

Why This Recession Has Been So Tough on Recruiters

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This recession has been merciless to recruiters. I don't have any statistics, but anecdotal evidence indicates that thousands of recruiters have been laid off and that hundreds of recruiting agencies have closed their doors.

Sometimes the recruiters who been laid off have just been unlucky enough to have worked for an organization that is failing or in an industry that has been strongly affected by the recession. Yet, others have been laid off partly because of performance or attitude. Many recruiters remain tactical, and fail to grasp how strategic their function is to a firm. Many have remained working for leaders and organizations that do not appreciate how much they could contribute to the success of the business. And even fewer have become leaders who take command of the recruiting process and forge a function that competes effectively against other organizations and consistently supplies their organization with quality talent without relying on the use of extraordinary measures. In my many years in the profession I have only known a handful of these people. Most corporate recruiters become recruiters by accident and leave the profession for some other HR or related field after a short stay. Their stay is a roller coaster of half-completed technology implementations, high staff turnover, muddled objectives, and often leaves a legacy of unhappy hiring managers. To achieve even the simplest objectives, they have to use outside resources, employ a large number of recruiters, or seek to outsource the function.

Unfortunately HR has not positioned the recruitment function as strategic, nor has HR realized that the role of talent manager, aka recruiting and development leader, is emerging as one of the most potentially needed (and influential) professions within the organization.

Generally, those recruiters who lead the effort to supply scarce talent are filled with bad habits and uncertainty that create a revolving door of leadership and produce lackluster results.

To change this and move toward a position of respect and strategic leverage, recruiting leaders should examine their own behaviors and thoughts and see if they reflect any of the habits I list below. If so, now is the time to change.

Bad habit 1: Arrogance about yesterday's tools and techniques

Yesterday's successes probably will not be repeated by using the same techniques or technologies. Over-reliance on techniques like cold calling, telephone screening, and resume reviewing are examples of methods that have seen their heyday but are still widely championed and loved. I frequently talk with recruiters who swear that the old ways are the only ways — the best ways — and insist that everything from interactive websites to LinkedIn are just fads.

Tomorrow belongs to recruiters who embrace such emerging practices as social networking, video interviewing, online assessment, and candidate relationship management. Recruiters experimenting with virtual communities and with building online relationships already have a advantage over the recruiter who is tied to geography and to face-to-face meetings. Labor markets are not confined to single countries, work can increasingly be done anywhere, and recruiting is a virtual, global game.

Bad habit 2: Filling requisitions instead of meeting business objectives

Most recruiters are obsessed with filling slots. That is what they have been taught to do without regard to need or effectiveness. They have a hard time discussing the value of positions with hiring managers who often regard the recruiter as little more than a clerk trusted to filter piles of resumes that are supposed to magically be arriving each day because of the organization's prominence or brand. They are given requisition to fill and they dutifully go forth and do so — even if it is a poorly defined job or one that might be done by someone with a different skill set.

Recruiters who have the respect of the organization's leadership have to be brave enough and well-enough informed about current issues and business needs to engage in meaningful conversation with a hiring manager. They have to be equipped with knowledge about the organization's strategic business objectives, the needs of the hiring manager, and the state of the talent marketplace. They need to present numbers and data and make a case for hiring the competencies and skills that will be most effective in meeting the business needs of the organization.

In short, they need to act as a resource and consultant to hiring authorities and show a deep knowledge and understanding of the needs of the business. And, on top of this, they then need to be able to fill the position from a talent community they have built in anticipation of the need.

Bad habit 3: Failing to build new competencies

The emerging competencies for recruiters include the ability to engage people in conversation using virtual tools, the ability to collaborate virtually on projects, to influence hiring managers, and build targeted marketing strategies. These are totally different skills from those that dominated the profession a decade ago. In fact, over 80% of the skills that made a recruiter successful in 1997 are of little value today. For example, interviewing skills, cold calling, and reviewing and screening resumes are not critical skills. Even less understandable are the recruiters who are competent at interviewing and who then focus on getting even better at it instead of on developing skills that might be more useful. It is very easy to rely on the competencies that made us successful and not notice that times change as do the skills we need.

Far more important are the ability to write a blog, influence a candidate, and identify the value proposition of an offer.

Bad habit 4: Functional Shortsightedness

More and more of the most strategic recruiters I run into have a background in disciplines such as marketing, sales, and operations. Fewer are coming out of traditional HR disciplines. And an elite handful is morphing into talent managers — people who can understand and integrate recruiting with employee development, competency analysis, performance management, and succession planning. These recruiters are not afraid to try out new approaches, nor are they afraid to experiment and leverage technology. The most innovative websites and process improvements are emerging from recruiting leaders who have no training as recruiters and who have recently entered the field. They are writing exciting blogs, using search engine optimization techniques, and experimenting with interactive websites and tools.

The recession may be tough on recruiters, but it is also forging a new breed of talent expert. Recruiting inside organizations is evolving into talent management and the focus will be on ensuring that the organization has the critical talent it needs to achieve business goals. The talent manager will need to be able to run scenarios, produce

numbers, and show where the best talent comes from whether it is developed internally, hired from inside or brought in from outside.

Out of every recession have come new ideas, new functions, and exciting change. Recruiting is at the forefront of many of the changes and for a small number of you it will be an invigorating time of learning new skills and adopting new techniques, habits, and technologies.