



From the Interview Front: **Tales from hiring managers about three candidates**

by Joanne Meehl

About two years ago, I talked with two people at a small software company in the 128 area who interviewed software engineers for an open position they had. The specific kind of company and exactly what kind of engineer, I can't reveal for the sake of anonymity. But the comments about the candidates by the hiring manager and one of her current engineers were telling.

When I talked with them, they had already seen three candidates. All came to them through Boston's Craigslist, a source they said brought in more qualified candidates than any other. Their small company does not have the resources to work with recruiters. On paper, all three candidates were qualified, and a brief phone screen proved them worth having in.

The first candidate was someone out of work for 18 months. That did not matter to the interviewers; in fact, they're nice and they would have loved to have hired him. But. (You knew there was a "but"...) This candidate exhibited no energy. No enthusiasm. And one sign of this was that he had absolutely no questions for the interviewers. Now we know that sometimes our questions in an interview get answered before we have a chance to ask them. But no questions? No curiosity about how the engineering team works together? Or about release cycles, or QA, or customers' needs, or anything else? The resident engineer doing the interviewing even went so far as to throw on the table questions for the interviewee, in case the interviewee was too nervous to think of any, but even this did not stir the candidate to any level of energy. Add to this the candidate's inability to give examples of previous successes, or to describe what he'd been doing for 18 months, and the decision -- no surprise -- was "no second interview".

The second candidate's failure was to say one thing but demonstrate its opposite. Specifically, the candidate said she left her large company because she couldn't stand the hierarchy and paperwork. But when posed a question about how she'd handle various problems within development at this small but growing firm, her answer was laden with large company processes: she'd have meetings, get clearance, do reports, and so forth. This contradiction made all her answers

suspect, especially her stated desire to work in a small company. Her failure: not doing enough research on the company culture, and not understanding the differences between large, long-established firms and small, nimble ones. There are significant differences between these types of companies that go beyond their respective numbers of employees. The interviewers' decision here, as well, was "no second interview".

The third candidate was well-prepared for questions, and had plenty of his own. He showed a quick understanding of the way the company worked, and showed he'd done some research on the type of product he'd be working on. He gave numerous examples of his own work that he accurately related to hypothetical situations at this company. He listened with eagerness to the answers to his questions, and the give-and-take was more conversational than interview-ish. It was easy for the interviewers to picture this candidate in the job, because he was clear about how he could contribute. Later, the resident engineer conducting the interview said "I could already see how we could work on various projects together". The interviewers knew they had to act quickly because -- no surprise -- this candidate had had a second interview already somewhere else. And some of their answers to his questions about product offerings, he admitted, gave him reason to pause. But he was willing to do a second interview, which they offered on the spot.

Candidate #1 will go home and say "I don't think it went well -- after all, it's easier to get a job when you have a job". Candidate #2 will go home and say "I don't think it went well -- maybe it was my age or my different background".

None of those reasons is true. The two candidates who were not offered a second interview just didn't do their homework and didn't show the qualities that would make the hiring managers picture them in the job.

Those doing the hiring here have projects that desperately need to get done. They are eager to hire someone. But that *someone* must be able to do the job. Candidate #3 got the second interview, and then the job offer, because he was able to get them to see him in the job. It had nothing to do with any magical fit with background. Instead, it had everything to do with how he was able to make the connections: connections between what he knew and how he could solve problems -- and with what the hiring company needs to get done.