

DISMAL TREATMENT OF THE DISMISSED

Christine Keller

In the current economic climate we hear more and more about restructuring and redundancies. This puts an ever-increasing number of people in the situation of looking for new employment. I was made redundant in 2010 and, during my subsequent job search, I found an interesting position advertised in the *Guardian*. Intending to apply, I faced application processes from a UK university which I felt compelled to comment on. A slightly edited version of my letter to that institution is printed in this article. In it, I firstly questioned the treatment of applicants who are asked to disclose huge amounts of private information with the alleged intention of 'treating everybody fairly.' In my view, simple principles of respect and privacy are at risk. Secondly, I believe the practice of not replying to unsuccessful applicants is dismissive and should not be accepted. This practice is supposedly 'in the interest of economy.' I finally want to raise discussion about what that actually means. What is the interest of economy? Who is economy?

In some countries, it is illegal to ask job applicants for personal details of the kind I was asked in this application process. I remember that these questionnaires were put in place some years ago to make sure that no person would be discriminated against, but I think it is time to speak up and say that we have thrown out the baby with the bathwater. Also, the practice of not replying to applicants is just plain rude. The kind of position in question here is not a casual labouring job, but requires a high degree of long-term commitment from the applicant. 'In the interest of economy' is a lame excuse here. Economy means actually 'the wealth and resources of a country and region.' Think about that. Wealth and resources are not limited to monetary aspects. That is what, in a growing atmosphere of financial pressure and collapse around us, we tend to forget. In my opinion, we will not achieve a sustainable society if we do not change our focus and evaluation (the S- word is so trendy right now, isn't it?).

Recently, I came across the website of the New Economics Foundation in the UK (www.neweconomics.org) and found their ideas worthy of investigation. Their catch phrase is: 'Economy as if people and the planet mattered.' I am waiting for a time when more of us stand up for practices developed in the interest of the people and stop using money as the sole indicator of wealth and resources!

I sent the institution where I had applied the following letter:



Dunedin 11.10.2010

To,
Human Resources and the
President of University

I am writing this letter after reading all the application requirements for your institution and I would kindly ask you to forward this to Human Resources as well as to the head of the university.

My name is Christine Keller and I am presently a Senior Lecturer at the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic in southern New Zealand. With huge interest I read your job add in the Guardian. As the government in New Zealand is cutting funds for education, I am facing a redundancy and need to look for a new perspective. I planned to write an application and to let you know that I will be in Germany in week 48 (where I am shortlisted for a textile professorship). It would be easy for me to come and present myself to you, as I am 'next door'.

I read that your institution states they want to work to best practice to "attract, retain and develop staff of the highest calibre". That sounds fabulous! As an award-winning designer with an international network, a good teaching record, industry experience and student success I would not hesitate to see myself on that level.

You may not have chosen me, but I would like to tell you why I decided to not even apply: the recruitment policy suggests that there is no discrimination in the application selection process. I wonder why in 2010 any university is asking for the sexual orientation and religion of their applicants and needs to have that information on file. What does the university learn from us ticking a box on those subjects? I have nothing to hide, but wonder if ticking one of the boxes will make me a better person or seem a weirdo. (I grew up in the Lutheran tradition by the way; does that make me a Christian?) And my sexual orientation - who is asking? I live in New Zealand, the T-shirt says "Kiwis do 'it' with sheep" (well I don't, but that is nobody's business). And the details in the questions on race and disability; could you not ask the relevant questions of the people considered for interview? What points are relevant to being a good lecturer? The important thing for lecturers is to be tolerant towards different practices and religions and personalities and to be able to cater for all students of all different beliefs and orientations (and race and abilities and so on). You need to be concerned whether my skills and personality will make me a good reliable teacher, administrator and staff member. Other private issues, if they are not used to discriminate, should not be asked about!

As a German whose parents were teenagers in the last war, I am very aware how this information on file can overnight become relevant beyond reason. I am concerned; my 81 year old mother was shocked when I told her about the form.

The point which really put me off is this:

In the interest of economy only those candidates selected for interview will receive a communication; may I thank you for your interest in employment with the University.

To put all the information together for an application as important as an academic position needs an applicant's competence, knowledge and heart. A lot of work is needed for an application and it potentially has big consequences for people's lives. To know that you are not chosen might be an important piece of information for the future decision-making of an applicant. It is simply not good enough to not even reply in case of rejection. If a prospective employer of academic teaching staff cannot come up with a system for decent rejection letters, albeit standardised and emailed as today's technology allows us, how can an applicant believe that the employer will look after the people in the institution according to the highest standards?

The relationship between people, the economy and technology has recently become one of my research interests. My discipline of textiles is a fantastic example of the development of technique and its consequences for society. Your application process is another example of how 'far' we have come. We are looking for progress and innovation but we must not forget whom we are doing this for: The point is not 'the interest of economy' - the only decent and sustainable way forward is to consider the economy in the interest of people.

I hope you will find the best person and future colleague for your job. I have been working in a great team over the last 5 1/2 years and am sorry that I will stop working here, but I have learned that there are some qualities that are very important: team spirit and support for each other. For example, I would define one major quality of my school here in terms of the fact that I still give my present boss a hug. She is the person who had to tell me that I was being made redundant, and I did not get the impression she enjoyed that.

In the interest of respect and in the hope that you will review your practice,
Kindest regards,

Christine Keller
Senior Lecturer; Textile Studio



Dunedin 11.05.2010

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The point which really put me off is this:

In the interest of economy only three candidates selected for interview will receive a communication: may I thank you for your interest in employment with the University.

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In the interest of respect and in the hope that you will review your practices,
Kindest regards,

Christine Keller
Senior Lecturer, Textile Studio

Christine Keller is German-born and was the head of textiles at Otago Polytechnic School of Art in Dunedin, New Zealand, between 2005 and 2010. Her work is positioned between traditional textile design and weaving and new media art and innovation. She is interested in the clash of tradition and new technologies and its social and political implications. Her work has been exhibited internationally and was featured in the publications *Techno Textiles 1 & 2* (1998 and 2005). She is an award-winning designer for her woven and felted work produced for the Handweberei im Rosenwinkel workshop in Germany (1998-2001). She has taught textile design, weaving and textile arts in Germany, Mongolia, Australia and Canada.