

## Pick the Best of the Bunch

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*Tough times can mean fewer job openings but many more candidates to choose from. These tools and methods can help you effectively manage an abundance of applicants.*

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By Stephenie Overman

In this economy, more job applicants than ever are cropping up, making it increasingly difficult for recruiters to sort through them all when a position becomes available.

Practicing superior candidate management and offering excellent candidate care can help recruiters pick the right person now while ensuring a sufficient talent reserve in the future. Even companies with limited hiring or a hiring freeze can benefit from taking a closer look at their recruiting processes.

"Companies that say 'We're not hiring so we'll bury our heads in the sand' are missing an opportunity to come out of the economic downturn with a more efficient recruiting function," says Anne Nimke, co-founder and executive consultant, Pinstripe Talent in Brookfield, Wis.

The first step in dealing with an abundance of applications is to increase your selectivity, Nimke advises. "If you are overrun with candidates, you need to raise the bar on the minimum hiring qualifications."

"Knock out" less qualified candidates with online or phone screening early on, she says, and "cascade the background checking by moving pieces of it up in the process" to help eliminate undesirable candidates more quickly.

Actel, a semiconductor company based in Mountain View, Calif., uses automation to handle the candidate selection process more effectively. The company is "adding filters to our job postings so that only the people who are truly qualified get reviewed," says Jim Robertson, director of staffing, "so we're spending time on only the most qualified applicants.

"We don't receive any paper resumes or application forms any more. It is all done via the system, so tracking, retrieving, reporting are all done quickly and accurately," says Robertson, who adds that he finds that "the greatest saving comes from the ability to use staff for more intelligent, meaningful work rather than sorting and filing resumes."

Allied Building Products Corp. in Rochester, N.Y., has made changes to its technology that allow for "pre-screening" questions on the application of each job that is posted, according to Corey Listar, HR/staffing systems specialist.

"That allows us to get some basic information from the candidate that we wouldn't be able to gather from a paper application," Listar says. "It allows us to see from a quick glance who meets the minimum requirements for the job."

### Technological Advances

Bob Schulte, president of HR Services in Lima, Ohio, estimates that for every 100 applicants a company was reviewing late last year, it now reviews 175—and often with fewer recruiters to do the job.



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Automation can help the harried recruiter in a number of ways, says Schulte. Beyond screening tools that identify whether an applicant meets the minimum qualifications for a job, automated responses can keep people informed of the status of their candidacy and politely let rejected candidates know when positions have been filled.

Even the process of scheduling interviews can be automated, Schulte notes. Candidates who make it through an initial screening are given choices of interview times tied to the recruiter's availability and can access automated scheduling to set up a telephone interview.

"It eliminates the phone tag," he says. Without the automated system, "the preparation for the phone interview might take 40 minutes while the interview itself takes 20 minutes. It's skipping the front-end process."

Many applicant tracking systems (ATS) have the capability to do much more than recruiters realize, either because new staff haven't been trained completely on the system or the recruiters haven't been trained to use software updates.

What tends to happen, according to Schulte, is that employers put a lot of thought into the ATS when it is first set up, but they don't keep up with the system's new features and functionalities and then end up a few years later with a system that seems outdated.

Companies that use ATS should conduct regular reviews of the system, identifying new offerings from the vendor that may help their candidate management process. Updating doesn't have to take a lot of time and money, says Schulte.

As a vendor, "we try to sit down a couple of months prior to the renewing of a client's license to review for an hour or two and give them suggestions. In some cases it costs more, but in some cases it's just turning on a functionality or training on a functionality."

### **Candidate Care**

Even, or perhaps especially, in hard times, good communication with job candidates is crucial. Every time a candidate is involved in any activity concerning a job application, there should be some type of response from the company, says Schulte.

"Even behind the scenes, once the position is closed you still can communicate, say 'You're not a fit but please come back to our web site' and let them know about other positions. What you want to do is create a relationship with the candidate [and] not just treat them like a number," he says.

When a candidate applies for a job at Actel, the individual gets a note thanking him or her for the application. In addition, the system enables candidates to come to the database and track the status of their application, says Robertson.

"If they are not qualified for the job, or are rejected from the search for any reason, one click of the system sends them a highly personalized little note thanking them for considering us and telling them they are not considered," he says.

"It is signed by me with my contact info so we are not hiding behind a

systematic approach," he says. "Each step in the process has a couple of notes associated with it that we send when appropriate."

At Allied Building Products, "We can assign a status to a candidate, which they can view on their profile page from our web site. This will inform them of their status for each position they apply for at our company. With the number of candidates we receive, it is not possible for us to contact everyone; therefore, this tool works well for us," Listar says.

And by using the applicant tracking system "we are able to reach out to candidates who weren't selected for a position in the past to see if they would be interested in new openings in their area."

Food and facilities management company Sodexo uses a customer relationship management (CRM) system to manage all contacts, not just active candidates, says Arie Ball, vice president of recruitment services.

Although many more people are sending in applications, "we're still giving each person full consideration. We want to provide a good experience for the candidate. We survey candidates whether or not they move forward. Even though there is more volume, our goal is to have candidates feel comfortable enough to reach out to us," Ball says.

Good candidate care protects the organization's reputation as an employer of choice, one that will attract great candidates when hiring is on the upswing again. Recruiters should stay engaged with ideal candidates, maintaining a dialogue with them, and should treat rejected candidates with respect.

"You need to let people know where they stand because rejected candidates are customers or potential customers. Make sure you are handling those candidates with care and professionalism," says Nimke.

That's particularly important if you want to further use your database. "Let candidates who have applied in the past know they haven't gone into a deep black hole. The No. 1 complaint [from candidates] is that they never hear back," she says. "Look at it from the candidate's standpoint. It's very important to maintain communication with the person sitting in the database."

Sodexo, which has its U.S. headquarters in Gaithersburg, Md., "is a growth company. We haven't been hit hard" by the downturn, Ball says. Her staff of more than 60 recruiters hires about 5,000 exempt employees a year at all levels from recent college graduates to experienced vice presidents.

Still, the company is taking the time now to invest in the development of its recruitment team and build its own talent network. The company has about 100,000 people in its database and reaches them through e-marketing, which "allows us to reduce advertising costs. It saves us multiple hundreds of thousands of dollars," she says.

### **Invest in Training**

The company has a trainer on staff and brings in experts to help recruiters hone not only technical skills, but relationship-building skills as well. "Every single week we do a best practice sharing session," Ball says.

"Recruitment has changed at lightning speed. Every year I say that. It's amazing how every single year we talk about the speed of change. Today

it's all about social media" so recruiters have been receiving training in areas such as Twitter, the social messaging utility that can keep people connected in real-time.

"We want to help recruiters get good at social media, to get comfortable" with it so that they can interact naturally with candidates, she says. The beauty of social media is that it allows recruiters and applicants to have conversations, she says. In addition, it drives candidates to the company's career site and helps recruiters better identify passive candidates.

Ball sees her recruiters becoming leaders in this area. "They're getting great at it. I'm proud as a peacock."

She also wants recruiters to be seen more as partners in the company, so they are exploring ways of supporting business operations and even generating revenue. "We're looking at this as an opportunity to strengthen our entire operation. We want to emerge out of this stronger than ever."

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*Stephenie Overman is editor of Staffing Management magazine.*

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