

EPISODE 10**[INTRODUCTION]**

[00:00:07] TF: Thank you for joining us for another episode of Job Search Strategies with Tiffany Franklin. This is Episode 10, and today I'm going to talk about how to find a job with a startup with Tarek Pertew, the Co-founder of Uncubed, which is a candidate engagement and recruiting platform.

Before we begin, I just like to always include a quick tip and that's to use targeted job boards in addition to the big ones such as LinkedIn, Glassdoor, Indeed. Some of these job boards are targeted by industry. For example, with startups, it would be AngelList or VentureLoop among others. If you're looking for nonprofits, try idealist.org. If you're an engineer, try engineerjobs.com. That's engineerjobs.com. It's always good to cast a wide net as you are conducting your job search. Don't forget to network as well.

Let's dive in! If you would like a career strategy session, or you need help with career exploration or your resume, go to tjfcareercoach.com where you can book an appointment with me, or you can find additional episodes of this podcast to help you in your search.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:19] TF: Tarek is the Co-founder of Uncubed, which is a great candidate engagement and recruiting platform that connects early professionals with innovative companies. I had the pleasure of meeting Tarek earlier this summer when I was working at UPEN. We worked on a career fair together and he's also the co-founder of NYC Footy, one of NYC's most prominent adult soccer leagues.

Earlier, Tarek founded MyWorkster, a job fair platform for college alumni, and Referio, which is a referral hiring platform. Tarek is an advisor for his alma mater, the University of Virginia, and GoCoach, a coaching and upskill platform. Previously, Tarek served as a technology advisor for the United Kingdom.

Tarek, welcome to the show. I'm really excited to have you. I enjoyed working with you last summer, and can't wait to hear your advice for those job seekers who are interested in startups.

[00:02:16] TP: You've got it. Thanks for having me. Appreciate it.

[00:02:19] TF: One thing I always love to have everybody do, because that's part of why I went into being a career coach myself, is just the career journey I find fascinating. So, even though I just talked about the highlights, could you kind of walk me through what your journey was?

[00:02:32] TP: Sure, probably one that a lot of students can relate to, or at least they could, sometimes I forget that I graduated college so long ago, back in 2004. But I was a little bit of a jack-of-all trades personality, I wanted to dabble in everything. I think that your schooling, for the most part, I guess, encouraged that type of behavior, right? Because you take all the basic courses and science and math and history and what have you. If you're a pretty dedicated student, as I was, you end up trying to excel in all those courses, whereas some and those that we've seen in certainly modern-day, in the engineering profile, going really narrow and deep on a particular path in computer science or math has a completely different type of course.

For me, I was a little bit of a jack of all trades, and then I went to college not knowing exactly what I wanted to do. That was at the University of Virginia. I ultimately went to the undergrad business school there called McIntyre and that wasn't for any other reason than I thought business degree was probably a little bit all-encompassing in a way that would be most useful to me professionally, because I liked dabbling in so many different things. So, even then, when you're in the undergraduate business school, then the question was, do you graduate with a finance degree, an accounting degree, a marketing degree, an international business degree? I believe they even had negotiations as one.

I ended up doing international business and marketing, and both extremely broad, just ongoing years and years of doing the generalized version of career progression. That's the reason that my first job really made no sense. I ended up getting an internship for a company called the May Company back in 2003. That was a clothing company. They own Lord & Taylor. On the west coast, they own a company called Robinson's Main, the Northeast Filings, some folks will remember those. In the DC area, it was called Hex. I interned there and then I got a full-time offer where I worked for a few years after graduating in New York at Lord & Taylor. I was a clothing buyer there.

[00:04:18] TF: Interesting.

[00:04:19] TP: I was buying women's jackets, then I was buying watches, then I was in the men's department and then, ultimately, my last job was an internet buyer. Even though that was I think, 2006, 2008, Lord & Taylor was very late to the internet game, and that might have played a role in their ultimate demise. But that was my

job there. My first business sort of hatched in the later part of my tenure at Lord & Taylor and I started my first business called MyWorkster with a little bit of overlap with, again, the tail end of my career at Lord & Taylor. That was a professional networking site for students to engage with alumni at their company for career prospects. It ultimately turned into a job fair business of which I left in 2011. For anyone that wants to hear the broader story, you can get it, but just some partner disagreements effectively and it didn't make sense for the two of us to work together anymore, so I left.

Over time, I think that business ultimately closed. I did a company called Referio for a stint, which was in the hiring space that was helping sort of accelerate the referral hiring mechanism in a way that would go beyond employees and get out into the wild a bit. Very fun project, cool technology, low uptake. Still, what we've learned over time is that the HR world is pretty slow to adopt new technologies and that's not a personality thing as much as it is a budget thing. The HR departments don't often get the experimental budgets that marketing and others get.

Sidelined that and eventually launched a media company called Uncubed in 2012, which was a big event platform for tech startups to connect with talent, and then we had a technology blog called Wakefield that supported it. Over time, that media business has now evolved into what is now Uncubed, a decade later, which is a full-on career platform and in-house employer branding studio, where we help companies brand themselves.

Last year, we bought a very well-known career platform in the media space called Mediabistro. It's the preeminent career platform for folks that want jobs in media. Now, that's the full-on story of where I'm at. I'm the Chief Creative Officer here, so I oversee a lot of the creative elements of the business, which includes design, some aspects of the product, our agency as well, our studio, where we do a lot of the branding work for companies on the employee branding side.

That's it. I had a little side hustle, which was just a hobby called NYC Footy, it began as just a fun way to organize soccer games myself and, over time, it has grown significantly. There are now 10,000 players in it. It's one of the largest leagues in the city and despite getting punished by COVID, pretty promising outlook of where the growth is in that world. It's an entirely co-ed Soccer League. So, that's something that's been a nice part of that, that business as well.

[00:06:46] TF: What a fascinating journey. I really appreciate you sharing that. I could just tell this summer working with you how passionate you are about connecting early professionals to these innovative companies. I'm just curious, what got you back in the day when you were working as a buyer interested in the whole hiring and HR aspects of everything?

[00:07:06] TP: I actually – good question – for a very short stint at Lord & Taylor, they moved me into college recruiting. I think my personality catered to it. I did that for maybe six months, really enjoyed it. But that's where I started, I think, learning just how painful it was for me to recruit UVA grads back into the company, it wasn't really a sophisticated platform for it. When I was in school, if you wanted to connect with alumni, you had to take the bus to the Career Service Center, which was in the stadium. Most students they don't know that or understand. Then they had one computer that you had to take like a ticket to wait your turn to use the computer and then you would log in and write alumni contact information on a notecard. This was 2004. I mean, computers did exist.

[00:07:49] TF: Oh, wow.

[00:07:50] TP: So, that to me, was like goodness, gracious. They make it really hard to connect with alumni. It wasn't the school's fault. It's just where the technology was. So, that's what really sparked at least the awareness that there was something wrong, that could use some support, and connecting for career opportunities. Then when I do that stint as a college recruiter, I at least cut my teeth a little bit on the professional side of it. When an individual who, again, I have now separated with as a business partner at the time was a friend of mine had launched this concept of MyWorkster. I sort of gave my two cents it was brand new. I mean, just maybe a couple weeks old, a couple months old, and said, "Look, I think we can turn this into something special based on what I know." That's how we got kicked off with it.

[00:08:28] TF: Well, that's exciting. One thing I think is always fascinating with people's career progression is that sometimes those little six months or one-year things that are just, in the big picture, a tiny part of what you do, but yet they can introduce you to something so pivotal to your future work.

[00:08:44] TP: Yeah, exactly. I mean, one of the pieces of advice that I often give students is: share what you care about with really anyone that you're engaged in a conversation with them. Don't overdo it, of course. Recognize that it is a conversation but, if you have an opportunity to say, "Look, this is the industry that really gets my juices flowing. This is my skill set," what that effectively does is that just means you're planting little

seeds. A lot of seeds won't germinate, but some will. What happens is, you're effectively just broadening the amount of touch points that could ultimately help you find, really, the perfect career.

If you relying entirely on your own self and how you search, that's great, and you should put almost all of that on your own shoulders, but the more people you talk about with your passion, one day, someone's going to say, "You know what, so and so I know has just launched this amazing company in that space, you should take a look at it. If you're interested, let me know and I'll make a connection." That happens all the time. I just got off the phone with a student that I connected with a couple years ago, a UVA student that's graduating this summer and I know a lot about his passion in real estate and so I was able to unlock loads of different company names that he never even heard of before that would be really interesting to consider.

You don't get that way by not chatting with people or networking, if you will. I think networking starts to get a – people don't love using that word anymore. But I suppose that's what it is.

[00:09:57] TF: Interesting. That's great, you're saying that advice you give. What's the best piece of career advice you've ever been given?

[00:10:03] TP: My cofounder, Chris Johnson here at Uncubed, he's our CEO, probably one of the most impactful career lessons I learned was when he told me that I need to work on how I frame my story and – using myself as an example, an then I'll use a possible example that many students listening would be familiar with. MyWorkster, for me, never felt like a successful business, because I wanted it to be this big, scalable, networking platform and it ultimately became a job fair business that ended in a lot of stress because of partner disputes.

I would tell the story of this failure that I had, and yeah, I didn't really work out, I don't really want to talk about it. Chris, was like, "Man, you know how rare it is that someone can actually run a successful business? And you, here, you launched this very successful job fair business, almost by yourself. You have lots of clout with universities, you've helped thousands of people presumably get jobs, the business was continuing to grow until you left." That's part of where I think it ultimately fell apart, but it was a successful business for all intents and purposes. It's probably the original American dream of being able to create a business that sustains your livelihood and that you're in total control of, but I always envisioned it wrong.

When someone said, “Hey, what have you done?” I would say something like, “Oh, you know, I had this failed business. It wasn't really great.” What Chris taught me was, you could say, “Well, I started a very successful job fair business. It was, at the time, one of the largest in the country and work with these great companies. Now, I'm on to my next thing.” How unbelievably different the response you get when you reframe that story and that narrative into a positive. I think a lot of students could learn from that.

For instance, there's a number of students that feel that their GPA is not high enough, they might come up with excuses, “Oh, it's not great. I had a lot on my plate.” But a lot of times people suffer their GPA because they're actually taking on a lot and they're working to get through college, and what have you. That stands out in a very favorable light to employers, so to say, “I did something that I had to do. I worked multiple jobs at university, I paid myself through it. My GPA suffered a little bit as a result but, in the end, I have this great experience where I tried to start a business while I was in school, and maybe it failed, but I was able to cut my teeth on the entrepreneurial journey a bit, and my GPA suffered a little bit, but it was worth the trade off.”

Whatever it might be, you probably have a story as a student on a career journey where you reflect on it negatively. My advice to you, which was given to me, is to sit and think about that story and practice reframing it. Or maybe just ask your mom, “If you told the story about me, how would you tell it?” Then you'll probably get that very positive response. That's the story you should effectively go to market with.

[00:12:45] TF: That's such great advice. What I love about it, too, is whether you're a student, or you've been in the field for 30 years, I feel like when it comes down to it, if you don't believe in yourself, that in an interview that's going to come through. A lot of times when I'm working with clients of all ages, I try and get them to remember five things of which they're really proud of, and talk about that. But you also brought up something too with the entrepreneur thing.

Since my days of working at Vanderbilt Career Center and traveling around, I spoke to so many entrepreneurs, and I can't tell you how many, they were on their fourth company or their fifth one. It seems like once somebody has that founder's mindset, it's like potato chips. They can't have just one. Every one, I feel like there's incremental success.

[00:13:30] TP: Yeah, exactly. I mean, a way of looking at entrepreneurship, and I'm going to be 40 soon, and I started my entrepreneurial journey at 25. You're in a completely different frame of mind then. You have a completely different vision. You're in a rush often. You want to be extremely successful now. I'm not going to

change anyone's ingrained, conditioned mindset that that's what they need, because that's what we've been conditioned to need now. But the true reality is, when you're an entrepreneur, if you really think about building towards something special, it's going to take a very long time and you should be patient through that. Some companies aren't going to work out, but if you take your learnings and apply it to the next one, then the next one stands that much better have a chance of success. That's just everything in life.

Once you get a little older, you start realizing that almost everything you do, upon reflection, you realize how much better you are weeks after getting started, because you've learned – I just bought a house for the very first time. I didn't know anything going into it.

[00:14:27] TF: Congrats.

[00:14:27] TP: Thank you. I didn't know anything going into it. Now, I genuinely feel like I could advise almost anyone on the process, very easily. Because that's the learning curve that I threw myself into. So, now the next one will be that much easier. I'll be that much smarter, I'll save that much more money, whatever it might be and that's the same thing with entrepreneurship.

I often liken it to this concept of remodeling a car. You might build a car and yourself and realize that it's just not what you wanted it to be. It's not as stable. It's not as fast. It's not as fuel efficient. Whatever it might be, so then you start the next car, but are you going to start from scratch? Or are you going to take some of the things from the previous car that actually worked really well? You might have nailed the interior. You might have nailed, I don't know, the paint color, whatever it is, you'll take that and you'll already have that done with the next project. Over time, you can kind of see that you'll assemble the perfect car based on all this experience.

Now, that's easier when you stay in the same domain. Because you build a network in that domain, you build expertise and domain expertise in that domain. And so, if you work there, and then you elevate to a different, whatever it might be with your career, whether an entrepreneur or just in a profession as an employee, or an intrapreneur, you're going to be that much better at it. Now, if you go laterally, and you take on a different type of job, or completely different industry, there's a little bit of a learning curve there, but doesn't mean you're not taking some aspects of what you've done with you. Then you build towards something special that you can look back on. So, here you are, in your early 20s, literally at the peak of your career.

Do you want the peak of your career to be in your early 20s? Or do you want the peak of your career to be effectively at the end of your career, which has amassed everything you've ever learned and you've ever produced into something that's foundationally strong, sustainable, and beneficial to lots of people?

[00:16:06] TF: That makes so much sense. So basically, looking at it like a marathon, where everything is building and you're pacing yourself along the way.

[00:16:13] TP: Yeah, exactly. Or even like climbing a mountain. I like that reference sometimes, because it's pretty much impossible to get to the top of that mountain immediately. It's going to take a lot of coming back down and going up a different way because that path didn't work. Climbing a mountain to me is probably a little bit more in alignment in the way my brain works of what it takes, really.

[00:16:34] TF: Well, when you hear about those people, what is it, overnight success 12 years in the making? How you don't always see all the things they did along the way, you only see it when they really make it. But there was a lot of important steps along the way.

[00:16:48] TP: Yeah, I think you hear often as an entrepreneur, it actually hurt for a while, as a young entrepreneur to hear all the amazing news of these extreme successes. You never hear the news of the struggles, and you rarely hear the news of the failures. But that is true. I mean, even Instagram was not an overnight success. That took complete retooling before it took off and I know it's a little cliché to use a big name like that. Most companies can't relate to that. But even the biggest successes had a journey that was undocumented that was difficult, presumably. Some people, as the world works, just get a golden ticket early and ride it but most have to work for it.

[00:17:22] TF: Now, for those people who maybe aren't ready to start their own company right now, but yet they love that culture of startups, I'd like to kind of pivot a little bit and talk about that. So, what would you say are the biggest differences between finding a job with a startup and a more traditional corporate role?

[00:17:40] TP: I think the more traditional corporate roles have been evolving quite a bit over the past 10 years, when they saw that there was just a lot of growing success and attracting the greatest talent for fast growing technology companies like Facebook, Google, Amazon, Microsoft, Apple, they all attract the best. They had a completely different culture about them, more of an open culture, probably less of a hierarchy, better perks. A more corporate traditional workplace was less transparency, more hierarchical, more, I'd say

just rigidness around what you can wear to work, what's appropriate. Some more of the traditional, probably patriarchal norms that trafficked in the traditional workplace are becoming less relevant. Startups have disrupted that in a big way. Larger companies are learning from that.

I think if you're a student, I would say this: not all startups are the same. Your early stage startups you've never heard of before are going to have a completely different interview process and security profile than an established technology company like Facebook or Google that often gets thrown into the category of startups, if you will. Because startups, for a lot of folks, is actually more of culture than it is how long it's been around.

If you want to work at the Lyfts or the Next Doors or the Betters of the world, you're going to see a much more progressive way of work before the remote world. A lot of these offices were extremely attractive. They were almost like these beautiful hotel lounges, and they catered lunches and breakfast and what have you. You would never see that in your traditional company, which was very cubicle, no meaningful artwork that was interesting outside of your typical you can just buy at posters.com stuff.

It's really just what you're looking for and it also depends on the industry you're looking for. I think if you're extremely attached to FinTech, you'll probably have less – most of the big employers there that hire a ton are a little bit more traditional. Even if there's growing FinTech companies, they don't hire at the same scale that these larger established brands do. I think the other thing that's a big difference is your more established brands are very much conditioned on recruiting out of college and campus, and startups are just not. Some like Google and Facebook and Yahoo and others have gotten there, and very heavily rely on it. But if you think of a lot of these fast-growing technology companies that have just recently went public, you're just not going to see them on campus very heavily.

That makes it much more difficult, less accessible for students and they end up maybe finding their way down the traditional career path because it was harder to find their way to a startup. That said, once you're in the startup, it's not going to be all roses, either. It'll move faster and what have you. But I think a lot of people take their work home and startups and it becomes a very important part of their personal lives more at startups than it would a more established company and so that's something just to think about as well.

[00:20:24] TF: I think you bring up some good points as far as what stage the startup is. So, if you're a job seeker, and you think you want to work at a startup, then really look at it, do you want the one that only has 10

people? Or are you looking for that tech company that's grown bigger, but it's still not Fortune 500? How that experience, it sounds like, the bigger it is, the more it'll be like the more traditional companies.

How long would you say it takes for like a typical job search with say that startup that maybe has 50 people or less?

[00:20:57] TP: I think a company that has 50 people or less probably is recruiting not a lot of students. They're going to be focused most heavily on mid to senior level, for sure, and they might hire junior candidates but those would be mostly in probably sales roles, sales, development representative roles, if you will, or business development associates.

Depending on the type of startup, it might be very engineering heavy, or very sales heavy. So, your Groupon at the time, if people remember Groupon, is extremely sales heavy, not much engineering. If you look at pretty much every other startup, they're probably going to be very engineering heavy and you can often tell by the founders. If the founder is an engineer, it's going to be an engineering first company, and probably at least 30% to 35% of the workforce is going to be engineering. Then the second biggest chunk is going to be sales. Then you start trafficking and marketing and HR and other roles like that. But that's typically what you would see.

In fact, many 50 person companies have one HR person that does all the HR and recruiting, which stinks for them, obviously, but that's –

[00:21:59] TF: That's a lot. But if somebody, whether they're a student or they're a mid-career professional, and they want to find opportunities, they could go into LinkedIn's job board and type startup or maybe they'll go to AngelList, where are other boards or places that people can start to look, if they're truly interested in working for a startup?

[00:22:19] TP: Well, definitely come over to Uncubed. I would join our finalist network, if your students, particularly engineering and data, that's a network of our most accomplished students that we then can hand deliver opportunities that we're very familiar with. So, that probably would be my number one recommendation. AngelList is another good one. There's really not a ton of job boards that kind of nail that. Uncubed is one that's focused on tech and startups. That's why we kind of have that. But same with AngelList. So, those are probably your best.

If I were a student right now, I would rely very heavily on a Google search based on industries that I like or founders that I follow or tools that I use. I would take notes; what are the sites, platforms, products I use the most? Write them down, find out what the company is, do a search. See if they've got some cool stuff, because you are already, by default, a domain expert because you're very familiar with those products. That would probably be my number one suggestion.

Once you're there, once you do a Google search for the products that you use, then you do the same for industries that you're obsessed with. It could be gaming, it could be FinTech, it could be environmental, it could be healthcare, because what happens with Google search often would take you to probably like an AngelList or an Uncubed is that you'll get a list of these companies in this industry love, and you've never heard of them before, and you can start tapping into them and see what opportunities they have. Then you're going to start developing this very well-rounded profile that's going to align with your career goals. Then you have to try to find out, especially if it's a startup, who are the founders? Make sure they don't have a dirty dark history behind them. They raise money with their eyes closed and start another one again, but the culture is not going to change because the founder is not different.

You have to be very mindful that when you're going into a startup, because they're very top down sensitive culturally. But if the founders have a great track record or you follow them on LinkedIn, or Instagram, or Twitter and you get an idea of their personality, and you dig it, that's another great path to probably betting on the right horse for yourself professionally.

[00:24:09] TF: Okay, so say that they have this list of companies that align with their values they're excited about, it seems like they're going in a great direction. If they don't have a job listed, but yet this person is really interested and they think they can add value to that company, how can they reach out to them and make a good impression?

[00:24:29] TP: Not all companies are going to respond the same to this advice, and just be mindful of that. Everyone's a different type of human. But if you were really interested in a job that you think you're a great fit for, and maybe there's a role that does fit but you feel like they're not going to consider you for whatever reasons, or maybe there's not exactly a role in the site. If there's not a role in the site, then what I would do is I would send a note to who would be the hiring manager of the division you're interested in.

Hiring manager is probably going to be an engineering lead. If it's engineering or product lead, if it's product, someone's senior in marketing, if it's marketing and just say, "I'm obsessed with this company, this is my background, I know a ton about the space. It doesn't look like there's an opportunity currently. Are you aware of any opportunities that might be on the horizon so that I can log it and pay close attention to when it surfaces?" You're not always going to hear back. Sometimes you're going to hear back with a short answer. Sometimes you're going to hear back with like, "Hey, awesome. Yeah, I don't know of any, but keep an eye out and if you see one, let me know."

It is basically relationship building. If there is a role out there, and you feel like you're getting lost, same, you can reach out to people that are on the team, not necessarily the hiring manager, but maybe someone in a similar role and say, "Hey, I'm really interested in this one role. I thought I would tap you on the shoulder and learn a little bit more about it. If you have a chance happy to ship you a coffee virtually. I just want to know what it's like working there. Why you decided to work there." Ask them these questions but, oftentimes, I have calls with students all the time and sometimes students, they're not educated on actually how to communicate. So, they come across as painfully phony. They might say, "Hey, oh, gosh, awesome. That's amazing advice. Oh, yes. Great." You can tell they're either schooled the wrong way, you can just tell that it's not authentic. It's them trying to say the right thing so that you think about them when the job's up. But that doesn't help you.

If you really care about a company, write the questions you really want answers to, tap someone on the shoulder and say, "I got to ask you these questions. I'm interested in a job here one day. I hope it'd be a good fit for me. It sounds like a dream job, but I got some questions first. Awesome." After you answer them, "Thank you so much, genuinely for helping me out. If anything surfaces and you remember, keep me in mind. Otherwise, if I see something, if you don't mind, I'd love to tap in the shoulder again." It's much easier said than, when you're in position like I'm in and when you're a student, desperate for a great job. But just keep that in mind. You don't want to come across as overly excited, overly thankful, because in my brain, you're not even taking notes. You're just saying, "I need to talk to someone on the team, because that's a step that I need to check off," and that's not the way you want to approach it, because then, ultimately, that person feels like they might have wasted their time.

Being authentic in your outreach, very important. You can reach out to recruiters also. I'll be honest, I think you're going to get a weaker response from a recruiter, because they're the obvious ones to reach out to and they get overwhelmed. But the benefit is they are in LinkedIn all day long if you reach out to them that way, and they are looking for great talent all the time. If you land there and say, "Hey, look, I love what you're doing. I

know the application process means that some can get lost. I know that I probably could do a better job of telling my story that's just tough to be communicated over a resume. But if you don't mind, I'll just tell you a little bit in a chat window here.” Some recruiters are going to respond to that, but I would say, if you do that homework on which industries you love, what founders that inspire you, what products you use, and you get a bunch of companies and just go down the list and take those steps, you're going to get a decent number at the end that are like, “Wow, I got three or four pretty good prospects here, because I did that work.”

[00:27:42] TF: Now, Tarek, to what extent should they do a little bit of a pitch as well? Should it just be the questions like an informational interview? Or should they kind of weave into this, well, given that I've done almost a few bullet points, but in a real quick, tight story about how they could add value? Or is it not the time for that yet?

[00:28:02] TP: No, I think if you're ever going to reach out to a company with career aspirations, then having a pretty good grasp of how you can add value is a good thing. One thing I tell students to keep in mind is don't assume that they haven't already thought of the hole that you're about to present to them as being plugged by you, the candidate. If you're like, “Look, I know this space really well. I've been thinking a lot about the challenges that you have. This is why I believe I can add value.” People love to hear that. But just be mindful, like, “Look, I'm sure you're already working on solving these problems, I believe I can help you accelerate that solution.”

I think if you take that approach, in that manner, you're going to get a good response, presumably from that company. But yeah, you want to know where you can add value. You want – companies, especially startups, they really want to know that you genuinely understand the company. I'll say one red flag for almost every single startup is if someone applies, and then at any point in time they ask, “So, what exactly do you all do?”

If you are really intrigued by a company and you've tried to figure out what they do and you don't understand, then reach out with those questions like, “Look, I really intrigued by what you're doing. I've done a lot of research. I've read some articles, but I'm having a tough time understanding exactly what the product is,” or something. That's fine. That's just being honest, but you don't want to come across as someone that just didn't take the time to do their homework.

[00:29:24] TF: That makes sense. So now that we know what not to do, what is something that when interviewing candidates in the past, what did someone do that really impressed you the most?

[00:29:34] TP: Well, it was someone that wrote, he's now our COO, but he wrote a letter, effectively a cover letter about what kind of value he could bring to our company. It was long, he wrote it in a voice that was very fun and it was the tone of voice of our, at the time, our daily email. We were like, we don't know if we have a job for this guy, but we've got to interview him. He just seems to understand our business so well. He said something funny like, "I'm like the fun uncle that can bring X or Y to the table." I just remember reading it and thinking, great writer, good sense of humor, coupled with awareness of what we need. Result is, we brought him in for interview, and we didn't know where to put him and then we had a big project planned shortly after that, that ultimately became, at least for us, the point of entry for him. Then he, over time, worked his way into position to be our, what is now, our COO.

[00:30:25] TF: That's so interesting. Well, I love that story. I was reading on the news today, where they were saying cover letters are actually getting, especially with the pandemic, to be more important and more people are reading them. So, that's a good story, I think about how if you can demonstrate how you can add value and show you get the company and their tone, then it's worth the effort to do that.

[00:30:49] TP: Yeah, I think so. I think it's always worth it. I'd say when I interview recruiters, it's probably 50/50 whether or not they're going to actually read the cover letter. I think the most frequent case of when somebody will read it, is if they liked the resume, but they're struggling to like see exactly what is beyond what they liked. They need more context. If there's something where they feel like they need more context, then they'll go to the cover letter and say, "Oh, okay. That explains this gap here. That explains why they're so interested in this role, even though their resume didn't really show it."

If your resume is not fully showing why you'd be a perfect fit for a role, but there's enough teasers there for someone to be interested, then they're probably going to read your cover letter. Then the cover letter is where you can really shine.

[00:31:32] TF: Fantastic. Well, just two more questions. While I have you here, do you have to live in a big metropolitan area or tech center to find roles at startups?

[00:31:43] TP: No, absolutely not. I mean, especially now with COVID. I mean, for anyone that wants to work in technology that didn't want to live in New York City or San Francisco or Chicago or what have you, because right now, there is this remote movement, that's not going to go anywhere, and you probably have an opportunity to live wherever you want and work for these companies. Your biggest focus now should probably

be on schooling yourself on what makes an excellent remote candidate or remote employee. If you can effectively let the world know that you are the perfect candidate as a remote employee, then you're going to be successful and that's going to be very attractive to companies, if someone can just step into a remote role and succeed.

Showing that, right now, is going to be extremely relevant. I personally understand why someone wouldn't want to work in New York, if you didn't want to be here. I got a shelf life myself with this city. But you can be anywhere. I think in a world where everyone's back at the office, it's just a numbers game. Most jobs are going to be in the big cities. So, more opportunities will be in the big cities, but every city has the startup scene and some cities have a major offshoot HQ of a company. So, Google is HQed in the West Coast, but they have an office with 20,000 people in New York. Tumblr, it was a startup out of New York had an offshoot Customer Service Office in Richmond, Virginia. Loads in Texas, loads in Arizona for some reason or not.

You just have to kind of knock on the door. Don't always look for companies that are HQ'd in certain cities. Just look for companies that have offices in different cities. But if you desperately don't want to move to New York or San Francisco and that's like your priority, then don't move there. Just find companies that aren't there. But just rank your priorities. If the most important thing for you is finding the perfect company and the ones that you find are only in those cities, and they're only hiring for their office in those cities, then you're going to probably make the jump, even though you don't want to be there, because the other things are more important to you. But in general, no.

[00:33:35] TF: That makes sense. We're always talking about values for the job seekers. So, my last question, Tarek, how can someone be successful at a startup, especially if they were used to a corporate environment before? What's that special sauce to make a great impression now that you've got the job?

[00:33:49] TP: Asking some questions, and being mindful of who is most likely to answer it. I think you're conditioned in more corporate environment that can be scary for some startups, because you might be used to excellent training and serious management oversight that helps guide you through projects. A lot of startups aren't going to have that, which means can you showcase that you can have good throughput with less management oversight than you might have originally had? So, communicating that. I don't need the type of management layers that exist in traditional work environments to thrive. Show me and prove that to me. Wonderful.

I'd say, similarly, you would want to communicate to them – management is probably the biggest one, but the other ones probably that you can get comfortable delivering products that might not have gone through 10 or 11 checks and balances and what have you. This might get into the wild and we find out later that we made a mistake. You have to show that you're comfortable with that. If you're very conditioned in a world of like loads of red tape, can you communicate that you can actually push a product through without being paralyzed, a fear that it's not going through the different layers that it normally went to in a traditional environment?

[00:34:57] TF: Sounds like lots of adaptability.

[00:34:59] TP: Be adaptable, and ask questions, and find the people early on that are very obviously the folks that are interested in sharing knowledge. Because the other thing at startups and a lot of companies is people are like very much to do list soldiers, right? Plowing through the to do list, but if you come in and ask a bunch of questions, you're like, slowing down my ability to do that. Those aren't the people who want to spend a ton of time with. Every company has them. But who are the people that just love being that guy, that friendly individual that's going to be there and help you and get as much intel off of them as possible?

[00:35:30] TF: It's great to hear. For the next generation that are getting into this. What are some of your things that you advise about. So, thank you. Are there any other final thoughts you want to give the audience?

[00:35:42] TP: If you go to Uncubed, and I've done a video on how to get a job at a startup, you can watch that and you'll have a little bit more intel. But talk to people, ask questions, this is your career. Just keep in mind, you'll spend more time doing this than anything else in your life. If you think about the amount of time you might have researched a product, or a game, often for a lot of people, that's more research than people do on their own career. Do the search yourself. Find the best path towards where you want to be in your career and spend a ton of time working on that. Inputs tend to equal output. So, if you put a lot of input, you're going to get the best output in your career. If you just say, "I just need a job that pays." Then you're going to get what you put in.

[00:36:20] TF: Well, thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

[00:36:23] TP: You got it.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:36:24] TF: Thank you so much. I really appreciate you and hope you will join us for the next episode. If you would like a career strategy session, or you need help with career exploration, or your resume, go to tjfcareercoach.com, where you can book an appointment with me, or you can find additional episodes of this podcast to help you in your search.

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