What Are You Hiring Your Job to Do?

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Nothing should give us more confidence in our beliefs than when others who have delved more deeply and interrogated wider evidence come to similar conclusions. One of the questions we've consistently asked at Incandescent is, "*What are you hiring your job to do*?" Ethan Bernstein's new book *Job Moves*, with co-authors Michael Horn and Bob Moesta, brings out the power of this question more fully than I'd ever seen before and teaches a practical set of methods for how to hire our jobs wisely and well.

Ethan Bernstein is one of the deepest thinkers I know about how organizations work and how organizations can both enable and impede human flourishing. We've been friends and collaborators for many years, including co-authoring the HBR article, "Beyond the Holacracy Hype," which aimed to thread the needle between the usual visionaries vs. skeptics debates about self-management in organizations, and a companion piece: "Why Is Micromanagement So Infectious?" One of Ethan's strengths is his combination of intellectual humility and intellectual discipline. He reflected deeply on whether the advice he was giving people about their careers was in fact well designed to help them meet their deepest needs. That inquiry led to Ethan's course at Harvard Business School *Developing Yourself as a Leader* and to this book.

Before sharing how the book has deepened my thinking on this topic, let me share the three most significant reasons we've been asking this question at Incandescent for many years:

1. We need to hire people who have the independence of mind to be effective advisors to our clients and dynamic collaborators with brilliant and often fiercely opinionated colleagues. This requires the capacity to be what Bob Kegan and Lisa Lahey have termed "self-authoring": the ability to set one's own compass and navigate choices about beliefs, values, and relationships with others on that firm basis. When a candidate is able to engage in a real dialogue about what they are seeking in a role, conceptualizing that independently of this job that we're discussing, and explore how this job fits in some ways and perhaps in other ways doesn't quite

fit that "hiring spec," that demonstrates their capacity to author their own work.
2. We strive to be an organization in which people develop themselves purposefully (this piece What Does "Becoming More Senior" Really Mean?, explores this in more depth). We're interested in beginning a dialogue about purposeful development from the very beginning of our hiring process, setting the tone for the importance of that inquiry beginning on day one of the job and continuing through all the years after. Many of the people who have been a part of the team are still in conversation with us about these questions long after they've departed Incandescent. There are many valid things someone might hire their job to do. We at Incandescent have a particular interest in people who want to hire their job to develop a greater capacity for thought and action, and once we understand what that means for them, we can direct our assessment accordingly and self-assess whether we can, in fact, help them achieve what matters to them.
3. We value and expect open dialogue among our team regarding career aspirations beyond as well as within the firm (more on this in How to Retain Talent – And How to Lose People the Right Way). What people want to hire their jobs to do will evolve as their careers and their lives unfold. Our team members benefit from being able to discuss this openly: we meet them where they are as fully as we can — or as fully as it makes business sense to do — in finding ways to give them the experiences they value having, and we support their external explorations with connections and advice. We, as a firm, benefit from the ability to think proactively about how to retain high performers who want something different from what they're getting now and from having greater visibility into the likelihood that we'll lose people, which in turn grants us the opportunity to plan ahead. Starting this conversation during the hiring process makes it easier and more natural to continue the conversation on the job.

For all the thought and energy I've devoted over the years to the question, "*What are you hiring your job to do?*", Ethan's book meaningfully deepened my own perspective on the question.

In *Job Moves*, Ethan and his co-authors teach how to use this question to cast backwards, seeking to understand what we hired past jobs to do and interrogating our experience through that lens. For instance:

> This is what we did with Clara. We didn't focus yet on the boredom she was experiencing in her current job or what she was considering next. Instead, we talked about her past move from expat lab manager in Ireland to physical therapy assistant in Colorado. When we started the interview, Clara already knew that she had been motivated to move back to the United States and that she had tired of some of the day-to-day work in Ireland. But until we drilled down, what was less clear to her was that her dissatisfaction stemmed partly from a lack of opportunities to continue learning and growing. After our interview, she came to see her move to Colorado as a "jobcation" – a less onerous stint that allowed her to have more time to explore her interests outside of work.

In an extended exploration of this example, *Job Moves* shows us how Clara mined her past experiences to reach a sharper definition and a deeper sense of agency regarding what mattered to her most in hiring her next job. That enabled her to seek purposefully what kinds of work could fulfill those "jobs to be done" without being constrained by her early assumptions regarding what roles might naturally come next.

Although I didn't have the same vocabulary at the time, I went through a similar thought process as I was contemplating leaving Bridgewater Associates and starting what would become Incandescent. I came to understand my experiences at Booz & Company and Bridgewater as two tests of the hypothesis that if I "hired my employer right," I could experience greater challenge and greater impact through leadership roles in organizations with vast resources and incredible talent than what I could provide for myself as a founder. If I didn't experience that enough in these two contexts – quite different from one another and each extraordinary in its own way – perhaps I didn't need to keep testing the hypothesis, and was ready to conclude that I ought to "hire myself" to solve this problem.

Being a good business strategist often comes down to refusing to settle for the assumption that something is "just that way." Being a good strategist and hiring the right job to do the right thing for us requires an equivalent fierceness of inquiry. *Job Moves* gets intensely tactical and specific about how to avoid the temptation of making superficial assumptions. Forty pages after the passage quoted above, we're back with Clara:

> … don't fall into the trap of adopting certain energy drivers and drains because you think they are "standard" for "people like you." Some people, like Clara, might not like "dealing with politics," whereas others might instead view that same activity as "getting to influence other people to get things done and make an impact.

In understanding our past experiences, Ethan and his co-authors teach, we shouldn't just look at each role in its totality, but we should disaggregate each aspect of the role to understand how that aspect created energy drivers and energy drains.

> There are difficult parts to all jobs. There are always trade-offs, even in the job that you loved the most. We want to make those trade-offs explicit. We want to help you understand your experiences more clearly by showing them in relation to one another across each energy driver and taking advantage of the fact that contrast helps create meaning. We want you to recognize that a past job you loved perhaps wasn't as good on a certain energy driver as another job you didn't enjoy quite as much.

To illustrate that in my own experience, as I took stock in my early forties, while being co-founder and Managing Partner of Katzenbach Partners was by far the best job I've had – the work equivalent of a long, passionate romance – there were a couple of important energy drains. One was that I found it frustrating that my work with clients was nearly all project-based, and that it was hard to stay with questions as long as I wanted to. Another was that the nature of Katzenbach's business model made it difficult to work with earlier-stage, more entrepreneurial companies – they just couldn't afford our fees. By contrast, while I wasn't nearly as happy at Bridgewater, I found Bridgewater's feedback culture and inquiry to diagnose the root causes of failures deeply energizing. These insights led to important early decisions in building Incandescent, including choosing a first hire, Diana Spasenkova, who would be not a consultant but a chief of staff, in part to help me learn from what I was experiencing, in a way that I couldn't learn without a conversation partner. Incandescent was built, from the beginning, not to be subject to the "tyranny of the project" as a business model, and to be able to work for equity as well as for cash fees.

The lessons of the book feel equally relevant from an employer and from an individual perspective. As Ethan and his co-authors write:

> This paradoxical idea—retaining your top talent by setting them up to move on someday—makes many managers anxious, even when we assure them that everyone benefits. If you consider managers' and employees' priorities separately, it's true that they can be hard to reconcile. But think about where they intersect. Just like individuals navigating their careers, teams, and organizations are on their own quests for progress. They have missions to fulfill, customers and other constituencies to serve, books to balance, and results to deliver. To accomplish all this, they hire people. And the people who use our process tend to "hire" employers with quests that align with their own. By sharing that process with your team members and supporting them in their quests for progress, you're making it more likely that they'll rehire your team each and every day, as long as their quests and yours continue to be mutually reinforcing.

Most relationships—even most good ones—aren't meant to become marriages, and the same undoubtedly applies to jobs. As poet David Whyte illuminates in his beautiful book *The Three Marriages: Reimagining Work, Self, and Relationship*, there's quite a lot to be learned by thinking about the parallels—considering a "marriage" not to be to any given job but to the fullness of our life's work. With gratitude to Maria Popova, who calls out this quote from *The Three Marriages*:

> Good work like a good marriage needs a dedication to something larger than our own detailed, everyday needs; good work asks for promises to something intuited or imagined that is larger than our present understanding of it. We may not have an arranged ceremony at the altar to ritualize our dedication to work, but many of us can remember a specific moment when we realized we were made for a certain work, a certain career or a certain future: a moment when we held our hand in a fist and made unspoken vows to what we had just glimpsed.

Ethan and his co-authors give us the practical, prose accompaniment to this poetic aspiration. They show us how to author this central dimension of our lives, how to hire work on our own terms and how to set those terms in ways that fulfill our deepest needs.