

The most dangerous rejection is the one you explain to yourself

According to an anecdote, a woman was outraged by a painting by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. She considered it scandalous how shamelessly the woman in the picture was undressing in front of her lover. Toulouse-Lautrec is said to have replied calmly: the woman was not the man's mistress, but his wife. And she was not undressing – she was getting dressed. E se non è vero, è ben trovato. Whether the story is true or not, it beautifully illustrates something that people tend to do excessively during a job search:

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They interpret. Perhaps you know from your own experience how painful standard rejection letters can be. You invest considerable effort in preparing a compelling application, only to receive nothing more than a polite rejection phrase in return. I have written about the understandable reasons for this practice in my article “Interpretation of standard rejections”.

The question, then, is this: How should you interpret a rejection? Because whether you want to or not – you will interpret it.

Interpret consciously!

Most people do so unconsciously or without sufficient reflection. In my consulting practice, I have encountered countless explanations for rejections. Some assume discrimination based on gender, background or age. Yet they rarely have any certainty. What repeatedly surprised me during my years as a headhunter was that such exclusion factors were far less decisive than many applicants assumed. In most cases, the rejection was based on perfectly understandable and objective reasons.

When objective explanations are missing – and they are often impossible to identify from a job

advertisement alone – another interpretation suggests itself: It must be me.

When applicants receive numerous standard rejections and are unable to uncover the objective reasons through follow-up phone calls, their self-confidence suffers because of the interpretations they make. They begin applying for positions below their actual level of qualification because they gradually trust themselves less and less.

Observe your thoughts

Eventually, they receive further rejections, this time because they are overqualified. The next interpretive trap follows: “They won't even hire me at this level. Apparently, I need to apply for even less demanding positions.” And so, the vicious circle begins.

What can you do about it? Interpret consciously. Write down why you believe you were rejected and then examine how plausible that explanation is. Just as the woman's interpretation in the story reveals more about her than about the painting, your interpretation may reveal more about you than about the real reasons for the rejection. For example, it may expose your fears and self-doubts.

Make a conscious effort to look for alternative explanations. The man in the painting could just as easily have been her doctor, her tailor or a department store detective. After all, there are many occasions on which people get dressed or undressed.

Likewise, there are many possible reasons for a rejection. Not every interpretation is wrong. But it remains a hypothesis – not a fact.

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