



PUTTING HUMOR TO WORK: USING HUMOR TO FIND WORK, LOVE WORK, LEAVE WORK

From there to here, from here to there, funny things are everywhere!
—Dr. Seuss

Amidst the canned applause track, the last of the 60 students presented their signature stories in the final session of Humor: Serious Business, a class taught at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. Professor Jennifer Aaker, Lecturer Naomi Bagdonas, and Lecturer Connor Diemand-Yauman had been teaching the class at the GSB since 2017. This class promised to teach about “the power (and importance) of humor to make and scale positive change in the world” and equip its students with tools and techniques “to achieve business objectives, build more effective and innovative organizations, cultivate stronger bonds, and capture lasting memories.” Over the past eight weeks, the class had explored various aspects of levity and humor. As the applause died down, the question on most students’ minds was, “what now?” What good would humor do in a grim economy battered by the COVID-19 pandemic?

LEVITY REFRAME

In mid-May 2020, well into the global pandemic and six weeks into Humor: Serious Business, the draft of the final project was due. The final project was simply called a “Levity Reframe.” This was meant to be a story from the student’s life tied to a theme one really cared about. It could be related to one’s personal or career aspirations. The key was not to look for something that was obviously funny. Rather, the focus was on something truly meaningful to the student.

Anupriya Dwivedi, MS ’20, had never been a planner. This was hard for her family and friends to understand as professionally she worked in strategy consulting and advised clients—some of the largest banking institutions in the world—on their strategic vision and business planning. The only life plans she had ever been ruthless about was getting education from the finest institutions and effecting impact by working at companies that she felt were, at their core, mission-driven organizations.

Anupriya Dwivedi and Professor Jennifer Aaker prepared this case solely as the basis for class discussion. Stanford GSB cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation. Funding for this case was provided by the Stanford Graduate School of Business.

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With 11 years' experience in management consulting across Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, Anupriya was also trained in neuroscience and psychology and had a significant background and interest in media and communications. She joined the one-year MS in Management "Sloan" program at the GSB in 2019 hoping to supplement her industry experience with a top-notch business education.

On May 15, Anupriya received a friendly reminder from the course faculty that the draft of her final project was due. "We know these are incredibly hard times. How are you holding up? Anything we can do to better support you?" began the email from Bagdonas. "Second, the final project is a big part of our class, so please let us know how you're feeling about the 1-minute levity reframe. Is there anything we can do to help bring your final project to a great draft by this Tuesday?" Dwivedi was at a loss for words. She had spent the past three weeks diligently attending her classes but had fallen behind on shaping the Levity Reframe. She had just been diagnosed with severe anemia and had maxed out on her academic workload. At the same time, she would be graduating in a month's time and still had not been able to focus on her job search or networking. She remembered:

It was a difficult time. I had no physical energy to even get out of bed in the morning. Weeks were flying past with virtual classes, assignments, and projects. And yet, there was a near constant anxiety over the seemingly insurmountable search for a job post-graduation.

How should she best deal with this situation? Should she spend her time and (little) energy in continuing to look for a job or hastily put together a final project for the class? If so—what was meaningful to her at the time? With some trepidation, she decided that full disclosure was the best policy. Her response to Bagdonas and the teaching faculty attempted to reassure them: "apologies but with a rapidly intensifying job search, my priorities have been elsewhere. I'll try and catch up over the weekend. Please be assured that I take the class seriously and value all the work the teaching team puts into every session."

Anupriya was surprised to hear back from Professor Aaker within minutes of her email:

...curious if you could make your one minute reframe about a pitch or part of a job application to people whom you want to interview with/telling your story in a way that has levity. Does that sound practical and useful?

It had become very clear that there was suddenly a way to conduct the job search during an exceptionally difficult economic time—with creativity, resourcefulness, and dollops of levity. But how? Traditionally we do not associate humor and the workplace. We have been raised to keep our fun, social, blithe selves firmly separated from our somber professional side. Modern workplaces are supposed to be serious and any sign of frivolity or mirth threatens to negatively impact one's reputation as a sincere professional. Would approaching a job search with levity be too risky?

MAKING A BUSINESS CASE FOR A LAUGH

There has been a lot of evidence to suggest humor at work increases collaboration amongst employees,¹ and helps us combat stress,² even preventing burnout.³ Researchers from Harvard Business School found that joke tellers at work are perceived as more confident, compared to those who don't make jokes. This perception can increase to the point where "a well-executed appropriate joke makes you seem more confident, more competent, and higher status."⁴ A small issue with humor is that it can be pretty subjective⁵ and the inherent risks of failed humor can be quite costly to one's career.

In a prophetic section in their new book, *Humor, Seriously: Why Humor Is a Secret Weapon in Business and Life*,⁶ authors Jennifer Aaker and Naomi Bagdonas write, "at a time when 53 percent of professionals work remotely for at least half the week, and digital modes of communication have all but replaced proverbial 'water cooler' talk, finding ways to bond with our co-workers isn't easy." This percentage exploded during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. A survey conducted by Gartner revealed that 74 percent of the interviewed finance leaders were planning to move "at least 5 percent of their previously on-site workforce to permanently remote positions post-COVID 19."⁷ How do we recreate the water cooler moments of laughter when we are staring into screens in virtual conferences and Zoom meetings? Is it too risky trying to inject humor in one's job search process? Once you have a job of your dreams but have decided to move on—what is the proper way to bid a lighthearted goodbye (eliciting the right kind of tears)?

JOB SEARCHING WITH LEVITY

Renowned executive search firm Korn Ferry had specific advice for people who were job hunting during a time when social distancing protocols meant in-person meetings were impossible. The suggestion: "networkers should set up video chats to actually see each other. The video calls can make it easier to establish a connection and be authentic—especially with a

¹ Tina Seelig, *inGenius: A Crash Course on Creativity* (Harper Collins, 2012).

² John Morreall, "Humor and work," *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*, Vol. 4, pp. 359-373, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/humr.1991.4.3-4.359/html> (June 22, 2020).

³ Laura A. Talbot and D. Barry Lunden, "On the association between humor and burnout," *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*, Vol. 13, pp. 419-428, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/humr.2000.13.4.419/html> (June 22, 2020).

⁴ Alison Wood Brooks, "Research: Cracking a Joke at Work Can Make You Seem More Competent," *Harvard Business Review*, January 11, 2017, <https://hbr.org/2017/01/research-cracking-a-joke-at-work-can-make-you-seem-more-competent> (June 22, 2020).

⁵ Alison Beard, "Leading with Humor," *Harvard Business Review*, May 2014, <https://hbr.org/2014/05/leading-with-humor> (June 22, 2020).

⁶ Jennifer Aaker and Naomi Bagdonas, *Humor, Seriously, Why Humor Is a Secret Weapon in Business and Life* (Currency, 2020).

⁷ "Gartner CFO Survey Reveals 74% Intend to Shift Some Employees to Remote Work Permanently," Gartner Newsroom press release, April 3, 2020, <https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2020-04-03-gartner-cfo-surey-reveals-74-percent-of-organizations-to-shift-some-employees-to-remote-work-permanently2> (June 22, 2020).

new person.”⁸ Settling on video as an appropriate medium, Dwivedi cobbled together a rough roadmap of elements that would help her job search:

1. Communicating with levity
 - Messaging to make one smile and making an impression
 - Spicing up signoffs
 - Choosing content strategically
2. Getting the foot in the door
3. Persuading and closing

Messaging to make one smile

Igor Stravinsky, the famous composer, was once asked to work on a Hollywood movie musical score. However, the amount Stravinsky was offered seemed too low to him. When challenged, the producer mentioned that the offered amount matched what was paid to earlier composers. Stravinsky countered: “Ah, but my predecessor had talent, and I do not, which makes the work for me much more difficult!” Both laughed and the composer got the fees that he wanted.⁹

In their book, authors Aaker and Bagdonas offer suggestions on “Putting Your Funny to Work.”¹⁰ These practical tactics include the all-important element of Communication with Levity.

Considering the sheer volume of messages an average employee writes and sends in the twenty-first century, they encourage us to “think of digital messages as bite-sized opportunities to invite genuine connection with your coworkers and partners.” Indeed, in the joy-depleting world of cold-call emails¹¹ to potential employers, candidates have an opportunity to differentiate themselves by injecting some relevant and appropriate humor.

Dwivedi did just that. In the week following the class wrap-up she fired off a lighthearted email (**Exhibit 1**) to an Emmy Award-winning media agency in Los Angeles. She had just taken **Leadership in Entertainment**, a class renowned for hosting Hollywood luminaries. At a recent session, the guest was Academy award winner Gwyneth Paltrow. During the class Dwivedi sought some career advice from Paltrow and referenced this in her outreach. The CEO later confessed, “that intro email you sent me could have been taken in two ways: either I would have thought—who is this loony-toony character talking about Gwyneth Paltrow or I would think, I work in the creative industry and this is a pretty unusual email. You could say that my ears pricked up.”

Spice up your signoff

In the cold job enquiry email, Dwivedi built up some expectancy and ended with a P.S. that elaborated on why there was a Hollywood star mentioned in a job application. She explained, “Whether it’s something random, a callback to the content of the email, or a reference to an

⁸ “Networking in the Age of COVID-19,” Korn Ferry, <https://www.kornferry.com/insights/articles/job-networking-search-coronavirus> (June 22, 2020).

⁹ K Sathyanarayana, *The Power of Humor at the Workplace* (Sage Publishing, 2007).

¹⁰ Aaker and Bagdonas, loc. cit., chapter 4.

¹¹ Typical cold call emails are prescribed to follow a particular structure: Introduce yourself and ask for an intro chat or a meeting in less than 50 words and remain professional and stiff at all times.

inside joke you and the recipient share, a lighthearted P.S. is the email equivalent of a wink: it signals intimacy and invites a similar playfulness from the recipient.”

Choose content strategically

With all the advantages that levity offers, the authors warn against grasping the funny indiscriminately. They suggest that levity must be used strategically to:

- a) mitigate potentially negative perceptions,
- b) showcase personal details that are peculiar, impressive, relevant, and of personal importance.

A job search utilizing nontraditional means can be extremely risky. You do not want to erode your competence by losing gravitas and focusing on the humorous aspects of your life story. Combining the advice on making an impression, ensuring the right mix of self-deprecation and promotion of professional competence (**Exhibit 2**), while also infusing levity can be hard but ultimately rewarding. Dwivedi felt an excitement building when she first considered repurposing her academic project for a strategic career pitch. She noted, “I was unsure if a snappy and engaging storytelling format alone will suffice for a job hunt, but I had to give it a shot.”

Getting the foot in the door – The plan

She got started on devising a rough storyboard (**Exhibit 3**) for her dual-purpose project/career pitch. Identifying one of the Humor sessions as an opportunity to get feedback from professional comedy coaches, Dwivedi brainstormed over the “scenes” that would constitute her pitch.

Extremely varied facets of a candidate’s value proposition might be hard to highlight in a traditional boxed-in corporate CV. The Levity Reframe Signature Story allowed creative flexibility in a way that helped Dwivedi showcase not only serious competence, diverse skills, and achievements but also her value system, interests, and quirks in a rounded and compelling way (**Exhibit 4**). And this approach could also help map out an upbeat way to leave a company (**Exhibit 5 – Sample B**) instead of generic leaving emails that go largely unnoticed (**Exhibit 5 – Sample A**).

Persuading – Presenting the signature story

As the teaching assistants put on the video for Dwivedi’s levity reframe project in the last session of Humor: Serious Business, she was relieved to see the reactions on the faces of her classmates. There were chuckles and multiple chat messages applauding the novelty of the “pitch.” Peers told her how they wanted to know this person more—all because of a humorous “teaser.”

The 1-minute “pitch video” was never meant to replace her professional resume but this new way of presenting her accomplishments and interests in a lighthearted way had the potential to differentiate her from similarly qualified candidates.

RESULTS AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

Job search is a formidably scary and serious endeavor, but it does not have to be. Injecting appropriate doses of levity can ensure a brighter, less stodgy office culture—and, for those looking, also a job offer or two. In fact, one carefully crafted humorous email can get someone a

job offer in under 15 days (**Exhibit 1**). At the time of preparing the case Dwivedi had obtained one formal job offer (thanks to Gwyneth!) and interviewed with major tech companies and the CEO/founder of the world's top crisis management firm.

Exhibit 1 Humor During a Job Search

Cold call emails / Job applications that get results – *fast!*

From: Anupriya Dwivedi
Date: May 23, 2020 at 9:02:39 PM PDT
To: CEO, A Renowned Creative Agency in LA
Subject: Head of Biz Dev role + Gwyneth Paltrow's advice

Dear John,

I am writing to you further to some sage advice given to me by none other than Ms. Paltrow. Gwyneth was a speaker last week in my Leadership in Entertainment class, here at Stanford University.

I am a master's student at Stanford University and have been passionate about entertainment and allied industries since my first ever job as a Music/Film journalist but with my senior management and consulting background, I am now able to combine this passion with expertise in Strategy and Operations.

Would it be ok to grab you for a 15-20 mins conversation to discuss my interest in the position at a time convenient for you please?

P.S. I asked Gwyneth a question - whether I should continue my Arts/Entertainment/Media endeavors as a side hustle or go all in. Her advice was all in and in LA. This role is the perfect mix of creative and business and something I am confident I will excel in.

Kind regards,
Anupriya

From: CEO, A Renowned Creative Agency in LA
Date: Jun 5, 5:14 PM (3 days ago)
To: Anupriya Dwivedi
Subject: Offer Note

Anupriya,
Happy Friday.
Tomorrow, I plan to put together an offer note.
Let me know your availability on Sunday and Monday to talk.
Be well.

Source: Anupriya Dwivedi.

Exhibit 2 Resume of Anupriya Dwivedi, MS '20

Experience

- 11 years of management consulting experience including over 50 complex strategy & operations projects (corporate strategy, innovation, customer experience, risk management, digital strategy, data/marketing analytics)
- Extensive global program and people management experience including COO role
- Change management and strategic advisory to executive leadership teams
- Strong expertise in business development, sales and executive-level enterprise client management

Deloitte Consulting AG (Monitor Strategy) Zurich, Switzerland
Senior Manager/Associate Director (incl. COO/Chief of Staff role)

Morgan Stanley U.K. London, U.K.
Vice President, EMEA Firm Management/Special Strategic Projects

Financial Conduct Authority (UK Financial Services Regulator) London, U.K.
Senior Associate, Corporate Strategy / Head, Women's Network

Royal Bank of Scotland London, U.K.
Business Change, Innovation and Strategy Specialist

Deloitte Consulting LLP London, U.K.
Management Consultant

The Times of India India
Journalist/Columnist

Education

Stanford University Graduate School of Business Stanford, USA
M.S. in Management

University of Oxford Oxford, U.K.
MSc. Neuroscience (Commonwealth Scholar)

Honors, Awards, Certifications

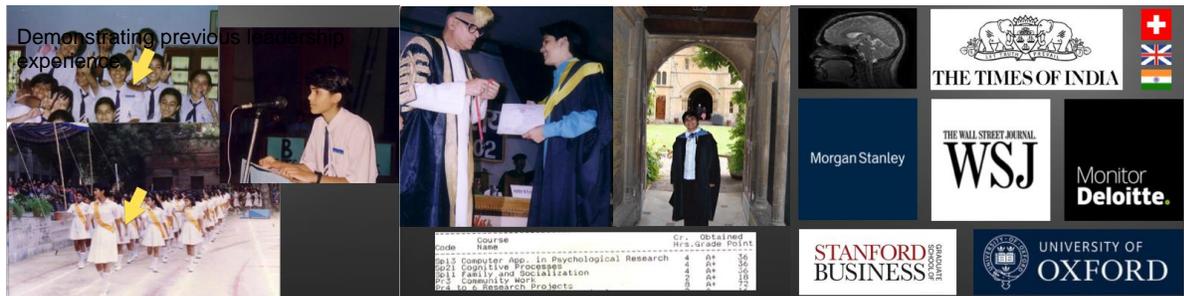
- Chancellor's Medal for best student across all divisions in the University (Top 3 in University)
- Board Member, Spa School, U.K.'s largest school for children with Autism (previously Governor for 3 years)
- Dean/Research Associate, University of York, investigated macular degeneration using fMRI experimental studies
- Awarded the highly competitive Commonwealth Scholarship at the University of Oxford (acceptance rate <1.5 percent for a fully funded scholarship)
- ISEB Diploma in Business Analysis, Systems Development (incl. agile and design thinking)
- d.Leader 2020 at the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design (d.school, Stanford University)

Publications

Conduct Risk in Switzerland: Customers, Culture and Compliance (2016), Industrialization in Banking (2016), Wall Street Journal Op-Ed (April 2020), Wall Street Journal Op-Ed (March 2020). Writer (Arts/Culture) at The Stanford Daily (2019-20)

Source: Anupriya Dwivedi.

Exhibit 3
Combining the Ingredients for a Job Search Fueled by Levity:
Storyboard for the Levity Reframe (sample shots)



Source: Anupriya Dwivedi.

Highlighting academic achievement and scholastic/analytical rigor

Illustrating international experience, professional and academic affiliations and a diversity of experience

Exhibit 4
Combining the Ingredients for a Job Search Fueled by Levity

Objective:	Graduating master’s student at Stanford with 11 years management consulting experience seeking to pivot into a new role that still leverages her existing background, extensive professional networks, experience and interests.
Industries of interest:	Financial Services, Arts, Media & Entertainment, Technology
Skills:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Analytical rigor, problem solving, communication, influence and advocacy, creativity 2. Innovation management, design thinking, strategy and operations 3. Cross functional team leadership, project management, self-motivated, strong attention to detail 4. Obsession and comfort with emerging technologies and social media, coaching and mentoring 5. Deep expertise in quantitative and qualitative research, sales and business development, product management, financial management 6. Ability to develop and maintain quality relationships with 3rd party partners, and negotiating/closing complex deals, particularly across several jurisdictions 7. Strategic joiner of dots with an ability to thrive in ambiguity and lightning-paced environments
Prototype Solution:	A 1-minute levity reframe of personal story and value proposition in the form of a video. To be posted on social media with #Moonshot2020
Audience:	Target firms in the chosen industries, existing networks and the random world at large across TikTok, YouTube, Medium and LinkedIn
Key Success Criteria:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> A. Inform the immediate and 2nd degree network of career aspirations and pivot domain B. Build enough support and advocacy that network can be mobilized for the job search C. Get in front of hiring managers for introductory conversations

Source: Anupriya Dwivedi.

Exhibit 5 Leaving Work with Levity

Sample A: A generic leaving email from a management consultant announcing his departure from the firm.

From: Date: Friday, 31 July 2015 at 10:49
To: UK Consulting
Subject: Leaving Deloitte

Hello All.

I apologize to those who don't know me.

After almost 2 years at Deloitte, after careful deliberation, I have taken the difficult decision to leave the firm and move onto a new challenge. I want to thank the firm for giving me the opportunity to work on some fantastic projects and also with some incredible people! It has been great working with you all and as much as a new challenge is exciting, my leaving is bittersweet - I will miss you all.

Today is my last day, so if you are in Buckley come over and say Hi and Bye! I wish you all the very best for the future and hope that you continue to succeed in your professional and personal lives.

Kind regards,
Anonymous

Sample B: A Leaving email with levity – same management consulting firm.

From: "Dwivedi, Anupriya (UK - London)"
Date: Monday, 30 April 2012 at 15:55
To: Deloitte Consulting All
Subject: Last day with Deloitte today

Hello all,

Please do feel free to delete this message if you don't know me.
After about three and a half years with the Green Dot I have decided to take up an exciting role in the Financial Services Industry.

I will miss some very talented colleagues, incredibly inspiring leadership and the newly installed Dyson Airblades™ at SCC. I will also miss all the PowerPoint decks in the merry shades of green and blue, Royston's time-sheet reminders, the treasure trove of knowledge that is KX, and

all the amazing people I have worked with in my time with the Firm. Summary of some highs and lows:

High points

- **BBC:** While my fellow Tech and Media consulting highflyers were spotting celebrities all over White City/TVC (Top Gear's Jeremy Clarkson et al.), my claim to the high life was having coffee next to Adrian Chiles. I guess this really belongs in the Low Points list below
- **Tesco Bank:** One of the coolest, game changing projects (building a Bank from scratch - how amazing is that?)
- **Lloyds Banking Group:** pretty much the entire gamut of Risk Transformation phases at WRSP, BSU Finance, Verde and now Group TFMI; I am not quite sure who I'll miss more, LBG or Deloitte...
- **Cell C:** Working with one of the friendliest of clients, some exceptionally entertaining Corporate Finance colleagues on a genuinely stimulating project. The glitz of Cape Town and Sandton was a plus. (JA you really shouldn't have failed that 1 Kilo of prime steak consumption challenge and in front of your Lead Partner too! Oh, the humiliation!)
- **Leading the Women in Technology Communications Channel**
- **Winning the Consulting Place with Personality (Best location) prize** for my 722 feet bungee off the Verzasca Dam (and writing some really cheesy "I love Deloitte" stuff that's probably still around in the deepest recesses of our intranet)

Low (and just plain bizarre) points/Career Limiting Moves

- Humming the Lloyds 'One for the Journey' tune incessantly for the last 2 years and driving my flatmate to drink (unfortunately she doesn't find Banks as fluffy and cuddly as I do)
- High-Fiving U.K.'s head of Banking at the end of Consulting Day with a cheery, "I am SO proud to be in Deloitte FS!" I think it was the Guinness Record that we had just won that got to my head

Today is my last day with Deloitte and I am off to Switzerland tomorrow for a few days to hike across a glacier or two before I take up my new position. All the best to everyone and a special thanks to everyone in Analytics, the class of 2008, and the fabulous people on all my projects.

Kind regards,
Anupriya

P.S. Stay on-brand and don't high-five Partners.

Source: Anupriya Dwivedi.