

Tear Your Label, Define Your Name

Standing in the shadow of a 420-meter high-rise building, I felt like I was under 420-meter crap. It was the fourth time that I failed in job interviews. I wanted to be a management consultant, however, I was considered unfit in this position.

“You are a nice person but you are too shy to connect with other people quickly.”

“I am afraid you are socially incapable.”

“I would expect the candidate to be more open and proactive in building relationship.”

“.....”

Above are the excerpts of feedback I got from the interviewers. Yes, indeed am I an introvert person, who is hesitant to talk with strangers and does not quickly mingle with other people. Introversion seemed to be an annoying label stick to my forehead and prevented me from being a sociable, easy-going and humorous management consultant. After the fourth trial, I decided to obey to my label and got myself another job of data analysis. This position did not require much interpersonal skill. I would be sitting comfortably in the cubicle and dealing with spreadsheet silently.

Was I comfortable?

No, of course not.

A teeny tiny voice was always haunting me, “girl, you are not happy at all”.

“I am not doing what I am passionate about. How am I supposed to be happy?” I shouted back to the voice in my head.

“You earn a decent salary. You can buy yourself beautiful clothes, expensive cosmetics and sometimes oversea trips. What else are you looking for?” The little voice talked calmly and sensibly, as if my friends and my parents would have talked to me.

“Money is not everything”, I fought back, “my current job will not get me to the place I want to be in my career”.

“However, you are introvert. You are not capable of going to the place you want to go”.

Truth is always harsh.

I shut up, in the imaginary talk.

I gave up, in the real-living life.

Young or old, women or men, many of us are struggling in the dilemma of “what I can do” and “what I want to do”. Doing a job that is not related to us is the first layer of sufferings. Knowing where our aspiration lies but not being offered an opportunity to realize it is the second layer. Even worse, forty years later on the day of retirement, we finally realize that we could have achieved our aspirations but we bow to the label imposed on us by other people and not dare to define our own name. This is the third layer of sufferings.

How does that happen?

Implanted in human nature, labeling and being labeled is too common to be aware of in our daily life. For example, Chinese are labeled as mathematic nerd, Americans as representatives for individualism and Germans as addicts of rules and regulations. Categorical labeling is a short cut for us to memorize things and at the same time works as an easy way to deal with people in complex situations.

When it comes to the talent recruitment in business world, hiring managers cannot help labeling candidates based on their previous experience and knowledge. It does not matter how sophisticated managers are in their jobs because people willingly accept statement in accordance with their own cognition rather than the evidence of validity. Even before knowing it, they are engaged in a name-calling game - talkative IT engineer is not capable of elegant coding; silent IT engineer is not the right person for client facing jobs. In the first 20 seconds of interview, they already make up their mind about the candidates sitting in front of them. The rest 30-minute is only used to confirm what they believe and ignore what they do not believe.

After understanding why labeling happens, we begin to wonder how labeling could be detrimental to us.

First of all, labeling harms our ability to identify the truths from biases, ungrounded assumptions and rumors. Here is an example. “Wendy’s face turns red when she talks with strangers” is a description based on facts; “Wendy is a shy person” is a label based on judgment. In the latter case, we tend to empty the word of meaning. What does “shy” mean? Does it mean that Wendy is generally uncomfortable with unknown people? Or does it mean that Wendy does not talk much on one specific day? How could we describe a

person with a single word without knowing the context of using this word? After all, people are complex, multidimensional and changing all the time.

Secondly, since labels inaccurately shape our perception of people, they restrict our potential of being different and being better. We take it for granted that Chinese can be mathematician but not a marketing manager; American can be a good public speaker but not able to handle advanced calculations. German people are good engineers but poor salesman. With these notions, we might give less career opportunities to certain group of people and more to the opposite group. However, the opportunity allocation does not necessarily reflect candidates' true interests or capabilities. It happens quite often in the recruitment process.

After talking with many hiring managers, I heard a lot of unsuccessful or surprising stories.

"I thought she is smart but in reality she is slow and less responsive to the changing requests. She showed 120% of best of herself in the interview, but..." said a tax manager of my employer.

"I am not optimistic about his performance at first but his deliverables are always beyond my expectation. I am glad that I recruited him even though I had much concern at beginning," a friend of mine mentioned me her hiring experience.

Our first impression is not always right. The label based on that is ungrounded.

Thirdly, labeling itself is not as frightening as our obedience to labels. In my case, I could be more sociable to achieve my goal of being a management consultant. However, my own label trapped me and I did not even consider tearing it. Have I prepared the lines before starting a conversation with new clients? Have I read enough anecdotes so that I could easily use them to break the ice? Am I knowledgeable enough to catch up with topics that the other person throws to me?

Yes, I am introvert. However, I should not be labeled as introvert person. There are so many things I can do to define my own name.

After 2.5 years of working as data analyst, I decided to quit. I name myself as a management consultant. In order to deserve that name, I prepared myself by reading business cases, by business education and by networking with students, alumni and companies. Introversion is still a label stick to my

forehead but it is never a stumbling stone on the way to my dream. Finally, I got a job in the consulting firm.

I am glad that I realized the problem in an early stage and I prepared myself to the challenges in the new role. Self-reflection and efforts are indispensable from realizing our careers. However, on the other hand, how could companies do to avoid human tendency of labeling and free up the full human potential?

One thing is to make the interview process comprehensive and structured. With comprehensive interview guidances and questions, the hiring manager shall not forget to look at all aspects of candidates and make a sound decision accordingly. A structured interview process could also help hiring managers to evaluate candidates based on the same criteria rather than gut feeling.

Employee diversity should be encouraged in the working environment as well. Only when we have different people working with us, we begin to understand that people are different and then we challenge our assumptions about the labels we put on ourselves or on other people. Studying MBA in an international business school highlights my experience about this particular point. Working with 64 students from 37 nationalities and 10+ industries, I firmly believe that everyone can do everything. In fact, with after level of related training and exposure, most people could master financial analysis, operational design or general management. The human potential is beyond expectation. Considering that, corporates should open themselves to different sources of candidates.

Also, it is suggested for companies to help employees to build their own name. Generally speaking, people are reluctant to step out of the comfort zone even though they have higher or different aspirations. Companies, especially the direct supervisor, should get to know “what their employees what to do” and “how the organization could help to achieve employees’ goals”. It could be a sales representative who wants to be a sales director, or a software developer who wants to be an IT consultant. It is not only for the benefits of employees but also for the benefits of business sustainability. Building a passionate team with stronger capabilities is always the key to the business success.

How could technology play a role in tearing our labels and building our own name? Technology takes over the repetitive work from human beings, for example, line workers, sewers, cashiers and so on. At the same time, it has

created even more interesting jobs, for example, IT developers, online marketers, blog writers, etc. Technology allows us to be less manual but more innovative and it frees up our brainpower.

Technology also brings more opportunities to people who dare to dream and define their own destiny. A significant example is entrepreneurship. Ma Yun, the CEO of Alibaba Limited Company, started his own business empire by selling products on a website. Now Alibaba is the leading online retailer in China. The sales revenue in one single day could reach 100 billion Chinese dollars. It is hard to believe how he could make the huge success without the introduction of Internet.

The world is changing rapidly. What we are taught might not be true any more and what we believe might not be feasible any longer. The way to the human freedom and prosperity is to challenge the stereotype, tear the label and define our own name. Companies also play an important role in achieving human and social success. An environment that respects and encourages individual difference and human diversification will help people to be different and better. At the same time, technology offers our career with more opportunities. The only thing preventing us from prosperous is our mindset and imagination.

Working in a 420-meter high-rise building now, I feel like I was under 420-meter water pressure. No matter how hard the job is, I am happy because I am doing what I want to do and I see my growth from a shy person to a sociable professional. I still prefer to spend spare time with myself but my name in the working environment is consultant not introversion.