



CHAPTER TWO

Make No Assumptions: Open Those Doors

Your Goal:
Recognize the negative consequences of making assumptions and stop making them.

THIS IS THE BEST advice I or anyone can offer you: Don't make assumptions—not ever—not about your career goals and objectives, and not about anything else in your life. As author Erica Jong observed, we make our own prisons. I'm convinced we build them chiefly out of the assumptions we make, assumptions that almost always impede our progress toward the most favorable outcomes in our lives.

During the time I headed a \$60-million education program for the National Cancer Institute at the National Institutes of Health, my colleagues and I hoped to enlist the assistance of renowned medical researcher Jonas Salk, who had developed the polio vaccine in 1954 and saved hundreds of thousands of people from this crippling disease. The medical

oncologists with whom I worked had mailed several letters to Dr. Salk at the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California, requesting an initial meeting, but they hadn't yet received a reply. While I was attending a professional meeting in nearby San Diego, I decided to attempt a different strategy. Although I understood that directly telephoning his office to ask for an appointment was perhaps a bit forward, it also certainly seemed worth the risk—I couldn't fail to reach Dr. Salk any more completely than my colleagues already had, after all. And because I refused to assume that I *couldn't* make an appointment with Jonas Salk by phone, I tried—and I succeeded. Dr. Salk's assistant kindly listened to my request, then scheduled an appointment. A few days later, Dr. Salk graciously met with me for more than an hour.

At one point during our time together, Dr. Salk suddenly and without a word of explanation left the room. Was the meeting over? Should I leave? I wondered. But I opted instead to make *no assumptions* about what his disappearance meant and simply waited to see what would happen next. After several minutes, he returned with a number of documents cradled in his arm, publications authored by him that he hoped would assist and encourage us in our research program. As I departed, he escorted me to the door and blew me a kiss goodbye. How charming he was! Back in Washington, my colleagues were astounded by my chutzpah and delighted by my success—an outcome I simply never assumed I couldn't accomplish.



Let me introduce a candidate I'll call Colin, a remarkable man whom I recently had the pleasure to assist in finding and securing a position for which he is very well qualified, one in which his talents are enormously appreciated by his prestigious employer, and the kind of mid-career advancement that offers him both satisfaction and security—a Right Fit for

Colin and his new employer in every way.

Colin, in his early forties, is a native of Ireland; he was lured to the United States fifteen years ago by one of the country's leading cancer-research hospitals to direct its clinical information systems. During that decade and a half, he developed a well-deserved reputation as one of the world's leaders in a field that applies advanced information technology to cutting-edge medical research. Colin's colleagues praised his myriad skills and loved working alongside him; he remained happy in his position. However, he was increasingly aware that he had accomplished the goals he had set for himself there, and he ultimately determined it was time for a new challenge in a new city, in a place where he and his family could create the kind of home they had dreamed of for so long. Canada appealed to them. They loved the countryside and were eager to escape from a large metropolis where they couldn't afford to buy a home.

When Colin discovered that a Canadian research hospital—one with an international reputation comparable to that of his current employer—had begun to advertise for a new director of clinical information systems, he was intrigued, then excited, then quickly disappointed. The published position description stated that the employer was interested only in candidates who possessed advanced degrees, preferably a PhD, while Colin had risen to the top of his field with only a BA. When he and I first spoke, Colin remained interested in the position, but he didn't think he should bother to apply. He could read, after all, and the employer wanted to hire someone with a PhD. I assured Colin that I could read as well, but I also explained that if we were to work together successfully, he would have to adopt and take completely to heart the first rule of my Right Fit Method: *Don't make assumptions*.

Certainly, Colin and the position that intrigued him would have to prove to be the Right Fit. We wouldn't know whether they were until we had created a comprehensive blueprint for the position and compared Colin's collective skills, training,

and experience to it. But what we *wouldn't* do as we began the blueprint process was assume that Colin was the wrong fit simply because he lacked one of the qualifications the employer deemed important. This was a career door Colin couldn't possibly open if he assumed from the outset that it was a door he wouldn't be permitted to walk through. We had just begun determining whether Colin was well matched to this particular position—and we were oceans away from winning him an interview or an offer—but before we could begin the journey, it was essential that Colin not paralyze himself or the process with too-early estimations about what was possible and what was not.



During the course of my search and placement career, I've discovered that candidates for professional positions commonly make five assumptions that lead to detrimental, if not disastrous, career decisions, assumptions that limit their vision and ultimately prevent them from fulfilling their dreams. As I've already made clear, *any* assumption is a perilous one, but these five are particularly dangerous. Sadly, I find that people make these assumptions over and over again.

1. *Employees assume that, if given the option by their employer, it's wiser for them to accept downsizing—in other words, no job at all—than to accept a lesser position within the company.*

But actually: Accepting downsizing is your *last* alternative, not your first, unless you're a CEO or a very high-level corporate executive. And even at the top rungs of the ladder, it's often better to use some ingenuity to restructure your role in the company rather than find yourself out on the street. Remember, future employers aren't going to view you as “downsized” or “in transition.” To them, you are simply unemployed. When you

are employed, you operate from strength and can negotiate your options accordingly. But when you're unemployed, your strengths are stripped away, and whether you deserve it or not, you look far too much like a failure for comfort. It isn't fair, but it's true.

2. People searching for employment, regardless of their current employment status, assume that search firms are quite careful about protecting their confidentiality.

But actually: When you give a search firm your résumé, it's critically important for you to find out what that firm plans to do with it. In certain parts of the country, it's common practice for search firms to broadcast, via e-mail or fax, their candidates' résumés to companies and organizations. But if you or another search firm happens to contact those same employers, their response—count on it—will be “no interest.” The search firm is neither your mother nor your father, and ultimately only you can protect yourself. Remember, your résumé is a precious illustration of your background, experience, and accomplishments. You *must* maintain its value, value that's lost forever when it becomes nothing more than a search firm's unwelcome spam. And if your résumé is reduced to spam, who will view *you* as anything other than spam?

3. Candidates assume that by the time an open position is posted, companies and organizations have a clear and well-defined understanding of the opening they seek to fill.

But actually: Clearly defining a position and who is right for it takes time and creativity. Far too often, employers have only the dimmest sense of the parameters of a position they seek to fill or the kind of candidate they believe will be the Right Fit for the situation. In fact, that's often the fundamental reason why they choose to examine—and even interview—a long parade of candidates; it's only as the parade passes by that

they clarify for themselves what the position will entail and what kind of person can best fill it.

4. Individuals in search of a perfect opportunity assume their odds of finding it are greatly improved when they broadcast their résumés as widely as they can, which, in this remarkable information age, means all around the globe.

But actually: Broadcasting your desire to change positions is unwise for several reasons. If your employer learns of your actions, he or she may well summarily determine that you're disloyal and either reprimand you or ultimately send you packing. If you use company e-mail to broadcast your résumé, you can be fired on the spot. And perhaps most fundamentally, remember that if you broadcast your availability from Burbank to Bombay, you'll appear desperate or mediocre or desperately mediocre, and who will want to hire you in that case? Employers like to believe in every instance that they've captured the very top talent. But are the most talented people out there really sending their résumés out so widely and distantly that they seem to be searching for life on other planets?

5. People who have set their sights on a particular position assume it's not appropriate to telephone company management to discuss the opening and their active interest in it.

But actually: Calling high-level management personnel without an appointment can, in point of fact, be very effective and may well be the only way you can reach them, interact with them, and influence them to your benefit. Try calling early in the day or late in the day to catch them personally, instead of their assistants. If you know how to frame your call and what to say, briefly, you just might speak with a decision maker who'll agree to meet with you in person to discuss an open position—long before your interview. I'll address this often-valuable

opportunity later in the book. Remember that I successfully arranged a meeting with the legendary Jonas Salk simply by calling and proposing one. You can do it, too!



Faulty Assumptions Employers Often Make

The research hospital struggled, without success, for nearly a year to find the “best” person for the clinical information system position, which Colin wanted with all his heart. Richard Jameson, who headed the hospital’s human resources department, had advertised widely, attracted great interest in the position, and by now had read hundreds of résumés, conducted dozens of telephone interviews, and invited numerous candidates to interview in person, all without success. It was critical to get this vitally important position filled as soon as possible, yet somehow, every time she, Jenna Phillips—the hospital’s vice president for clinical research—and other key staff anxiously examined the leading candidates, the “best” of the large group either had just accepted a position elsewhere, was no longer interested, or failed to impress in a second interview.

In determining the necessary qualifications for the position, Richard and Jenna had made a costly assumption—one that had kept many potentially compelling candidates at bay. Someone capable of leading the institution’s cutting-edge clinical information-systems program necessarily would have an impressive academic background, they had assumed. Yet both professionals failed to consider that the IT world has evolved so dramatically over the past twenty years that its best and brightest new talent emerged not from

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long-established university programs but rather from tiny entrepreneurial start-ups with curious names like Oracle, Yahoo!, Google, and a hundred others. Many of the finest information-systems experts in the United States didn't have bachelor's degrees, let alone PhDs, and the assumption that the "best" candidate for the hospital's position would have wallpapered his office with degrees was entirely at odds with industry realities.

Assumptions employers make are every bit as detrimental to finding the Right Fit as the counterproductive assumptions of candidates. Thousands of managers like Richard and Jenna mistakenly assume that they should search the world for the "best" candidate. They assume that a search for the best will consume at least half a year, even a whole year; finding the best can be a lot like searching for a peanut in a super-sized tub of popcorn, Richard liked to say. Managers who make his mistake assume a generalized, boilerplate position description is all they need to envision, produce, and post in order for hundreds of stellar résumés to begin showing up in the in-boxes.

Yet each of those assumptions is mistaken; each works *against* a successful hire, rather than for it. In reality, companies and organizations who don't carefully analyze their needs *before* they post a position opening, creating a position-specific blueprint of their needs and the specs of the candidate they desire, are crippling the process from the outset. And those who believe it's best to leave the position description vague so they can mold it to a spectacular candidate are limiting their organization's vision and risking the hiring of a very wrong fit, albeit someone with eye-catching credentials. And by taking months and months to watch a battalion of candidates march by, trying to decide who is "best," they

squander time and human resources that could have been far better spent determining in detail what the company’s true needs are and the ideal candidate to meet them.

Without the implementation of the Right Fit Method, absent a shift of the process from searching for the “best” candidate to carefully evaluating their hospital’s true needs, Richard and Jenna never would have given Colin—whom everyone on the hospital’s clinical research team is now thrilled to have among them—a second look, not because he didn’t deserve one, but because their series of ruinous assumptions were leading their search far away from the Right Fit.

What assumptions do you make?

Let’s find out. You’re working. It’s lunchtime and you need a break. You decide that instead of going out, you will stay at your desk and play on your computer.

Next to each statement, check TRUE or FALSE. I can:

	TRUE	FALSE
■ Send personal e-mails.	_____	_____
■ Read personal e-mails.	_____	_____
■ Play solitaire.	_____	_____
■ Delete e-mails that I don’t want anyone to read.	_____	_____
■ Search Monster and other websites to look for a new opportunity.	_____	_____
■ Send my résumé to other employers.	_____	_____
■ Shop for food.	_____	_____
■ Buy my vacation airline tickets.	_____	_____
■ Send jokes to my friends.	_____	_____
■ Do what I want with my e-mail during lunch.	_____	_____

What assumptions did *you* make?

Let's find out. Record your Assumptions Quotient (AQ) here: _____

Marked all 10 questions false.

You did it! 100%

Marked 6 questions false.

Walking on eggshells. 60%

Marked 0 questions false.

Leave before you are fired. 0%



Employer Management of Employee E-mail and Internet

Let's set the record straight. No one is above firing! Many companies require new employees to sign a document that delineates the proper and improper use of their terminals. If you are asked to sign such a document, it is highly likely that people have been hired to observe your behavior on the computer. I'm amazed when I speak to employee groups that almost everyone assumes that work computers can be used for personal needs. They also assume that if the e-mails are deleted, they are gone. Be careful. Although they appear to be deleted, those messages remain on the company's server. Your employer can view your deleted e-mails, even months after you sent them. The bottom line is that you cannot assume that you have any privacy on your office computer.

***Remember your AQ!
If you scored below 100 percent,
you are in a danger zone at work.
Make no more assumptions.***

In order to use my Right Fit Method, it is crucial that you learn to speak up to get what you want and need. To do this, you cannot make any assumptions about what is possible and not possible. To illustrate this point, let me relate one of my favorite stories, one I call “The Airline Produced a Plane.”

I was traveling from New York City to Toledo, Ohio, on a business trip. It was snowing. I missed my connecting flight. No problem, I thought. I’ll simply ask the airline for another plane. I asked, and, sure enough, the airline produced a plane! To be honest, it was a small plane, but my fellow passengers and I were delighted, and I arrived on time for my meeting. If I had assumed that procuring a second plane was impossible, I would have spent the whole night in the airport and missed my morning meeting.

Why do we make assumptions? It’s an automatic response. You’ve trained yourself to do so. But now, I want you to practice *not* making assumptions. To do this, you need to become aware how frequently you make assumptions, and then stop making them.

After you read the example below, turn to your Activities Journal on page 37 and record *one* assumption a day for seven days that led you to behave inappropriately and resulted in negative consequences. Next to it, record the inappropriate behavior and its consequences. Select your assumptions from your personal or professional life or both.

Here’s an example of an assumption gone terribly awry: After an interview, a candidate for a new position assumed that the employer was not interested in her because many

months elapsed and the employer communicated nothing. She ultimately accepted another position that she did not particularly want, only to find out later that the first opportunity, which was highly desirable, was not “dead.” After five months, the “dead” employer called with an attractive offer, but the candidate believed she shouldn’t abandon her new employer, so she lost a very desirable position because of her original—and erroneous—assumption.

At this time, I want you to learn how to stop making automatic assumptions.

Week 1

For a week, keep a diary of an assumption you make each day and the inappropriate behavior and consequences it spawns.

Week 2

Record nothing.

Week 3

Repeat Week 1, if you haven’t kicked the assumption habit yet. As you kick the habit, your stress level will go down. I promise.

As an aid to help you remember not to make automatic assumptions, remember this:



Trigger Tip
The Airline Produced a Plane

Let’s fly!

ACTIVITIES JOURNAL	
Week 1	
Record an assumption a day.	Record the inappropriate behavior.
	Record the negative consequences.
Monday	
Tuesday	
Wednesday	
Thursday	
Friday	
Saturday	
Sunday	

ACTIVITIES JOURNAL	
Week 3 (Remember, you do not record Week 2.)	
Record an assumption a day.	Record the inappropriate behavior.
	Record the negative consequences.
Monday	
Tuesday	
Wednesday	
Thursday	
Friday	
Saturday	
Sunday	