

# Is that all you're telling unsuccessful applicants?

*Most employers have given up on offering interview feedback – but if you handle it carefully, there's no reason to stay silent*

WORDS ANNIE MAKOFF-CLARK

**A**nna Jacobs's excitement at being invited for a job interview at Tecomak Environmental Services earlier this year quickly turned to dismay when she discovered, in comments attached to the email, that staff at the firm had branded her a "home-educated odd ball", who "might be very good but equally could be a biscuit short of a packet or a left-wing loon tree hugger".

But at least Jacobs got some sense of what the company thought about her. According to recent research from Debut, a student and graduate careers app, 83 per cent of candidates do not receive any feedback beyond a rejection after

attending a job interview, despite 77 per cent of young people believing it should be a legal requirement to provide it. A survey by Business in the Community (BITC) backs up the findings, revealing that 40 per cent of young people not in employment, education or training did not receive any form of feedback after an interview.

Is it cautionary tales such as Tecomak's (with the implied threat of reputational damage or even litigation in some cases) that are discouraging recruiters from providing feedback, or are the causes more systemic?

Helen Goss, employment law partner at Boyes Turner, says past growth in tribunal numbers,

**"Employers say little or nothing, as they don't want to get into a row"**

expansion of equal opportunities legislation and freedom of information requests, and the development of a "generally litigious culture" in the UK have made employers more "risk averse" and unlikely to offer feedback.

"It's become a kind of myth-based paralysis," she says. "When we stop behaving like humans because we're afraid of the legal consequences, the culture and employer brand of organisations suffer."

Melanie Morton of Nelson Solicitors adds: "Employers





won't risk providing in-depth feedback and they will say very little or nothing at all because they don't want to get into a dispute with candidates who may be feeling upset that they were unsuccessful."

And then there's the issue of time and resources. Morton suggests that employers may feel HR resources are better spent giving a thorough induction to new starters, rather than "keeping lines of communication open" with unsuccessful candidates.

It's certainly an issue for graduate recruiters who have to sift through hundreds of applicants; Goldman Sachs received more than 250,000 students and graduates for its summer positions last year. This huge rise in applications is a product of the fact that many graduates are having to take non-graduate level jobs, says Dr Jo Cartwright, senior lecturer in HRM at London Metropolitan University.

"All this undoubtedly places a substantial burden on HR and its resources – making them less likely to respond to every application and offer post-interview feedback," says Cartwright.

But this is a poor excuse, suggests Rhianon Cambrook-Woods, managing director at Zest Recruitment & Consultancy, who says that failing to provide feedback is "poor practice... There may well have been

several people shortlisted for the position, but how long does it really take to call or email an unsuccessful candidate?"

For Karen Dykes, partner at Anne Corder Recruitment, recruiters' reluctance to offer feedback to applicants boils down to a more human attribute than simply a lack of time. "Ultimately, it comes down to not wanting to give bad news," she says. "Telling a candidate they haven't got the job is never as rewarding as making a job offer."

While organisations such as Network Rail, O2, BITC and Fujitsu rally behind Debut's #FightForFeedback campaign – which calls for interview feedback to be made compulsory – John Lees, careers expert and former chief executive of the Institute of Recruitment Professionals, insists that applicants do not have an "automatic" right to it at all. But, he adds, valid feedback can help a candidate appraise their interview performance in the same way a driving examiner provides "hard facts" to someone who has failed their driving test.

The solution for HR, it appears, is to provide useful feedback where possible, but not to an extent that it leaves the organisation open to legal action. "Keep it short and simple," says Morton. "Do not express personal feelings or comment on personal aspects of the candidate."

Lees, meanwhile, warns against providing a "bland response" to feedback requests that might refer to 'a high calibre of interviewees' and the successful applicant being 'a better fit'.

"What do candidates learn from that? Nothing," says Lees. "Valid feedback tells candidates how their practised performance actually works. Yet, most frequently, they are just told something bland but vaguely troubling."

## "Last one in cleans the loos"

Illegal and inappropriate questions asked by unscrupulous employers at job interviews have been revealed in a new study by employment law consultancy Protecting.co.uk. Nearly a third of the 600 workers it surveyed said they had left a job interview before it ended. Almost a fifth (19 per cent) of those who had left before an interview's conclusion said it was because of a comment from the interviewer. Here are some of their anonymous stories:

**"I'll never forget their po-faced, highly illegal, take-it-or-leave-it offer of £2 per hour"**

**"He asked me if I liked foot massages. I thought I had misheard, but no – it was foot massages. This was for a job at a well-known store"**

**"I thought I had an estate agent's job in the bag before they mentioned the 'company tradition' that the newest person is always in charge of cleaning the toilets. They weren't joking"**

**"The woman who interviewed me came on to me to the point she licked the end of her pencil and undid her top button. I was only 17 at the time... I ran for my life"**

*"\_\_\_\_\_ was merely performing their civic duty"*

Part of a template letter from Nashville mayor Megan Barry, to be sent to employers by ice hockey fans who stayed up late to watch a crucial game