genuine interest in their experience. Care for the students you work with is essential to the work that we do; what better place to display it than in a note addressed to them?

**Move forward.** I recognize how difficult this tip will be to take, but I'm listing it anyway. Introversion lends itself well to rumination, even mild forms of obsession, in the days and weeks following an interview. But this intense focus on something that has already happened can detract success in interim endeavors; this can be particularly dangerous if you are still working in another role! Make an agreement with yourself to ruminate about the process for a finite amount of time after your interview, and then refocus yourself on other things.

Interviews are, in their purest form, a performance. They are a finite amount of time when you get to put your best foot forward, speak passionately about something you're (hopefully) excited about, and are typically conducted without interruption. In many ways, interviews take place under the same circumstances as public speaking engagements do. It may help you to review the steps in Chapter Two about public speaking. Preparation, enthusiasm and excitement are all great skills to harness as you pursue an opportunity to continue your life's work. If Julia Roberts and Will Ferrell can do it, so can you!