

Keep It Simple Stupid: Confessions of a Bad Interviewer

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I was in college, I wrote a 500-page book that went into considerable depth evaluating the incredibly complex race relations that existed within the Detroit metropolitan area at the time. Specifically, I was interested in how African-Americans had, in many cases, avoided integrating into the larger society due to a need to strengthen their own society first. The theory I came up with was quite interesting because I noticed (in an exhaustive multi-year study) that the more religious and ethnic groups had historically come together and developed their own customs, unique beliefs, and so forth, the easier it was for them to integrate into the larger society.

I went so in-depth writing this book that I analyzed how Africans who had been forcibly brought to Italy had assimilated into the country 2,000+ years before then did an exhaustive analysis of how other ethnic groups had assimilated into the various cities and other locations around the United States after immigrating here. It was an exhaustive study that looked at Jewish immigration, Irish migration, and multiple ethnic groups over hundreds of years in both the United States and abroad.

It generally took me about 30 to 45 minutes to explain this during job interviews I had during my senior year of college with investment banks, advertising agencies, and others who were unfortunate enough to bring this up during the job interviews. Because all this was featured so prominently on my résumé people always asked about it and, when they did, out of a sense of enthusiasm and loyalty to the material, I would launch into a long discussion about the material and what it meant. Within five to six minutes, the interviewers would all wear the same expression as they mentally checked out and started thinking about something else. When I was done with my lecture, they would generally thank me, and the interview would be over within a few minutes.

If you're thinking "This is some boring shit!" you are not alone. In fact, I was so interested in this information when I was in college that when I started interviewing, I couldn't figure out why I didn't get further interviews. I never got the jobs I was interviewing for. In fact, it literally bored people to tears. It took me numerous interviews to figure out that talking about that crap in an interview was a huge problem.

One day, I walked into an interview with someone who, at the time, was famous and since has become an even more famous hedge fund manager, Victor Niederhoffer. Even then, this man was probably worth hundreds of millions of dollars and was someone who was regularly in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and other publications. I'm not sure what he was doing interviewing seniors at the University of Chicago, but there he was. We were about two minutes into the interview when he looked up at me and said:

"What is all this crap on your résumé about doing academic research about Detroit?" Niederhoffer had a couple of assistants sitting behind him smiling. A ton of students had tried to get interviews with this guy because working for him even then was considered a ticket to fortune. He was only interviewing 10 students that day and had announced before the interviews even began he was bringing back one or two, a most, for further interviews.

"Don't know ..." I said smiling.

"Well, you better forget about it because I can tell you no one cares. Can you forget about it?"

"Yes," I told him.

"Okay, if you come to work for me, never bring this shit up again. The only thing that matters is what you do with what you know, and no one cares about what you know. Now tell me how many bricks are on that building across the street. That's the only question I have for this interview. If you can do this, you will show me everything you have ever learned about math right now and that's something I can use. I want to know the answer right now, and I do not care about how you reach it."

I looked at the building, did some quick math in my head and then told him.

"Thanks. That's all," he said.

That evening I received a call from his office asking me to come in and interview the next week. The "vibe" that Niederhoffer had sent out to me during the interview was something that really left an impression on me. The feeling he gave me was that "results" and action mattered most.

I didn't get the job when I went back to see Niederhoffer. In an interview that lasted no more than 5 minutes or so, the person who interviewed me told me my résumé "looked too much like I wanted to go to law school" then asked me to leave. I thought it was very funny and even then wasn't upset at the time.

What this Niederhoffer guy taught me, however, was that in an interview, you have to keep things simple. After the interview with Niederhoffer, when people started asking me about all of the academic stuff on my résumé, I would generally keep my answer to less than 20 seconds. People would then continue with more questions, and I would keep these answers short and simple as well. Since I was interviewing with businesses and not academic institutions, I realized the smartest thing I could do was keep things simple, and this always worked.

What does this mean to your job search and life? It means the most important thing you can often do is to keep things absolutely as simple as possible. I'm sure there are a lot of things you have an interest in. This may include a 30-minute explanation as to why you lost your last job, or it may be a long-winded explanation of how you chose where to go to law school or get your MBA.

No one cares.

In fact, the less people know and the less you bore people, the better off you will be.

My grandfather grew up on a farm in rural Indiana. He put himself through school writing for a newspaper called *The*

Michigan Daily. Because he'd grown up on a farm and spent his childhood with people from farms, he had a very easy-going style that enabled him to explain enormously complex ideas to people without very much education. When he got out of college, he ended up getting a job with the local Detroit paper covering World War II from Paris. After the war, he returned to Detroit where he became a very well-known newspaper columnist and had a radio show. He made his entire living off of keeping things simple and the ability to explain complex ideas to people in an easy manner. He wrote in simple language that the farmers he grew up with could understand, and it paid off.

The ability to take complex ideas and explain them to people in a simple and straightforward way is something that's a real skill and something not a lot of people can do. In fact, the ability to simplify ideas, concepts, and various things is one of the greatest skills there is. We all have the tendency to overly complicate our lives in incredible ways. We make our lives and everything we do much more complicated than it really needs to be. This is a huge mistake. When we make things uncomplicated, simple, and easy to understand and digest, we are always better off.

Think about the people who interview you. They have no interest in long-winded stories from you about this or that. All they are interested in is whether or not you are a good fit for the job. If you sit there telling them impossibly long stories, they are going to get bored very quickly and start thinking about something else. It's a well known truth that almost everyone is more interested in themselves than other people. If anything, you should be getting the people who interview you to talk about themselves and not you in interviews. When it comes right down to it, most interviewers want to talk more about themselves than you.

One of my favorite quotes is by P.T. Barnum who said that "No man ever went broke by overestimating the ignorance of the American public." Throughout my career, I have watched people who are not all that intelligent and cannot understand extremely complex ideas make a tremendous amount of money and start giant businesses explaining complex things in a very simple manner that would be viewed as condescending by academics and others in the know. I see this time and time again with books and other things that come out and skyrocket to phenomenal success. Here's the best way to succeed in your job search and interviews: present yourself and what you do in a simple, easy to understand manner.

You need to keep things simple and keeping it simple is something that can give you huge rewards in everything you do. The more simple you keep things, the better off you will be. When searching for a job, this is the best thing you can do. Don't over complicate anything. Just keep it simple.

One of the most interesting pieces I ever read about the power of keeping it simple was from a well-known copywriter who was hired by the company that manufactured the Swiss Army Watch to market this product in the United States. The company had several different styles of the watches and versions for both men and women. The manufacturer was very eager to run an advertisement in major publications, which gave consumers the choice between several different versions of the watch.

The copywriter told the watch company they shouldn't do this. Instead, they should only market one version of the watch and not even market different watches for men and women. They should just try and sell one watch. The copywriter believed that if people had too many different choices to make between the watches, they would never be able to make a decision. Because of this indecision, they wouldn't purchase a watch. However, the manufacturer believed that if they had the ability to choose between several watches, they would be more likely to pick out one they really liked.

Before rolling out a large national advertising campaign, the watch manufacturer agreed to do an A/B test where the manufacturer's preferred ad showing more than one watch was run against an advertisement showing only one watch. The result was that the advertisement showing only one watch, as the copywriter said it would, outperformed the other advertisement with multiple watches dramatically.

Simplicity works in many, many areas. I'm not sure why, but businesses and people who keep things simple are often able to do far, far better at everything they do than those who complicate things. For years, Honda Motor Company only made motorcycles. Then, slowly, they went into making cars. When they made cars for the longest time they only made the Civic and Accord. When others, such as Chrysler, were starting huge crazes with minivans and other sorts of cars, Honda continued manufacturing just a few models of cars such as the Civic, Accord, and Prelude. I remember an interview with the CEO of Honda I read in the mid-1980s where he stated they might never start making minivans and the sorts of automobiles other manufacturers were making because it would make the car company "too complex."

Years later, of course, Honda did start making minivans but the philosophy of the company was to keep things as simple as possible for the longest period of time. The reasoning for this was simple: the more things the business did, the more room there was for error.

This is a philosophy you should carry over to your job search as well. When you concentrate on keeping things simple, you don't give employers long-winded explanations and stories in reference to your various moves and so forth. You concentrate on doing a few things exceptionally well rather than doing many things in an average or below average manner. You keep things simple and this gets the best results.

You need to keep things as simple as possible and not overly complicate things. Simplicity is where you can get the best results.

THE LESSON

Many people make the common mistake of making their lives and work more complicated than they need to be. Interviewers, for example, are interested solely in your fit for the job rather than long-winded stories about you. Present yourself and your skills in a simple, easy to understand manner for best results.