

Job Interview

“—And yeah, I guess that’s where I’m coming from.”

The two women on the call, Cassie E. and Maryam N., nod their heads in near unison on separate screens.

“Thank you, yeah, thank you for that,” Cassie says. She takes a sip out of a cornflower blue water bottle. Even over Zoom I can hear the water rushing up the rubber straw. Watching her drink makes me suddenly aware of how thirsty *I* am, how my words are starting to get caught in the wads of dry spit in my mouth. I do have my own water bottle on my desk, but for some reason it would feel impolite to take a sip.

Cassie, still drinking, covers her mouth with the back of her hand and nods while Maryam, the quieter and less enthused of the two, looks slightly to the right of my gaze and types silently but vigorously.

Cassie subtly wipes her chin. “It is funny, isn’t it, that each generation seems to have its own...for lack of a better word, *thing*?”

“Yeah, it is,” I say.

Maryam finishes what she’s typing and fixes her gaze on mine, or rather where she imagines my gaze to be; she overshoot—now it’s a little too far left. “Well, we’re about wrapping up,” she says. “We just have a few more things we’re curious about, and then we can go over logistics and next steps.”

“Okay, great!”

Maryam nods quickly, and I can tell it’s directed at Cassie. She sits up straight and smiles at me.

“So, sort of speaking of generations, and, you know, how each generation is going to offer unique, and, and *innovative* approaches to adapt to the current circumstances, we’d be remiss not to address it: AI. Love it, hate it, fear it, it’s here. And we think that, because it’s here, we need to find a way to get ahead of the curve. Not to sound super dystopian, but we want to feel like we have a robust command of this...*thing*, this technology that’s everywhere, but we don’t really know what it is, and we feel that the best way to do that is to slowly and...*intentionally* integrate some uses of AI into the workplace. Now, in your case, if you do end up joining us, this will likely be in the form of generative AI. And we don’t mean it’ll be writing entire product descriptions for you, but rather generating *ideas*. *Helping* to generate ideas.

So, with that in mind, I think we just want to hear your perspective. You know—your thoughts about you potentially using it in the Brand Development Associate role, as well as AI in general. I know that’s a lot to throw at you, so take a second to think it through. But yeah, we’re interested in what you have to say.”

For the first time in this interview, my mind goes blank. I’ve had a couple moments where I wasn’t sure exactly how to word what I wanted to say or how to end my sentence, but what’s happening right now is an entirely different thing. Right now, it’s completely empty in here.

In the absence of thoughts, I do what I know how to do: engage my diaphragm, push sounds up my esophagus, and open my mouth.

“Wow, that’s a very interesting question. A very, uh, very *important* question. I’d love to know in what ways specifically AI might be incorporated into my responsibilities, but I’ll answer your question first before I start asking my own.”

Cassie smiles reassuringly. I try to clear my throat as quickly and quietly as possible, but it only makes the phlegm build up more.

“I think, if I’m being totally honest, I am, in a word, anti-AI. Not all of it. I think there are some very valid, and very positive uses, like in medicine, or, psychiatry, for example. It has incredible diagnostic potential. What I mean more so is that I’m anti-*generative* AI. That’s two words, I guess. For one, it’s quite bad for the environment, and I guess that leads me to my main point, which is: is this technology really worth all the risks? I understand that it’s convenient and can take care of some of the grunt work of modern life, like sending emails or checking grammar, and ideally this will give us more time to do the things that matter, but...I just don’t think it’s making things easier. At least, not in the long run. I actually think it’s making things harder. I think that when a task as basic as writing a four-sentence email becomes so burdensome that we outsource our labor to computers, these ‘things that matter,’ whatever they are, will eventually become too burdensome too. I worry that it’s seriously impairing us in ways we might not yet be aware of. Especially young people. I’m honestly glad I graduated before ChatGPT, you know? I can write a paper on my own. A lot of students right now can’t say the same. AI is here, you’re right. There’s no getting around it. But I think there should be far more barriers to entry, not fewer. Not to sound too cynical, but I have to wonder if something so accessible could possibly be good for us.”

I give them a beat in case they want to cut me off, but they don’t. Good. Suddenly I have a lot to say.

“And I don’t want to be a stick-in-the-mud. I’m too young for that. And I’m not oblivious. I pay attention to the world around me, and I know I don’t exactly represent the majority here. I mean, I’m sure there are plenty of people who share my feelings but are willing to accept AI anyway and work with it in a way that best aligns with their values. And usually, that’s how I am too. I can accept and learn to work with a lot of things I oppose. But weirdly, as much as I feel like AI is an unavoidable fact of life, I also feel like this is one of the first times I have agency over the technology I engage with. Maybe it’s because I was too young to have a choice with smartphones and the internet and social media, but I feel like, ‘hey, I’m an adult, and no matter how much you convince me otherwise, I still have the right to choose.’ And maybe one day I’ll give in. I don’t know. But I enjoy feeling principle, I enjoy the sense of freedom that comes with putting my foot down. And not even just for the good of society and humanity, but for my own good as well. People sort of frame AI as a valuable skill that you can develop to make you more prepared to deal with the challenges of the 21st century, but I kind of see it the opposite way. I hope that in twenty years, I possess the in-demand skills that many people *lack* because of AI. The way I see it, my choice to abstain from using AI is an *investment* in my future, and humanity’s future, as dramatic as that sounds.”

If my mouth was dry before, it’s like a Nascar track in Nevada after a midday tournament now. As I slowly come to, I realize that, except for the brief moment I paused to catch my breath, I was not looking at either woman for the duration of my tirade. I don’t know what I was looking at. Nothing, maybe. I don’t even really remember what I said.

Now, Cassie and Maryam are both typing. Are they talking about me? Are they preparing the “logistics” we will soon go over? Did they check out ten minutes ago; did Cassie open Pinterest in another tab while Maryam lowballs people on Facebook Marketplace?

“That was a lot,” I say, forcing out a sort of manic laugh.

“No, that was great, you’re very articulate,” Maryam says with a smile as she continues to type. She’s one of those people with the rare gift of making everything sound like an insult. “Give us *one* second.”

About twenty seconds later, both women slowly look up at me, again in unison, like animatronics waking up. It’s Cassie’s turn now.

“Wow!” she says. “That was impressive!” She doesn’t seem to have a rare gift for anything.

“So, let’s get into it,” she continues. “While we don’t necessarily align with every aspect of your perspective, we really appreciate your candor.”

I nod and mouth, rather than utter, a “Thank you.”

“We find it very courageous of you to speak your mind so freely and with so much confidence about such a controversial topic. We can tell that you really put a lot of care into your response. You didn’t just go with the canned, HR-approved answer. You took a risk. And you know that. You took a risk because following your own moral compass and adhering to your values matters more to you than telling us what you think we want to hear, and that is incredibly commendable. And incredibly brave! You should feel proud of yourself.”

“Thank you, I really appreciate that.” My mouth is frozen somewhere between a smile and a snarl. *Well, here comes the “but,”* I think to myself.

“Maryam, do you have anything to add?”

“I mean yeah, that was really cool. You definitely have the kind of attitude we’re looking for. Which is why...look, Corey: we like you. Your resume is A-plus. You clearly understand yourself and how you would fit into this role and what you can offer that others can’t. You’re intelligent, you’re discerning, and I think this last response just confirmed all these things twice over. I should be clear, this is not an offer. There are, of course, other candidates we have to meet with, as well as things we still have to go over, and conversations that *we*”—she gestures back and forth between herself and Cassie’s screen—“need to have. But in our eyes...”

“—We feel good about this.” Cassie is beaming.

“Oh!” I say. A current of profound relief pulses throughout my entire body. I’m pretty sure even my big toe is throbbing. “Well, that’s great to hear! Thank you!”

“Of course! You can expect someone to be reaching out—not either of us, but Ana, I believe, with whom you scheduled this interview—in about a week or two, but we wanted to let you know how we’re feeling. We’re excited.” Maryam delivers this last sentence with a smile that seems, for the first time, genuine.

“Well, thank you again. I’m very grateful.”

As quickly as the feeling of relief washed over me, it disappears and is replaced by a new, more uncomfortable sensation. My whole body continues to pulse, but in a way that feels like it’s warning me of something. My chest clenches up like it did when I first got on the call. Suddenly, I’m once again seated before two entirely new faces.