

Salt, and the Dreaded Interview

By Dennis Payton Knight

I claim some expertise in employment interviews because in the 1980s I was in the employment and recruiting business. I would find candidates to introduce to various employers, and then prepare them as much as I could for the interview.

One of those hiring managers had a rather eccentric pet peeve that would spell doom for the prospect. He would always invite the victim to join him for breakfast or dinner as part of getting acquainted. If the candidate reached for a salt shaker before he sampled the fare on his plate, he was no longer a candidate. Such rash behavior would prove him unfit. There would be no job offer, and probably no dessert.

Of course, I prepped our candidates well for the interview, gave each of them the skinny on the company, made sure they would appear for the interview in a navy-blue suit, and never touch the salt shaker until he or she had first tasted the omelet. Or the ratatouille.

In that vein, it has become fashionable for prospective employers not only to salt the interviewee with routine questions, but to pepper the meeting with brainteasers. Ostensibly, according to Glassdoor, a national employment and recruitment firm, employers do it to check on a prospect's ability to think on their feet.

Google was once quite notorious for brainteaser questions but claims to have abandoned them as being of little value. "They don't predict anything," Google exec Laszlo Bock told the New York Times in 2014. "They serve primarily to make the interviewer feel smart."

Glassdoor keeps a list of goofball interview questions, all from national companies, that fall into what I call the salt and pepper category, or what you might call landmines. They include, "If you could sing one song on American Idol, what would it be?" Or this one, "What is your least favorite thing about humanity?" or "Are you more of a hunter or a gatherer?"

You might be asked to explain why a tennis ball is fuzzy or asked to declare the color of money. (To that, I think the only good answer could be green, but I wouldn't take any chances with the obvious.)

Another all-too-clever manager might propound, "You're a new addition to the crayon box, what color would you be and why?" Another one, just as cleverly, asks, "If you were a box of cereal, what would you be, and why?"

I am retired now and managing within the limits of Social Security's largesse. I had better be, because I'm too old to look for work and explain how I would instruct someone, with only words, how to make an origami 'cootie catcher'.

When asked who would play me if there was a movie produced about my life, my obvious answer, "Clark Gable," would only get me a blank stare, not the job. And when asked whether I believe in Bigfoot, I could only answer, "Depends on how well he's paying."