
Your Guide to Landing and Loving Your Dream Job

Career Cupid



by

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Ready, set . . . his parents!

Yes, you're pretty sure that this job might be "the one". It makes you feel happy inside. You have found yourself doodling your name and new job title in scrolly handwriting in the margins of your books. "Debbie Winthrop, Senior Business Analyst", or "D. Winthrop, Senior Business Analyst", Oh, oh, what about "D.L. Winthrop, Senior Business Analyst"? Like the schoolgirl crush you once had on Derek Cassidy, you're googly-eyed over the prospect of this job. Why else would you put yourself through the torture of control top pantyhose on a sunny Thursday afternoon? Still, you might want to rethink the heart you've used to dot the 'i' in your last name.

But I digress. Congratulations are in order. You've been career dating and you've found work you want to spend some significant time with. You've locked lips with it and found the passion and the future you've been looking for. If this was a romantic relationship, this is the moment when you would be embarking on one of the biggest gigs of the process: meeting his parents. In career dating, this is known as the full-fat, full-foam, ring-a-ding-dong interview. Okay, it's maybe not exactly known as that but I like to call it that. And you really don't want to mess it up.

Prepare for battle

As with all meetings, it's good to be prepared. This means that if you have been getting serious about a job, you should anticipate a call asking you to come to "meet his parents". Be prepared so that you don't sound as if it is coming completely out of the blue. Just as you don't want to sound as if you've never heard your boyfriend's parents' names before, you also don't want an employer to think you've forgotten who they are. Keep a file close to your phone or in the electronic device of your choice. Pack it with information about the organization so that you can access it quickly as you're reading. Keep track of any correspondence you've had with the firm because referring to it will let the caller know that you know that you're talking about the same opportunity.

SMILE. You might be scared out of your wits, but you need to sound friendly and competent. People tend not to smile when they're talking

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on the phone so make an extra effort to grin, even though you may feel as if you're imitating that smiley Italian chef on the Food Network. Maybe, like her, you'll become rich and well-endowed, too.

Ask questions. He asks you to meet his parents. They call to invite the two of you for dinner. It's natural for you to ask a few questions. What can you bring? Is there a particular wine they prefer? Are there any passive-aggressive tendencies they'd like to get out in the open right now? Okay, maybe not that last one.

When an employer invites you for an interview, ask some questions. Who will you be meeting? What do they do? Would they like to see examples of your work? What's the best way to get to the interview room once you find the building? Should you bring any special equipment (e.g. safety shoes) in case of a tour of the factory? These are all questions that are appropriate to ask. You might want to make a cheat sheet for yourself with your questions on it. I recommend this because sometimes, when an employer calls, you're so excited and/or nervous, you forget what you want to ask. I once forgot to ask, "What time should I be there?" Mind you, that was in Germany and the only words I could remember from German class were useless things like how to say "Fritz, would you like to accompany me to the animal husbandry?" It's a little easier if you're interviewing in your native language. If you're not, don't worry. A little practice and you can even manoeuvre words like "animal husbandry" into the most ordinary of conversations.

Cheat Sheet

Job Title/Role: Fancy Pants Dream Job

Organization/Company: Cool Company

Estimated length of interview: 1.5 hours
(meet both interviewers at same time)

Interviewer(s) name & role: Ms Pamela Bennett (Director of All Things Important);
Mr Varun Singh (Master of the Universe)

Location of interview plus directions to specific room:
123 25th Street, Suite 6A (off expressway, exit 644, turn L at lights, bldg on right). Enter bldg, take elevators to 6th floor.
Turn R off elevators and go past washrooms on left.
Knock on 2nd last door in hallway (frosted glass)

Who to ask for upon arrival: Pamela Bennett

What to bring: References (3), extra copy of résumé, work portfolio

Riskier but can be acceptable:

Dress code (if you're unsure): Business casual

Reimbursement policy for travel expenses (if you're travelling out of town to attend)

Types of questions (Behavioural? Situational? Traditional?)

Stand up. You'll project better, you'll feel better, your stomach will appear flatter. Whether it's staring down the spider in the corner or talking to an employer, standing up will help you feel (and sound) the part of a desirable, skilled commodity. You can scream about the spider after you've hung up the phone.

Practise your small talk. As nervous as you might be when you're faced with the "meet the mother" job interview, it's important to try to sound at least somewhat relaxed. Employers want to know that you are a real person with whom they would like to work. Just as you might compliment your boyfriend's mother's um . . . lovely china bulldog collection, you should try to let the employer know that you think what they are doing looks great. This is the time to harness all the research you've been doing about the field of work, turn on your mega-watt smile and reap the "she's like the daughter I never had" rewards of all your preparation for this very moment. I'm not advocating that you fake enthusiasm. Just like faking other important things in life, it's not going to get you closer to what you want! Hopefully, you actually believe what you're saying because after all, you want to work with them.

Pick a lipstick that says: I'm someone you will like

Choose your outfit carefully. Hopefully, you've done enough research on your dream job at this point so that you aren't being forced to compromise your identity for the job. I personally love wearing hats. But you don't want to scare off boyfriend's mother by looking as if he's brought home Pippi Longstocking.

Your aim is to look slightly sparkly and shiny yet familiar. Think of it this way: it's the career equivalent of wearing a pretty sundress to the barbecue dinner where you'll meet boyfriend's parents. It's a little dressier than what you would normally sport for a summer evening dinner, but it still fits the occasion.

The best news? If you like shopping, it's a good excuse to hit the streets in search of something that will make you feel like a million bucks. Read the chapter, "Does This Skirt Make Me Look Fat?" for more tips on what to wear.

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Just what are your intentions young lady?

In the same way that his father will ask you questions to determine how you came to be standing on his freshly-installed hardwood floors when he didn't know you existed, an employer will ask you some probing questions. Their intention is the same as his father's: to find out if you're really the right person for the job.

So you were shackled up a mere three months ago with another man? Uh huh. And now I'm supposed to believe that you're madly in love with my son? Yep. His father is giving you the evil eye for a reason. He doesn't believe that you really know why you're here. You seem desperate to find a man and get another income to help you pay your condo fees. So what's the deal? Are you just playing with them?

Just as parents feel protective of their sons, employers want to know that you're not just wasting their time by looking for any job. They want to see the look on your face that says you think their job is special. They want to know that you see it for the wonderful opportunity that it is, and that you'll stick around for a while and treat it well, even though it sometimes leaves dirty socks on the floor. Talk specifically about why this work is right for you. Join the dots together so a central, relevant theme runs through your past experiences (and your résumé, cover letter and interview) so it's easy for them to see the purpose and success that have brought you to this incredible opportunity. Just as mothers don't want you to end up with their son by default ("yes ma'am, he was the very last one at the club after all the cute guys had left and I figured smiling at him was better than going home alone to my creepy basement apartment"), employers want to know that you have chosen them. I know, I know. It might seem needy but humour them. While you're humouring them, don't forget to be enthusiastic and sincere.

Objects in mirror are closer than they appear

Now comes the hot seat. They're staring at you, pens poised. It feels as if they're barrelling down on you at 60 mph. It's time for you to answer some questions. The object of this exercise is simple: are you really who you say you are? Do you have what we are looking for? Do we feel comfortable with you?

Don't worry. This isn't about being perfect. It is about being genuine, specific and likeable. If you're too vague, what you're really saying is, "Trust me, you'll like me" – but without any proof, they're not buying it.

Tell true stories from your life and work. Show how you think about things and what you do when faced with challenges. Think of and talk about specific examples that help the employer get to know you and

your work style better. Be very, very concrete, e.g. “Last Thursday, I spent the day collating stats for our annual report and this is what happened...”. While it’s definitely a bad idea to rehearse answers (mothers and employers have amazing antennae that pick up on that kind of thing), it is a great idea to prepare a little. Like mothers, employers have many standard questions that you’ll start to recognize over time. If you haven’t even thought about them before the meeting, you might be doomed from the start.

Helpful Hints

<i>Parents’ questions</i>	<i>Employer’s questions</i>
Why do you love our son?	Why do you want this job?
Do you know that he leaves the toothpaste cap off? Why do you still love him?	What looks like the most frustrating thing about this job? What looks most interesting?
Tell us what cute stories he’s told you from his past. We’re sure he left the really good stuff out. Do you still love him even though he’s done these embarrassing things?	How did you find out about us? What do you know about us?
How will you help our son reach the potential we know he has?	What can you do for us?
Will you stay for the long haul or will you run at the first sign of snoring like his last girlfriend?	Where do you see yourself in five years?

Going in for the kill

Everything is going reasonably well and all of sudden his mother looks at you, all innocence and mascara over her teacup and says, “So, Eric tells me that you have six tattoos. How interesting!”

This is the part of the meeting where you get the fun job of talking about your weaknesses. It’s important to remember that weaknesses are in the eye of the beholder (in this case, the mother or employer) and have little to do with what you perceive your own weaknesses to be. You might not think that your six tattoos are a problem but if she does, then

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it's your job to talk about them in a positive way and help her see that they are not reasons to disqualify you from loving the man (or job) of your dreams.

In an employment interview, scrutinize your résumé and yourself carefully. Are there any obvious cracks in your presentation? Do you have gaps in employment or a scattered career history or a lack of experience or really frizzy hair? Prepare to acknowledge and talk specifically about what you've learned from your mistakes. If you're asked to pick a weakness, choose something that is real but not overwhelmingly scary to the employer. Let's face it. While frizzy hair is tragic, it's not a life-or-death issue so it may be wise to pick something fairly benign such as this when you're asked. (Note to reader: the frizzy hair is merely cited as an amusing example. I don't advise using it in an employment interview.) Whatever the weakness, move on quickly to the strategies you're using to improve (e.g. "I wanted to take some responsibility for my frizzy hair so I went out and found some really great moisturizing shampoo at Wal-Mart last week. After using it for a few days, I've already noticed an improvement"). If you are the proud owner of naturally glossy, frizz-free coiffure but you lack relevant work experience then perhaps your weakness might sound a little more like, "As someone transitioning into a career in purple shoe design, I have been seeking ways to gain more industry experience and I was fortunate to be able to build my design skills by volunteering at an orange shoe-making factory. While the shoe colour is naturally different from what your organization does, this opportunity provided me with hands-on experience in the shoe manufacturing process, which will be helpful to you if I am offered the role of purple shoe designer."

Being authentic but positive and focusing on your strategies allows the employer to see that you want to improve and that you can take concrete action. This will allow them to remember these positive qualities, rather than focus on your weaknesses.

Mmmm . . . this meatloaf is delicious

Don't be tempted to lie. If you really think the meatloaf is delicious, say so. If you are choking it down and wondering about the significance of the "decorative" swirl of ketchup on the top, don't lie and say you love it. When you fib in the interview, it tells the employer (and boyfriend's mother) that you can't be trusted on the job. It also means that you may be talking yourself into a position that isn't right for you. Maybe you can handle a little dried-out meatloaf with ketchup swirl every once in a while. Every job has some of that. But if you're going to be eating that every day and you hate it, maybe this isn't the right job for you. You're trying to find Happily Ever After at work, remember? This is not the time

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for deluding yourself. Remember that you are on a quest for something magical and the truth will set you free! Well, possibly after a short period of imprisonment during which you lose all hope but as in all truly magical quests, eventually this dark period will go away and the happy ending will reveal itself. Disney and I practically guarantee it!

