

The Importance of the Ordinary Instant

Half a decade ago, Joan Didion wrote a book called *The Year of Magical Thinking*. In the very first chapter, she offers this extraordinary passage: “Life changes in the instant. The ordinary instant.” She was talking about momentous changes—life and death events—but I think the wisdom of her words applies to recruiting, as well.

Our recruiting processes are made up of thousands of ordinary instants. They are so ... well, so normal and banal, we don't even think about them. They are simply a part of the passage of our day, and we shoulder past them with hardly a by your leave.

And I believe that's wrong. I think Didion is on to something. We know the critical moments in our lives are important and we pay close attention to them. But, it turns out, even the hum-drum instants, those that seem to shrink in the face of our pressures and urgencies—they too—can shape the outcome of our day. Trivial as they may seem, ordinary instants exert an impact far greater than their modest countenance.

How is that so?

First, there are many more ordinary instants than there are momentous ones. Their sheer volume makes it likely that at least some—and often many more than we think—will influence the course of what we do.

Second, ordinary instants can and often do lull us into a kind of carelessness. We are so busy attending to the really BIG stuff in our day that the little moments gets ignored and can fester into their own version of a really BIG problem.

And third, ordinary instants for one person can be earth-shattering moments for another. We each bring our own sensibilities and perspectives to our experience, so what seems like just another point in time to us can be a profound event—a tipping point, to borrow a phrase—for those we are trying to recruit.

What are these ordinary instants?

They are the tiny intersections we have with candidates as they move through our recruiting processes. They include (but are clearly not limited to):

- The very first thing we show a person when the career area on our Web-site opens;
- The process we require candidates to follow when applying for a posted job;
- The way we greet candidates when beginning a telephone interview;
- The communication we use to schedule a candidate for a face-to-face interview;
- The kind of reception we give candidates when they arrive for their interview;
- The follow-up interaction we have with candidates after their interview.

These are ordinary instants to us, but to candidates they are moments of magic, monotony or misery. And two of those outcomes undermine our success.

What should you do to guard against the negative outcomes?

Audit the ordinary instants in your recruiting process. Put yourself in the shoes of a job seeker—or better yet, talk to those who have actually been through the process—and evaluate the caliber of the ordinary instants you're giving them. Are they carefully designed to optimize the candidate's experience or have they been so ignored and taken for granted that they are actually undermining it?

If a common, everyday moment in time has the power to change life, as Didion suggested, then it can certainly influence the opinions of your candidates. So, transform your ordinary instants into extraordinary passages that create powerfully positive impressions on all those who pass through them. Surprise your candidates by installing magic where everyone else offers the mundane or downright miserable.

Thanks for reading,

Peter

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