Observations from a Lifetime of Interviewing

Jean J. Boddewyn

Observation 1: The screening of researchers requesting interviews is sometimes more systematic than it appears. Most large firms subscribe to ‘clipping’ services about everything said about them in the press. Although I was on very good terms with a multinational parent company, I was once turned down for a further set of interviews overseas because a press report had given the impression that I was critical of that firm when, in fact, I had cited its name in connection with more general issues shared by many MNEs. In other words, be careful about what you say to the press!

Observation 2: I conducted many interviews in the United States and abroad during the 1970s when MNEs felt prosperous and were eager to take you out to copious lunches with cocktails, wine, liqueur and cigars! My point is that these ‘hedonistic’ circumstances generated greater candour after a few drinks – compared to sipping a Perrier and not smoking (another relaxant). Also, if you could schedule an interview for late afternoon (up to 6 pm in France), you would occasionally find a more relaxed respondent sometimes willing to cry on your shoulder. In other words, respondents are alert and brisk early in the day when they want to get over your interview which they may regret having granted; while, at the end of the day, the job is over and they can be more relaxed and open.

Observation 3: It is difficult to get meaningful interviews at corporate headquarters, but expatriate managers abroad are more open and interested – especially if you interviewed their counterparts in other subsidiaries of the MNE and are willing to share notes in a confidential manner. A good approach is to throw a dilemma rather than a straight question at them – for example: ‘I have heard different answers ... I cannot understand the answer someone else gave me ... What do you think they meant?’.