

Dare to be honest in your job hunt

It's best to be upfront with an interviewer about outside needs

By Maggie Jackson | September 10, 2006

Should you or shouldn't you? Say you're sitting in a job interview, controlling your nerves and selling yourself hard. Do you tell them that you train for triathlons, have two toddlers, or will die if you can't leave early on summer Fridays to beat the beach traffic? Deciding whether to be open about your work-life needs is the last frontier of job candidate angst.

Leah Graves votes for full disclosure. Although recruiters repeatedly have urged her to bury a mention of her sideline photography business on her resume, she puts it high on the first page, just under a line about her night-school MBA studies. After once slaving away for a big company that forced her to ditch her private life, she's now determined to be upfront about her other interests -- and her strategy has worked.

Downsized in early June, Graves landed a job eight weeks later as a corporate account manager for a Web-based employee benefits firm. She found the opening on Craig's List, sent them her "tell-all" resume and got a prompt callback from her new employer, Working Advantage in Maynard.

"They appreciated the fact that I was upfront and honest," says Graves, whose husband, an engineer, runs a business refurbishing soda machines out of their Framingham home. "This is my priority, but they do have to understand that I have a side business and I am going back to school."

Overworked, with an eye on the door -- that's how many feel about their current jobs and why more job candidates are raising work-life issues, such as a flexible schedule or even a desire to eat dinner with the kids, during a job search.

Nearly 70 percent of 1,000 workers surveyed in July say their workload had increased since spring, and half find it more difficult to juggle work/life matters than in the past, according to an online Harris Interactive poll sponsored by Kronos, Inc., a workforce software company based in Chelmsford. Nearly 75 percent of those polled said they are actively or passively looking for a new job.

Still, full disclosure job-hunting isn't easy. There are ways to raise the issue that will help your cause, and ways that won't. A first rule of thumb: Do your homework. Along with the requisite research into a prospective employer's business operations, try to learn about its culture. Do people work routinely until 8 p.m., give up vacations, rush back after childbirth? If so, they might growl at a candidate who mentions "balance," or worse, sweet-talk you and then make you sweat.

Before interviewing at Lexington-based VistaPrint, recent hire Austin Cooke asked numerous industry and employee contacts about the company's culture. He was looking for a new job with less travel, in part so he could spend time with his 9-month-old daughter Alexis and 11-year-old stepson, Zach.

“One of the questions I kept asking was, ‘What’s the culture like around work-life balance?’ Does the culture allow you to do that?” says Cooke, vice president of recruiting at the online graphic design and printing firm. “The answer was, ‘Yes, yes, yes.’”

Armed with this knowledge, Cooke decided to be open about his reasons for job-hunting in a first interview with Anne Drapeau, the company's chief people officer. As he drove to the interview, he worried he'd be perceived as someone who cares more about family than work, but he found a willing listener in Drapeau.

“It's one of the first things he raised,” recalls Drapeau. “I find it incredibly refreshing when someone poses those tough questions.”

Timing and language are also key. A few experts discourage talk about work life until you have a firm offer, but most applaud the move toward early discussions of culture, benefits, and schedules. Whatever your approach, plan it out, cautions Laurie Lopez, a general manager at Winter, Wyman & Co., a Waltham recruiting firm.

“Don't say, ‘I miss my kids.’ Talk about how it's going to benefit” the company, she says.

Treading carefully worked for Patti Gallagher, a high-tech systems analyst and Woburn mother of two young boys. She scheduled job interviews for Fridays, partly to let employers quietly know about her 30-hour workweek. Later, she expressed a desire to work part-time, while stressing her willingness to work more if needed.

This June, she landed a position working 3 1/2 days a week.

“I didn't want to say I'm only working 30 hours or forget it,” says Gallagher. “I told them I wasn't set on it, but I was hoping for it.”

Gone are the days when we hid the family photos, accepted any and every relocation, and couldn't leave at night until the boss called it quits. Now we may be working harder, but we also have more of a voice, and we should try to use it, especially during the hiring process when boss and worker alike can benefit from openness.

“These are things that should be on the table,” says Brad Harrington, executive director of the Boston College Center for Work & Family. “The more upfront we can be, the better the fit will be for the organization and the person. And that's ultimately what both parties are looking for.” ■