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## Using former employer's feedback

Q: Your column last month was on the duty for employers to provide accurate feedback on a former employee's performance and conduct.

I want to relate my experience. I had interviewed an applicant whom I thought was very good. But when I recommended him strongly for employment, my general manager did not approve.

He was opposed to the idea because the feedback from his last employer was unfavourable. He was described as "negative in attitude", "argumentative and definitely not a team-player".

I think we should not rely solely on one person's opinion. However, my boss disagreed and told me not to take the risk. I was forced to take the second best applicant.

I felt bad for this applicant. It so happened at that time that a friend was looking for an employee with similar experience. I recommended this applicant.

My friend is happy with this applicant. In fact, he likes him because he always speaks up. It has been two years now since he was employed. I think this case is a good lesson not to be prejudiced automatically by negative feedback. What do you think?

- Woo, Kuala Lumpur

A: You are correct in saying that we should not rely entirely on one person's opinion in rejecting a job applicant, although that person is as important as a former employer.

As I said in my last column, the feedback from former employers, whether it is positive or negative, is just another piece of information to help an employer select a suitable candidate for a job.

Your general manager was hasty in his decision to reject the candidate you had recommended. In playing safe, he was protecting himself. He was afraid of being blamed if the candidate turns out to be a bad employee.

To some extent, we cannot blame him for his decision. Much of it has to do with the work culture in your company. You see, often we are very quick to blame but agonisingly slow to praise. In this environment, everyone plays it safe all the time. No one wants to take any risks.

You may not believe it, but managers have actually been rewarded for doing this. One such manager - and a very high-ranking one at that - was given the nickname "ICMA" by his staff.

Many of us know that this is the acronym of a reputable accounting body in the United Kingdom. However, in this case, it stands for "I cover my a\*\*".

When we play safe, we would miss out on opportunities that might never come our way again. Jack Lemmon, an actor, has this to say about the fear of failure: "Fear of failure will absolutely destroy you. You walk down the middle of a street. You never take chances. You never go down the little side streets that you look at and say, 'That looks interesting. But I don't know that street. I'll stay right here and just walk this straight line'."

Even the most outlandish idea may work. Know who said this? The remark came from our Prime Minister Dato' Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Once upon a time, no one thought that man could fly. Everyone believed that the "horseless" carriage will be a luxury that only the wealthy can afford. And yet, one of the biggest headaches plaguing our cities today is not with having too few motor vehicles on the roads, but with too many of

them. Today, nothing seems impossible.

Enlightened employers allow their staff to make honest mistakes, so long as some thing has been learnt from it, and it is not repeated. One US company, Ore-Ida, even goes to the extent of holding a ceremony to announce a mistake. It believes that the road to an invention is full of potholes of mistakes.

Coming to the uncomplimentary feedback from the applicant's former employer, I notice that the remarks are of a general nature. What is meant by "negative in attitude"? Your boss should have asked you to find out more.

Then again, what does "argumentative" mean? It is clear to me, from the applicant's present employer's feedback, that he is a person who has, not only a mind of his own, but is prepared to speak up as well.

His former employer prefers people who will toe his line without questions. Obviously, his present employer thinks differently and finds him to be supportive, not argumentative.

So you see, what it boils down to, finally, is just a matter of opinion.

Don't misunderstand me. I am not saying that feedback from former employers are always unreliable - only that one must be careful about accepting general remarks of a derogatory nature without substantiation. It's different if we are told that the applicant was dismissed from his job because of a serious misconduct. Even then, we would want to know what specifically the misconduct was.