

HR screening interview or covert discrimination?

By "D"

When you meet someone, what's the first thing they always ask? For me, too often the question is what do you do for a living?

The ubiquitous nature of the question illustrates just how important it is in life that you have a vocation. Not only is work an important source of income, but it is also a source of pride and purpose. For no one should this be taken away by a discriminatory HR interview process. Imagine being denied a job because you are Black, Asian, or Aboriginal or because you wear a kippah or hijab? We all hear stories of this happening and are justifiably outraged. Sadly, this type of discrimination continues to happen in HR screening interviews while other forms of discrimination is even more common and insidious and yet enjoys a large degree of social acceptance.

I am a computer programmer with skills in my field that take years to master. My abilities in this area are not in dispute, yet it's not the technical assessment that cost me my career but interviews I have with HR staff that have never programmed a computer. Indeed, it seems these people have the power to overlook me and instead take a lesser candidate simply because I cannot answer some question about conflict or something else not related to the job I thought I applied for.

Preparing for a technical interview on programming is extremely stressful and you must put all your effort into preparing for this if you want to be on top of the game. This means one must compromise in other areas. It's unreasonable in my opinion to expect someone to come to an interview prepared for a programming test also to have perfect hair, nails a designer suit and perfume. These things are nice to have, but they are not a job requirement, and the hiring decision should not be based on this. Even so, I reiterate that many companies will discount a candidate that has the highest score in a technical test on grounds such as these. Remember that the next time your word processor crashes from a bug.

I am not disputing the right of a company to conduct HR screening interviews. Employees who can handle conflict well, for example, can save the company money, while a rude employee may be demoralizing, however these traits should only be taken into account for pay grade and not used to disqualify a person from the workforce altogether. Since companies are largely streamlined in this area, sadly, these issues will follow you everywhere you apply.

One can argue that a workplace free of conflict saves companies money, but it also seems unrealistic to achieve and leads to a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy of larger and larger numbers of people who do not develop coping skills because they do not encounter conflict in their work life. This can lead to a workforce that is unreasonably sensitive since tolerance to stress diminishes when the stressors are absent. Also, because finding people with great technical and great social skills is likely difficult, this drives up wages for computer programmers and similar careers in a way that is not in line with natural supply and demand. In the end the cost to the company to become devoid of conflict will inevitably become greater than the cost of hiring less expensive employees along with HR staff that is trained and capable of coaching employees through conflicts.

There are ways to fight back. Fighting discrimination is much easier, however, once a job offer has been made. Generally, the best case scenario is for a unionized employee who can go to the union for help on these sorts of issues. In the past, labour unions were common and had a lot of power to help in many ways. Over time they have become increasingly impotent. An alternative for those without a union is to file a human rights complaint. Such a complaint can even be filed over an interview where no job offer was made, but unfortunately this is hard to win as the burden of proof is on you and many companies are highly effective at evading justice.

Recently some recruiters have sprung up that specialize in placing autistic and other disabled candidates into jobs where they will be accepted and accommodated. This sounds too good to be true, and in many cases it is – there are many more people that would like this kind of treatment than there are spots. Nevertheless, especially for those who are highly functioning, getting a job through such a means is an option. I have managed it myself twice.

If no other option is practical there is one more: You can apply for income support for the disabled. It's a surprise to many that in some provinces disabilities that affect job acquisition are recognized as the same as a disability that affects job performance. Discrimination against disabilities can also qualify. This is especially useful for things like cosmetic disfigurements mentioned above which do not technically preclude one from working but greatly inhibit the likelihood of being paid for it. I know that these kinds of benefits are controversial, and they carry a social stigma. Those on them are often treated as second-class citizens. You can be disqualified for a myriad of reasons. Many call it unfair to the taxpayer. I say that if companies want to pay less tax, they can be fair to us, too. Stop discounting employment to candidates with covert discrimination.

About the Author

“D” is one of Autism Canada’s newest Autism Ambassadors and Newsletter Contributors. We would like to take this opportunity to welcome D to our team and we look forward to sharing D’s perspectives with our community.