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Route to:

“Yet another one said no”

WHY THE HIRING PROCESS IN SOME ORGANIZATIONS LEAVES SO MANY JOB CANDIDATES COLD

UNLESS YOU RUN AN AIRLINE, chances are you don't go out of your way to alienate customers.

Airlines, of course, didn't start that way. But having trained a whole generation of passengers to chase the lowest Internet fares, they now are forced to pay for increasingly costly fuel by “un-bundling” the components of airline service and either eliminating or charging extra for them. It's a mess no one seems to know what to do with.

But don't be too quick to gloat. While you may be going the extra mile to serve *your* customers, how are you treating the people who are considering coming to work for you? In some organizations, the answer is not very well.

Companies and institutions interact with all sorts of publics – employees, shareholders, customers or clients, suppliers, the news media, regulators and elected officials, etc. If treated well, all those “stakeholders” become potential ambassadors of the organization's brand. If abused, they sometimes can cause a world of hurt.

Job candidates, of course, are stakeholders too – if only for that limited period during which they consider potential employment. When treated with courtesy and respect, *even if they are not offered a job*, they are likely to view the employer with equal respect and become great brand ambassadors. Conversely, when treated poorly, they are likely to use all the forms of current communication to spread the word. That old saw, “Be treated well and tell ten people, but be treated poorly and tell twenty,” understates the reach of blogs and social networks.

Unfortunately, the consequences of mistreating job candidates are likely to be cumulative and difficult to trace. And, unless they become an Internet *cause célèbre*, such actions are unlikely to be considered a hanging offense. But that does not absolve them.

When the Hiring Process Turns from Treat to Treatment

THERE ARE NUMEROUS REASONS why the employment process can go awry, and many reflect the vagaries of human nature.

A surprising number of hiring authorities, for example, continue to think of job candidates as “applicants” – a term that traces back to the days when Human Resources was the Personnel Department, and people sought work by filling out applications. That may still apply to some hourly-paid positions, but most organizations and the search firms they use try to seek people for jobs, not jobs for people. Whether those people are found through personal recruitment or online postings, some sort of vetting process screens the talent pool and reduces it to a handful of qualified contenders – properly known as candidates. The dictionary defines a candidate as someone under consideration for an office, position or honor – and what a different picture that conjures up compared to an applicant seeking work. Might the use of one term instead of the other influence the way in which an individual is regarded? Might a candidate be treated with greater respect and deference than an applicant?

Among some people involved in the hiring process, the attitude also exists that the job is more important than the people being considered to fill it –

a belief that is buttressed during periods of economic scarcity, when good positions may be more difficult to secure. If the supply of candidates is considered to exceed the supply of jobs, that tends to encourage employers to string out the interviewing process (always wanting to see more people), to be slow in reaching a hiring decision and to be stingy when formulating the actual offer. This “beggars can’t be choosers” syndrome does little to warm the heart of a potential new employee and causes many candidates to be less than totally forthcoming throughout the interviewing stage (for example, not disclosing other interviews or offers).

In many organizations, a different kind of problem stems from the fact that hiring is rarely anyone’s primary job. In fact, the term “hiring manager” typically refers to the principal decision-maker in a hiring situation, not to what that person does for a living. As a result, given the range of responsibilities and problems facing the typical hiring manager, the actual act of hiring often takes a back seat. And if that means postponing interviews or even final offers, that’s just the way things are. Moreover, as time-management experts remind us, what’s urgent generally trumps what’s important – another body blow to the hiring process.

Also, a few employers just can’t seem to get their act together – for instance, allowing managers to bow out of the interviewing process at the last minute, failing to agree on the “what counts” factors in reaching a go or no-go decision on a particular candidate, having no clearly defined job description, title or salary range before interviews begin, etc. Anything that slows or disrupts the process tends to weaken the employer and make the candidate wary.

Eventually, however, Mr. or Ms. Right will emerge. As search consultants know from time-honored experience, that individual will be the best-liked candidate among the two or three best-qualified. What is so amazing is that many employers will display any form of emotion at that point, preferring to say “We’ll get back to you in due course.” That may reflect anything from a desire to keep one’s options open for another week or three to not having secured the approvals required to extend an offer. The end result, though, is the same: What could have been a powerful start to a long-term relationship has disappeared.

Of course, none of the above needs to happen. With care, the process can be rewarding to all.

Making the Hiring Process a Positive Experience

HERE ARE SEVEN EASY STEPS to hiring competently and graciously:

1. ***Treat every candidate with dignity and respect.*** You eventually need to offer one of them a job, so why burn bridges by being rude or inconsiderate? If they are visiting from out of town, treat them as you would a customer.
2. ***Help candidates feel relaxed.*** Even if part of a day visit includes a stress interview or role-play situation, you ultimately want to get to know the “real” John or Mary Doe. Avoid making them feel perpetually on guard.
3. ***Have an interviewing schedule and stick to it.*** Companies have learned they can start meetings on time, so why not interviews?
4. ***Don’t interview prematurely.*** If the position description, title and compensation plan have yet to be ironed out, it’s senseless to waste the time of candidates, search consultants, your associates and (of course) yourself.
5. ***Make sure every person in the interviewing process has a role to play.*** There’s no need to have ten people recite the same litany of questions – or, worse yet, not have any to ask. What perspective will each bring to the task?
6. ***Don’t neglect to sell the organization, the position and the person to whom it reports.*** Well-prepared candidates will have accumulated lots of information about your company, not necessarily all positive. Show why your organization should be the next (and maybe final) destination in that individual’s career.
7. ***Send positive signals to the chosen few.*** Even though you are looking for positive buying signs from interested candidates, it’s sometimes easy to forget that they are looking for the same from you. Successful hiring is like a love affair, not a poker game.

—George Snider

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