

# Demeaning job interviews and bullying bosses are still far too common

February 7 2019, by Stefan Stern

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Credit: Yan Krukau from Pexels

"And is there anything you'd like to ask us?"

It is that dreaded moment near the end of a job [interview](#) when, having

more or less kept your composure for the previous half hour, you are invited to turn the tables and come up with an insightful, pertinent question. In her recent and [now notorious job interview](#), it is possible that Olivia Bland, 22, from Manchester, would have been tempted to ask: "Why are you such an arsehole?"

We should exercise a little caution before condemning Oldham-based Web Applications UK and its chief executive, Craig Dean, out of hand. Only a handful of people were in the room for this interview. The CEO has [apologised publicly](#) for the distress he caused. And the company says it has carried out an investigation into the episode and believes "no bullying or intimidation occurred."

This is not how Bland sees it. In [her account](#), posted online, she says she was criticised for her posture and demeanour over a two-hour session. She says she was asked intrusive questions about her parents' relationship. She says she was told she was an "under-achiever" – although she has a first-class degree and is still only 22 years old. When she entered the room, she says Dean was studying her Spotify playlists, passing comments on her taste in music.

This is not normal. This is not how you should conduct a job interview with anyone, let alone a young graduate just starting out in working life. The company says that this was "a robust, multi-stage interview, which included simulating challenging, work-based scenarios, designed to help identify the best candidate for the role. This particular candidate excelled during the interview and responded positively to the feedback."

Bland says she was almost in tears during this "multi-stage interview," and was indeed crying by the time she got to the bus stop. When she was later offered the job she at first accepted, but on reflection turned it down forcefully, sharing her response on Twitter and setting off the media storm which continues today.

## Serious flaws in the system

Job interviews can be a bit of a lottery at the best of times. Managers still place a great deal of faith in them. But the [evidence suggests](#) they are a seriously flawed way of finding out how a potential employee might perform in the future.

Job interviewers are naturally prone to prejudices and biases, being attracted to "mini-mes" who perhaps remind the interviewer of his or her younger self. An unstructured interview might reveal some worthwhile information, but very well may not. Even in a more structured process extroverts may talk a good game but will never amount to anything more once they are in post. Introverts meanwhile may fail to sell themselves, keeping their true abilities and potential hidden.

Dean, it seems, was trying to simulate a challenging, pressurised working environment. But it sounds like it was highly artificial – not to mention weird. For most jobs this method will not really reveal anything useful. Indeed, it has cost him the services of a great person who thought she wanted to work there.

Too often I've seen companies that say they seek "resilience" and only want the "strong" to survive as a cover for a culture that treats employees badly. The tough and desperate may survive. But a lot of talented people will not stick around.

Job interviewers should be trying to spot potential and adaptability. A candidate is unlikely to be the finished product. New recruits will take many weeks to adjust to a new working environment before they can perform at their best.

I was struck by something the actor and director Samuel West wrote about auditioning people in [a recent piece for The Stage newspaper](#). He

said that when casting a show he did not want "immediate perfection." What he is looking for are "talent, niceness and rightness for the part, in that order ... I can think of nothing worse than casting somebody because they gave a perfect audition, then discovering they're unable to change it in any way."

## **Power imbalance**

Every encounter with a boss, whether in a [job interview](#) or in the ordinary run of things, has the potential to go wrong. This is because of the inevitable power imbalance between the two parties. Hierarchy is not dead. But [jobs](#) can be hard enough without bullying and intimidation. The sort of experience described by Olivia Bland – which the company says it is satisfied did not constitute unfair treatment – is [far too common](#) in workplaces.

Millennials, in particular, are at the rough end of this – even as they struggle to pay off student loans and keep up with high rent payments. These pressures combine to produce what some have labelled "millennial burnout."

Workplaces should be safe and productive – even happy at times. But sometimes it feels as if progress has stalled. It is now 70 years since Arthur Miller wrote his play *Death of a Salesman*, about Willy Loman, the long-serving but failing travelling salesman. In a brutal scene the young company boss – the son of the founder for whom Loman had also worked – dismisses the old man with the glib observation that "business is business." Loman, exhausted, protests: "You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away – a man is not a piece of fruit!"

Bosses need to understand that it's not just them interviewing us – it's a two-way process. Workers who are denied basic dignity will fight back, both offline and online, as Web Applications UK have discovered.

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