

Job hunting - it's not what you know

I hurried through the doorway and collided with a man carefully sculpting a white mountain of cream cheese on top of his bagel. Dispatching a wad of napkins to dam the spreading lake of coffee now running across the table towards him, I scanned the room. It was whisper quiet and devoid of tables and chairs. Two or three people held centre ground, standing physically close together but appearing mentally apart, as singles hugged the perimeter, like trees in a clearing.

A small table, the one I had just irrigated, supported three coffee pots, a tray of assorted sliced bagels, packets of jelly and two tubs of cream cheese. Both were the kind that might induce premature heart failure.

I poured strong coffee into a weak polystyrene cup, spread two halves of bagel with jelly and then, with my ring binder under my arm and breakfast in both hands, introduced myself to a total stranger. We balanced coffee and bagels and shook hands, the mirror of each other's awkwardness. We sipped politely, chewed carefully and made small talk - all at the same time. This was my entrée into the world of the networking breakfast meeting.

Casting around for an escape route, I saw that the seriously underemployed - a polite term I had heard used for those of us without a job for some time - had no bagel or coffee and were already working the room. Moving gracefully from nervous face to smiling face they explored curling stick-on name labels that read, "I am (YOUR NAME)", for that special person who would change their life, perhaps forever. A name-dropped here, an experience shared there, these few people circled eagerly, sifting and sorting, at first confidently and then less so, as they concluded their first pass. Reluctantly I disposed of my breakfast shackles, depositing them on a convenient space heater.

A woman, copper colored hair in a French twist, business suit, white blouse and pearls, floated into the room like a kindergarten teacher whose charges were all little angels. She requested that we form into a circle. We looked at each other, half-smiling, uncertain.

"Do we have to hold hands," someone joked.

I hoped not. This was already how I imagined the first time at an AA meeting might feel, but without any chairs for support. Due to the room's rectangular shape, the best we could do was to make an oblong. Slow movers distorted our geometry further. Hands clasped professionally in front of her, our employment consultant, a woman short of stature but long on enthusiasm, stepped into the centre of our confusion.

"My name is Angela Fox," she began, re-enforcing what was obvious from the immaculate script on the stiff card of her nametag; the one item not accessorized to her espresso coffee colored jacket and pants.

"Welcome to our networking breakfast. It is so good that so many of you could make it here today."

Distracted for a moment by two late comers she stopped speaking and directed her attention to them.

"Come in, come in," she continued. "As I was saying. So glad so many of you could make it here - on time."

"Oh yes," I thought. "*So little to do now, and so much time to do it is definitely an impediment.*"

But not as much of an obstacle as finding this office block, which was subtly camouflaged by a "Building for Lease" banner, placed where the address and number would have been in a healthier job climate.

I missed the next part of her speech as I mentally turned a map upside down in my mind, trying to figure out just how I managed to end up in the wrong business park on the opposite side of a four-lane highway.

A flipchart page zipped over crisply, bringing my attention back into the room. Written in red marker and in the same flawless script as the name on Angela's badge, were our instructions.

I scanned them to the tune of Julie Andrews' singing, "doh a deer". For those who could not read English well, or perhaps for those like me who lose focus, Angela recited them to us. Bullet point fashion.

"a) Tell us who you are; b) what special value you bring; c) what organizations you want to work for and who you want to meet."

A few of us exchanged mischievous smirks.

Jack Welch? Albert Einstein? Nicole Kidman? Could this be an interview technique or better yet a party game, where one answers the question, "Who would you most like to have dinner with or get into bed if you could?"

Angela cast around hopefully, sniffing the air for the alpha male or female among us.

"Now who is going to be first? Use your 30-second commercial."

"Oh hell," I thought. *"I can only recall my 10-second elevator speech."*

The oblong shuffled its collective feet like a centipede on amphetamines and perhaps, like me, considered why it had not shone its shoes before leaving home.

A savior rushed into the room in the form of a bespectacled man, hair tied back in a ponytail and wearing the sheen of over exertion. *"Unemployed software guy,"* I thought.

'I am... Ernie' stopped abruptly, a confused look of reverence on his face for those still in the downcast attitude of communal prayer. Angela pounced on the hapless latecomer.

"Ernie, why don't you start us – your 30 second commercial?" she said, the words not disturbing her smile. It was not a request.

Ernie stepped back, as if hoping he had blundered into the wrong room. With a look of realization, that unhappily he was in the right place, but at the wrong time, he had no choice. We gave Ernie our fullest attention, devouring every word, which turned out to be a poor substitute for the juggled and abandoned bagel.

Ernie's promo was short, not playing by the full rules of the game by omitting b) and c) in spite of Ms Angela's coaxing. We applauded spontaneously as a group in recognition that Ernie had sacrificed enough credibility and self-confidence for today's cause.

Monologues moved like a Mexican wave around our miniature stadium, giving voice to the articulate and certain, the hopeful and the relieved. I waited my turn, making eye contact with each new speaker, listening intently but absorbing little as I overlaid my words on their standup routine. Some names did register with enough force for me to bookmark a follow-up. I linked names like Boston Beer, RFID, Flextronics, and Bose with faces, clothes and positions in the room. These people became my targets for a variety of reasons. Some even related to future employment opportunities.

My mental motor continued to hum.

"My name is Geoffrey P Moore, and I am an author. No, wrong meeting. My special value is. What is it? It's been two years since my last job. I'd like to meet an expert on poison and Osama. Eh no. No. No."

Then it was my turn.

"My name is Geoff Moore and I am an innovative director of product development, a proven business operations leader on three continents and holder of seven patents. Blah, blah, stumble, blah."

Polite nods followed feigned interest. I could see that those that had gone before were planning their hunting trips; those to come were in dress rehearsal, silently practicing their lines.

We completed our performances to relieved smiles and soundless congratulations and Angela was once again the center of our attention as she pirouetted lightly and beamed at us.

"Right, you have your introductions. Now you are on your own."

We delayed for only a second, but it was too long for our mentor and she threw up both hands as if scattering mourning doves.

"Mingle! Mingle!"

Her trilling made it clear that she was done with us and our conditioning was complete. She left the room and the circle dissolved, understanding that she could do no more for us. She had brought us this far; now we had to go toe to toe, engage, and carve out our own leads.

With a dry throat and churning stomach, I took a deep breath and stepped forward to embark on my search.

Now. Where did I put that coffee and bagel?