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### How to Spot the Boss From Hell

#### There Are Ways to Size Up Your Job Interviewer

By Dennis Nishi

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When a friend told Jessica Dean about a hot startup looking for a director of business development, she forwarded her résumé. The New York-based company offered a new smartphone app that sounded innovative. Unfortunately, the owner's lack of professionalism raised red flags during the interview. He made lofty promises about company plans, used profane language, and overstated his qualifications. Ms. Dean took the job because her friend assured her that the owner—a friend of her friend's—would be a good boss.

The problems started right away. The owner didn't trust her, so would leave late-night voice mails asking if she'd completed her projects. "Even my mother didn't care for him when she met him," says Ms. Dean, who quit after six months.

Now, she looks for certain qualities when interviewing. "If they're really informal like he was, that kind of says something about how they conduct their business," says Ms. Dean. "My new boss is the complete opposite and very professional in appearance and how he communicates." Ms. Dean now works for a startup named Spuni.com in Brooklyn that makes baby products.

Bad bosses are a leading cause of workplace discontent, finds a recent Gallup poll, but few job hunters investigate their bosses before accepting job offers. One reason, say experts, is that job hunters don't want to risk challenging managers during interviews. But there are other ways to vet potential bosses.

For starters, dig for any information about the company, department and boss online and through your professional network. You can use websites like Glassdoor.com and search for industry bloggers with experience working for companies that you're interested in.

You can use the advanced search function on LinkedIn to find past employees from other companies and to look at references. Do past or present employees give the boss a good reference, and vice versa?

Find out how long the job has been open and why, says Gary Namie, founder of the Workplace Bullying Institute, an advocacy group based in Bellingham, Wash. "Has the job been open for a great deal of time?" says Mr. Namie. "Have there been 10 previous employees cycled in and out of the job in a short amount of time? Those are warning signs you need to look out for and ask about."

Ask the right questions about management style and workplace culture, says Lynn Taylor, workplace expert from Newport Beach, Calif., and author of "Tame Your Terrible Office Tyrant." Try to find out how team-oriented the boss is and whether he or she gives credit to others. "Does the boss say 'I was able to do this for the company'?" says Ms. Taylor. "'I accomplished that instead of 'we'—or 'the team'—accomplished that? That boss may be a solo flier. You want to find a boss that will have the best interest of you, your co-workers and the company in mind."

Of course, most bad bosses are probably going to put on a good show during an interview, says Noelle Nelson, a psychologist from Los Angeles and author of "Got a Bad Boss?"

Some of the worst bosses are narcissists who are self-absorbed and manipulative but capable of being charming when needed. Look for lapses in behavior, such as when the boss is communicating with employees. Is he suddenly cold or abrupt?

In one instance, Ms. Nelson worked with a client who was interviewed by the managing partner of a law firm for a paralegal job. The client noticed that the secretary seemed cowed by her boss whenever she interacted with him and there was no eye contact. The client later learned the boss had a temper and would shout at everybody in the office.

You'll get the best sense of a boss by observing the people who work with or for him or her. Are employees smiling and do they make eye contact? Is there upbeat energy or do you sense anxiety? A really bad boss can be a daily physical, mental and emotional grind that will inevitably show in the behavior and interactions of employees. Discouraged employees are also more likely to complain anonymously about their bosses online, says Ms. Nelson.

"Google that boss," she says, "and I can guarantee, if it's a really bad boss situation, somebody is writing about it."

Try taking a co-worker or another manager aside and asking if they've ever addressed "psychological violence" or "workplace bullying" in their employment policies, says Mr. Namie. "Not if it's happened there, but have they used the term? If they say that they don't know what you're talking about or it's never come up, methinks that they shut the door too quickly. The search for euphemisms

may show an act of denial. Whereas, if they say that they don't tolerate that [stuff] or they address it as something they're working on, that's a very good sign."

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