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Leave the rat at home

They are often condemned by job seekers for not being sensitive enough, but headhunters have their fair share of horror stories

By MARJO JOHNE

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Frank Garrity, a Toronto headhunter, remembers the time a job applicant brought a pet rat to a meeting with one of the recruiting firm's consultants. The applicant, a woman who had responded to an ad for a secretarial position, kept fishing something out of her coat pocket and then putting it down the neckline of her sweater.

"The consultant finally asked her why she was doing that," recalls Mr. Garrity, co-owner of the Searchsmiths Inc. "It turned out that the woman actually had her pet rat in her sweater and she was feeding him."

Needless to say, Mr. Garrity and his associates were less than impressed by the rat-bearing job applicant; she and her hungry charge were quickly shown the door. And while Mr. Garrity laughs at the story today, he says it's just one example of the many blunders and lapses in judgment committed by people who should, ideally, be putting their best feet forward.

Recruiters have come under fire for not following up with

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candidates who don't make the cut. They're often reviled by job seekers, who feel to be at their mercy. But walk a mile in their shoes, and it soon becomes apparent that recruiters have their fair share of grievances as well.

"Some people have this idea that they don't have to act professional when they're meeting a recruiter," says Mr. Garrity.

And that's about the biggest mistake a job applicant can make, say he and other recruiters, who become offended and annoyed when people have the nerve to lie on a résumé, swear, be rude to office staff, accept personal calls during an interview, or dress as they would for an afternoon on the beach.

But it happens, more frequently than one might think.

"It's appalling how many résumés we receive that are false," says Bill Fretz, a director at 500 Staffing Services Inc. in Oakville, Ont., just southwest of Toronto. Mr. Fretz, who is also the executive vice-president of the Association of Canadian Search, Employment and Staffing Services, says applicants who have been fired or who did not perform well in certain positions sometimes omit these unsuccessful jobs on their résumés -- assuming that a recruiter won't notice.

"They may have very good personal reasons for omitting that information, but I have to ask myself, 'Is this an isolated instance, or is it an indication of this person's character?' " Mr. Fretz says.

"If they lie to me, who's to say they won't lie to their next employer?"

Kate Lenihan, vice-president of operations for the Dean Group, a Toronto firm that does permanent and temporary job consulting, says she has seen candidates have great interviews with consultants, only to lose points by being rude to the receptionist or office secretary -- again, thinking they can get away with it.

"We've had that happen with people at all job levels," Ms. Lenihan says. "And it makes you wonder, if that person is

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rude to our receptionist, how will they treat the receptionist at the company who's looking to hire them for a job?"

Most recruiting firms require job seekers to fill out an application form the first time they come in, and that often leads to a row with the office secretary, says Jill Peapell, president of Peapell & Associates in Halifax.

She recalls one man applying for an information technology position and getting downright nasty with Ms. Peapell's receptionist after she explained to him -- more than a few times -- that, yes, she was aware that he was there to see a consultant, but he still had to fill out a form.

"The man got up and said 'Young lady, there is a total lack of communication here -- I'm here for an appointment, I'm not here to fill out these forms,' and then he walked right out," Ms. Peapell recalls.

"He was probably the rudest person [our receptionist] has ever come across -- an absolute prima donna," she says.

Another form of rudeness witnessed by recruiters is people answering personal cellphones during interviews.

One woman not only answered a call during her interview with a consultant, but she proceeded to talk to the caller -- her boyfriend -- about the job for which she was being interviewed.

"It was like 'Yeah, the money's pretty good and the job sounds great,'" Ms. Lenihan recalls. "She carried on like this for a few minutes, right across the table from the consultant."

Ms. Lenihan understands that sometimes, people just forget to turn their cellphones off. "But usually when their phones ring in the middle of an interview, people will just say 'I'm so sorry' and turn off their line."

Swearing is another thing that naturally offends a recruiter, as it would anyone interviewing an applicant for a job. But would-be job seekers, even excellent candidates, often think they're above this rule, says



Stephen Brouwer, a vice-president with David Aplin Recruiting in Vancouver.

He recalls a man who swore frequently during their meeting. But because the man had solid skills and a good work history, Mr. Brouwer recommended him for a job.

"I prepped him and told him he couldn't swear during the job interview, but he ended up saying the f-word in front of the client," Mr. Brouwer said.

"Apparently, he got so relaxed with the client, he didn't even notice that he swore," he said.

People can also get too relaxed about how they dress for a recruiter, believing that, unlike in a job interview, they don't have to dress to impress.

"One woman a couple of weeks ago was wearing cut-off jeans, her hair wasn't done, and you could tell there was no time spent getting ready for our meeting," Mr. Brouwer says.

"She had all the skills in the world, but I didn't present her résumé to the client."

Ms. Peapell at Peapell & Associates says she used to tell applicants to dress for interviews the way they would dress for work. But after a man applying for a restaurant manager position showed up at the agency in a tuxedo, she learned the importance of being more specific.

The man had worked only in upscale restaurants, "and that's exactly how he was dressed when he came in to work every day -- in a tuxedo -- so in that case, it was really my fault," she says.

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