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Joan C. Goodrich

Janina C. Latack

Shirley J. Roels

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# Women in the Job Interview

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Joan C. Goodrich  
Detroit, Michigan



Janina C. Latack  
East Lansing, Michigan



Shirley J. Roels  
East Lansing, Michigan

**The authors report on a survey they conducted of employer representatives while all three of them were employed as career counselors at the Career Planning and Placement office of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Even though their survey concentrated on representatives interviewing Liberal Arts and Education students, we think their findings and recommendations apply also to women students majoring in accounting.**

*Joan C. Goodrich is currently an Equal Employment Opportunity Specialist with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in Detroit, Michigan. She received her B.A. from the University of Michigan and plans to earn her M.B.A. at Wayne State University in Detroit.*

*Janina C. Latack is working toward an M.A. in College Student Personnel at Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan, and is employed as a part-time instructor at Lansing Community College. She received her B.A. from Michigan State University and has worked as an administrative assistant at the UCLA Placement and Career Planning Center.*

*Shirley J. Roels is currently studying for an M.A. in College Student Personnel at Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan. She received her B.A. from Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan.*

In response to Federal legislation and the Women's Movement employers have sought to hire more qualified women in recent years. As career counselors employed by Career Planning and Placement

of the University of Michigan we decided to find out if women were interviewing skillfully for their expanding career opportunities.

We were prompted by questions from many of our women students who were uncertain about employment interviewing. In particular many women were concerned about the well-known "double-bind" that women face when it comes to aggressiveness: On the one hand employers are looking for a certain amount of aggressiveness and confidence in an applicant as one indication of probable success on the job; on the other hand we were asked whether aggressive women aren't often perceived as pushy and whether their self-confidence wasn't viewed negatively.

We also realized that women applicants, encouraged by the progress of the Women's Movement in expanding career opportunities, know they want a career but don't know yet how to integrate a career commitment with their plans for a personal life. In addition they were unsure about how to deal with the actual interview situation. Prospective employers may well perceive this uncertainty and wonder whether it reflects a lack of career commitment. However, because of Federal Equal Employment Opportunity legislation they may fear that more probing questions might be discriminatory. As a result communication between the woman interviewee and the recruiter may be hesitant and cause misconceptions on both sides. Since employers are actively seeking qualified women we felt that women must be able to interview success-

fully in order to take advantage of these expanding opportunities.

We therefore embarked on a project to determine the opinion of employers on how women were doing in employment interviews. Specifically we wanted to know: Are there any characteristics unique to women interviewees as a group? And are there any behavioral traits more common to women than men which are considered undesirable in an applicant and thus lower women applicants' chances of being hired?

We had four objectives for the project "Women in the Job Interview:"

1. Obtain feedback on employment interviewing that would help our women students prepare for productive interviews,
2. promote discussion and exchange of ideas between Career Planning and Placement staff and employers concerning opportunities for women,
3. provide assurance to employers that Career Planning and Placement was actively interested in the expansion of women's employment opportunities, and
4. encourage employers to examine their views of women as applicants.

An eight-page, open-ended questionnaire was prepared to elicit employers' comments on various issues relating to women as applicants for employment with particular emphasis on the interview situation. Of the employers who interviewed at Career Planning and Placement during the 1973-74 academic year, 50 em-

ployer representatives elected to participate in the survey.

The employers in the sample represented various segments of industry, business, government, and education. They visited Career Planning and Placement primarily to interview Liberal Arts and Education students. (The University of Michigan operates a decentralized placement system which includes separate placement facilities for the School of Business Administration and the College of Engineering. Only those employers who visited Career Planning and Placement were included in the study, though some of these employers also visited one or both of the other placement offices mentioned.)

### Summary of Findings

Employers' answers about the women job applicants they interviewed illustrate a mixture of changing attitudes and traditional viewpoints toward women — both by the employers and by the women applicants. Employers are making a sincere effort to give women equal consideration and to increase the number of qualified women in their organizations. Women are becoming more aware of career opportunities and of their potential in non-traditional roles. But the process is gradual. Many women still cling to traditional ideas or have not yet begun to understand the difference between a "career" and a "job." Some employers still view women's work roles as supplementary to men's careers or as temporary. The detailed summary of findings which follows reflects these mixed attitudes.

- Employers reported that, while many women are becoming more career oriented, their career goals and plans for the future are more short-term than are men's goals and plans. That is, women think of first jobs rather than career paths and plan in terms of a few years rather than the long term. Many women are willing to make the necessary commitment to work (such as willingness to work overtime), but they draw the line short of the greater commitment required by a career (such as relocation).

- The majority of employers felt that women did not inquire about advancement and related concerns as frequently as men did. One reason cited was that women are often so concerned about finding their initial professional job that they seem unconcerned about the future and often fail to research career progression in any organization. Restrictions imposed by family responsibilities — i.e., the limitations on time and travel — were cited as

reasons for not seeking advancement. Other questions not asked by women are also significant. Women, according to recruiters, do not ask about the need for overtime and relocation any more frequently than men — even though for many women there may be difficulties in this area. The women interviewees only rarely asked about the potential problem of discrimination in advancement and in interpersonal relations. Either many women are still unaware of these potential problems, or they are afraid to raise these issues in a job interview.

- Women are aware of some, but not all, of the important qualities which employers seek in applicants. For example, women seemed to recognize human relations as a marketable and necessary skill for success. Women, however, did not mention organizational/administrative skills and long-term career commitment as qualities which may make them successful in their fields as frequently as did men. Although many employers responded that women were uninformed about careers in general and unsure of their abilities and long-term direction, these problems were encountered just as frequently in male applicants. Ignorance about career development seems, therefore, to reflect lack of career knowledge and self-knowledge by all college students, rather than just women students.

- Marital status plays a crucial role in some areas of the career decision but not in others. Employers mentioned that mobility and advancement into management were often hindered by family concerns. But even though marital status was cited as affecting these areas significantly, it did not seem to have a great impact on women's attitudes toward overtime work. Most of the employers said women responded positively when asked to work extra hours; less than one in ten said women's answers depended on family concerns. Apparently then women are dedicated to working hard and long hours. However, this dedication may be tied to a particular job rather than to a career or to an organization that might require relocation.

- When asked whether there were significant differences between men's and women's conduct in interviews, most employer representatives declared that women are more nervous and sometimes less confident, but that they dress more appropriately and have decidedly better verbal skills than men. They further commented that women tend to be less aggressive (in a positive sense) or show less initiative than men. Interestingly, a minority of employers expressed the contrary

view: women are more at ease and more poised in an interview and have better verbal skills than men.

- Employers' responses reflected not only their perception of women in interviews but also their attitudes towards women as applicants. For example: when asked whether there were any differences between male and female applicants in the areas of commitment to spouse and/or children or other personal commitments outside of work life, all employer representatives — male or female, business or education — reported that women applicants have more difficulty with relocation, child care responsibilities, and juggling a two-career family than do male applicants. Representatives differed, however, in their perception of the nature of the difficulty. Female interviewers viewed it as a management problem between husband and wife, whereas male interviewers thought it was the woman's responsibility to be more committed to home and family than to a career or a job and to consider the husband's career first. In other words, the male interviewers assigned the breadwinning role to the husband rather than to both husband and wife. Business representatives showed that they were more aware of changing attitudes and seemed to have more liberal attitudes themselves toward women in careers than did education recruiters who tended to maintain more of the traditional attitudes towards women in careers.

- All employers tended to view married women as more limited than single women, both in terms of geographical mobility and in the extent of their commitment to a career. They further felt that married women are at a disadvantage particularly if relocation is a necessity. When asked whether women should indicate their marital status as part of the application process, interviewers in general responded positively. This was true even though Equal Employment Opportunity legislation states that marital status may not be a factor in hiring decisions.

- Employers felt that women might have difficulties in certain areas of their organizations. Both education and business representatives mentioned supervision and management areas as well as traditionally male fields, such as manufacturing production, engineering, and the teaching of vocational education subjects as areas of difficulty. International business was also mentioned as a problem area due to lack of acceptance of women in business roles on the part of foreign colleagues. One important difference emerged here between business and education representatives: the business employers suggested that the

main problem for women is lack of peer acceptance by male colleagues, whereas the education employers felt that women were not capable of handling management positions.

• Employers' responses differed somewhat according to the sex of the employer representative. The female representatives in general responded more liberally and tended to see no significant differences between the responses of men and women in a number of areas. This was particularly true in the areas of importance of a career, personal commitments (excluding spouse/children) outside of work life, women's ability to handle administrative/management positions, or women's willingness to work overtime. They also tended to express the difficulties women employees may face in work situations in terms of the need to cope with and work through the problem with co-workers and management, whereas some of the male representatives tended to feel that resolving difficulties was the responsibility of the individual woman.

• Most employers in the study seemed to be sincere in their efforts to afford women equal consideration in the employment interview and the hiring process. Many acknowledged that women's attitudes toward career employment are changing

and commented that they, as employers, have re-evaluated their attitudes towards women as applicants and employees.

• Employers' advice for women entering the job market centered on strategies for interviewing and included such tips as knowing one's own abilities and needs. They advised women to have definite ideas on the kind of position sought, to research the organization prior to the interview, to know where they want to fit into the organization, to get practical experience, and, finally, to go into non-traditional fields such as computer science, accounting, engineering, or management.

### Evaluation

In summary, this survey provided Career Planning and Placement staff with a substantive body of information from employers who are significant to University of Michigan women students. The results of the "Women in the Job Interview" project have been incorporated into the Women's Career Opportunities resource materials of Career Planning and Placement and are available on a browsing basis to all University of Michigan students. In addition, copies of the official report on the project were given to the Women's Studies Department and to other women's groups on the Michigan and other campuses. All employers participating in the study were provided with a copy, as were all employers throughout the US and Canada who requested it.

Career Planning and Placement staff have added to their knowledge about opportunities for women in various organizations, both from the written responses to the questionnaire and from the numerous discussions with employer representatives. The employers were extremely cooperative and welcomed the opportunity to keep the staff informed concerning their progress in the area of equal opportunity for women.

Finally, the questionnaire did encourage employers to look at their views on women in the interview situation and in the entire hiring process. This was summed up by one employer representative who commented: "Your questionnaire caused me to rethink my whole set of attitudes about women as applicants and employees."

### Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study we have the following recommendations:

1. Counselors working with women students should inform them that, although many employers hold positive attitudes to-

wards women and are committed to providing significant career roles for women, many of them still view women applicants in traditional terms. Federal Equal Employment Opportunity legislation and the Women's Movement have had positive effects, but equal opportunity is still far from universal. The career-oriented woman should realize that she may have to face discrimination and may have to convince some employers of her career dedication.

2. Women need help and encouragement to conduct a thorough self-analysis and to make long-range career plans. Since women have not had access to the informal information network about the world of work which has been a part of the male experience, extra efforts are needed to help them become knowledgeable. Further, since long-term career involvement is a recent development for women, counselors should help them think through career and personal life style decisions before they reach the initial employment interview.

3. Placement counselors and others who work with students frequently have the opportunity to interact with employers. These contacts provide a chance to encourage support for expanding women's opportunities and changing traditional attitudes. Our survey, for example, encouraged employers to re-examine their attitudes towards women applicants. Other possibilities include employer participation in career seminars and career days for women students.

4. Special group programs and workshops should be developed to help women prepare for job interviews. The staff at Career Planning and Placement conducts job-finding skills workshops for women which cover the basics of resume writing and interviewing skills, provide tips on how to handle the problem of discrimination in pre-employment inquiries, and help women face the problem of integrating their choice of career with their own personal life style.

In our opinion the findings of this survey can easily be incorporated into individual and group counseling efforts and help to attain the twin goals of expanding women's career opportunities and of helping women to take advantage of them. Yes, we've come a long way, but we still have a long way to go.

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