Footnotes

[1]AALL Economic Outlook Survey 2009 http://aallnet.pbworks.com/f/Economic_Outlook_Survey_Results_April09.pdf
[2]AALL Economic Outlook follow-up Survey October 2009 http://aallnet.pbworks.com/f/Comparative+Summary.pdf
[3]The Yale Daily News reported that Harvard's endowment dropped by 30 percent and Yale's by 30.4 percent in the 2009 fiscal year. Zuckerman, Esther "Harvard's Endowment sees Sharp Decline" (11th Sep 2009) Yale Daily News http://www.yaledaily-news.com/news/university-news/2009/09/11/harvards-endowment-sees-sharp-decline/
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Biographies

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Making the Right Investment – Recruitment and Selection

Abstract: This article is based on the presentation given by Suzanne Wheatley at the BIALL Conference in June 2010 giving advice to prospective interviewers on how to make the best recruitment decisions.
Keywords: employment; recruitment

Introduction

There is much written about the process of finding a job. Much of our time at Sue Hill Recruitment (SHR) is spent helping job seekers (our candidates) present themselves in the best possible light when applying for roles. In 2008 and 2009 we delivered training workshops on how to write an effective CV, tackling application forms and successful interview techniques. When the call for abstracts was made by BIALL for their 2010 Conference, I saw the theme was Managing Resources in Difficult Times and my thoughts immediately turned to the effectiveness of recruiting and retaining staff. Your staff are your greatest resource – both in terms of knowledge but also, in some cases, in terms of spend. Are you making the right investment?

The aim for my session at the Conference was to facilitate a discussion of best practice in recruitment and to discover how colleagues within the information world overcome objections to hiring staff in these straitened times. As a recruiter, it is a joy to work on a vacancy with both a communicative human resources professional and a participative and passionate recruiting line manager in the same company. This is not always the case and so I went in search of those good relationships and asked how they made it work. I am indebted to my colleagues in the information industry who gave their time to talk about their recruitment successes and, where there have been failures, how they made sure it did not happen again.

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It is possible that some of the points I discuss will err on the negative side, assuming bad relationships or practice. That is not what I have found in the majority of firms. However I have been given snippets of information, which form the basis for this article, from many different angles and perspectives, including my own. I hope that the examples will help highlight key points and possible solutions that will be beneficial to successful recruitment.

What happens when

There is an order for recruiting staff which goes something like this:

- Employee resigns
- Approval given to replace
- HR advertise job
- Applications received
- Interview shortlist produced
- Interviews
- Offer and acceptance
- New employee starts

Often a notice period is often only one month so it is rare that there is a hand-over period between the outgoing and incoming employees. Indeed, there can sometimes be two to three months between the first and last steps above. What impact will this have on you and your team? How can we try to minimise this gap?

Building good foundations

If we go back a few steps, away from the pressing need to recruit a new member of staff, and consider how visible your department is within your firm. Do you have a presence? I think this is the very foundation of smooth and successful recruitment. It is likely, as you are reading this article in *Legal Information Management*, that you take seriously your need for continuing professional development (CPD) and have a professional presence within the information industry. You may have written articles and given presentations about your work to your fellow information professionals. Have you extended this to your colleagues in your organisation? Do you walk the floor, have an intranet presence or regularly attend practice group meetings? Perhaps you have a sponsor at Board level. As we have seen over the last couple of years, no departments or jobs are safe from cuts, but it is possible that a strong presence and visibility for value-added work could help your cause in sticky situations. I think the same can be said of fighting for recruitment funding. Yes, a business case will almost certainly be required, but there is less of a tussle if you are presenting figures rather than a long list of whys and wherefores.

Job description and Personal statement

Much is written about the importance of keeping your CV up to date both for job-seeking purposes and your own CPD. When was your job description last updated? As a recruiter, I can tell you now that frequently it is more than a couple of years. How do I know? The "Last Reviewed" date in the corner or footer of the document. As this is a document that is emailed to agencies or directly to prospective candidates, it should be more regularly updated.

Keeping the job description (JD) up to date is a relatively simple, if a little time-consuming, process. Perhaps it can be an objective after regular meetings or appraisals for the post-holder to review and amend their job description to note any changes in daily activities, increased (or decreased) responsibilities.

The person specification (PS) is slightly different. Recording key achievements or projects could be beneficial in terms of the skills needed to be able to function successfully in the role. Do these need to be aligned with your organisation's competency framework? Can a particular skill be taught by another member of the team or do you have a skills gap which you would like to fill?

Once you know there is a vacancy within your team, you will need to review the job description in line with your team and company direction and objectives. This might be the perfect opportunity to restructure, redeploy, reassign duties or promote from within.

Your relationship with HR

Let us introduce at this stage your colleagues in Human Resources (HR) or Lateral Recruitment or Resourcing or Personnel. This relationship is often vital to the smooth running of your recruitment campaign. Frequently HR is engaged as technical and administrative support, often in a secondary role to the recruiting line manager.

The technical element is in terms of company framework and legislative advice. It is likely your HR professionals will have relevant qualifications and will keep abreast of current legalities and best practice in recruitment.

On the administrative side, there are diaries to co-ordinate, phone calls to make, emails to send and letters to be produced. How can you strike the right balance of utilising HR's expertise and perhaps ensuring your knowledge of departmental needs is appreciated?

Cultivate and educate

Your HR colleagues will probably be very familiar with recruiting fee-earners and PA or secretarial support but

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possibly not with your roles. By cultivating a relationship with HR, you can build rapport and understanding and educate them about what makes your department successful. You can also brief them, in advance, of the recruitment agencies you wish to work with. This means HR can get agencies signed up to any preferred supplier lists or negotiate terms of business in advance, thus not delaying the recruitment process. This administrative element can be time-consuming and can hinder the flow of applications, widening the gap between the person leaving and the new person starting.

By building this relationship with HR you can also agree who does what in the recruitment campaign. Where do you want to sit in the process? If you are new to management and recruiting, you may prefer that your HR officer takes the lead. Many of the people I spoke to prefer to see all the CVs received and then to shortlist them for interview, handing back to HR to arrange interviews and reject unsuccessful candidates. As our industry can sometimes be a bit jargon-heavy, this approach can work well. The recruiting line manager understands the terminology that will undoubtedly appear on applications and so is able to shortlist more knowledgeably.

Invite or reject?

How do you shortlist when there are so many capable and experienced candidates in the market? One manager told me that candidates often rule themselves out of shortlisting because their CVs are too long and lack focus or do not contain enough technical specifics. The latter point is interesting. Do candidates remove those technical specifics so as not to get rejected by less-knowledgable HR? The issue of "over-qualified" candidates is ever-present for us. As an agency, our practice is to discuss in detail with the candidates the role, its requirements and their aspirations, so that any CVs submitted to the client are from candidates who are genuinely interested in the role as a viable career choice.

The invitation to interview will include as much information as possible about the interview itself including time, duration, location, names and job titles of interviewers, JD and PS (again) as well as any competency framework documents or details of any case studies or tests. Flexibility on interview times is always appreciated by candidates who are working. Whilst it is tricky for candidates in permanent roles to get away for interview, remember that candidates who are in temporary work face a different issue. If they are not working, they are not getting paid. Interested candidates will always make themselves available for interview, but early or late interview slots will be appreciated.

Rejecting candidates at application stage will be a task handled by HR. I think it is important that all candidates receive a response, whether directly from your firm or through their agency. Whether or not you do this will impact on the image of your firm, something I'll talk about later.

The interview

You would never go into an interview as a jobseeker without good preparation, so why is it we have all found ourselves sitting opposite an interviewer who has obviously just seen our CV for the first time? Preparation as an interviewer is vital and shows respect for the candidates.

Before the interview

Sit down with your fellow interviewers and decide on the split of duties. Discussing interview questions in advance and deciding who will ask which questions is time well spent. You will decide whether the interview will be standard question and answer about experience to date, or competency-based, or a mixture of the two. Construct your questions so that they are open (what/where/how/when) rather than closed which only invite the answer yes or no.

It is important to have a lead interviewer who will do the introductions and explanations about the role and then close the interview by explaining the next steps. You may also like to involve other members of your team in bringing the interviewee to the room and giving them a tour before showing them back to reception.

Take time to consider your selection criteria for second stage interviews and job offers. If the role has measurable outputs e.g. production of company profiles or current awareness bulletins, you might like to test candidates at the interview stage to determine their level of skill.

Environment

As an interviewer, it is your job to put the candidate at ease so that you can discover as much about them as possible in order to appoint the right person. The environment in which you do this is important. Ensure you book a room so that you are not wandering the corridors searching for space. Think about the temperature of the room and be aware of this during the interview. If you are lucky enough to have windows that open, fresh air is always preferable to air conditioning. Should there be sunshine streaming through the window and there is no alternative, position yourself so you are looking into the sun and your interviewee is then able to focus on what they are saying rather than being blinded by the light.

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The effective interviewer

Think back to interviews you have had and you will know who made a good or a bad impression. What was it that made someone stand out as a good interviewer? An effective interviewer communicates as much through body language as through words. A good handshake, eye contact, smile and posture show engagement and interest in the interviewee. An active listener will appear attentive and adaptable in their questions.

Preparation is noticeable. Lack of preparation can lead to inconsistent questioning and can be bewildering for the candidate. We have sometimes had feedback from candidates that interviewers do not seem interested and disagree openly in front of the candidate about the role or the organisation.

It is not just what you say but how you say it – speak clearly and give the interviewee the best opportunity to impress you.

Managing expectations

What happens after the interviews is important for your organisation's brand management. If you told candidates you would make a decision by a specific date, try to stick to it. Should there be a hold-up in the decision-making process, it would be courteous to inform the candidates or agency that there has been a delay. By taking notes during the interview, you will be able to reach agreement with your colleagues on the right person for the job and you will also be able to provide constructive feedback to unsuccessful candidates. Whilst it is probably company policy for HR to contact those who have not been offered the role, we are lucky enough to have some clients who like to talk through detailed interview feedback with candidates on an individual basis. In an industry as small as ours, I think this is a wonderful gesture. Thanking candidates for their interest and effort in a timely and considerate manner ensures that, whilst they will undoubtedly be disappointed, they will hopefully not harbour any negativity towards your organisation.

The successful candidate

The high point of my job is to make the call to a candidate to offer them a job. The phone call is met by gasps of surprise, shrieks of happiness and sometimes tears of joy. It is a great feeling. As the line manager-to-be, I think it is a call you should make. There will be standard wording from HR along the lines of "conditional offer, subject to references" and there is no reason why HR could not follow up your call to discuss the technicalities of the verbal offer.

Conclusion

Congratulations! Once the paperwork has been completed and HR has done all the necessary checks, you will have a start date in the diary for your new team member. You can start planning the induction, working with HR to ensure your new colleague will be welcomed into the department and the organisation. We talked earlier the need to keep job descriptions up to date. In an ideal world, your team's manual will be an easy starting place for the basis of the handover. Maybe that is a discussion for another time…

Biography

Suzanne Wheatley is Recruitment Manager at Sue Hill Recruitment.

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