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Are You Finding the Best People? They are usually employed - and seldom looking

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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL recently confirmed what many long have suspected – namely, that "Online job boards have lost their cachet." (July 12, 2005) Why?

According to the Journal, they are yielding "landslides of résumés" that mostly come from unqualified candidates.

"The trick – something that executive-search firms and headhunters have known for decades – is that the perfect candidate is usually working happily at a desk somewhere."

The Journal is exactly right.

THERE ARE TWO TYPES of job candidates, in the parlance of professional recruiters. The first is the so-called "active" candidate, who is either seeking new employment or at least wanting to test the waters. Active candidates may or may not be employed. The "passive" candidate, by contrast, is certainly employed and too engaged in his or her work to be actively looking.

While there is nothing wrong with the active candidate (and we would disagree completely with those recruiters who regard them as "damaged goods"), it is a poor recruitment strategy to limit one's search to the active candidate pool. And that, unfortunately, is the great limitation of job boards and corporate websites, whose portals are open 24/7. They are directed primarily at those individuals who need or want to find a new job. Moreover, those in need of new employment tend to be less discriminating in responding to opportunities, meaning that there will be many responses from those who are under or over-qualified. To make matters worse, the more popular your company is as a place to work, the more useless résumés it is likely to receive.

Applicant-tracking systems and HRIS software were supposed to help out by providing various filters to help separate the wheat from the chaff – but they cannot increase the supply of wheat.

Statistically, only five percent of the American workforce is unemployed. (That figure is higher or lower elsewhere.) Let's be generous and assume that an additional thirty percent is unhappy enough to really want a new job – due to oppressive work conditions, tyrannical bosses, missed promotions or whatnot. Accordingly, recruiting strategies aimed at such individuals will miss more than half of all potential candidates.

Seeking all 'A' players...

IT'S A FACT OF LIFE that employers with an ounce of common sense go to extraordinary lengths to keep their 'A' players – those superstars who constitute the top ten or twenty percent of their workforces. The future of the company or institution rests on their shoulders, and retention strategies are designed with them in mind. Unless the victim of a power struggle or other unfortunate circumstance, they stand as the most happy of the happily employed – enjoying the greatest wealth, perks, position titles and responsibilities at their particular level within the

corporation. They are precisely the people that rival employers should be attempting to hire.

Application-driven hiring systems not only fail to attract such superstars – but would be hard-pressed to evaluate them if they did. Gifted managers and exceptional individual contributors possess unique personal attributes (or "soft skills") that cannot be identified by key words on résumés or evaluated by aptitude tests and standardized personality assessments. They may, for example, have an uncommon ability to motivate employees to contribute 110 percent, or they may possess the kind of creative thought process that sees solutions others can't. How does one glean that information from a résumé?

Prospecting for human capital requires a human touch

THE MECHANIZATION OF RECRUITING sounds great in theory but makes little sense in practice – unless one is filling the type of job that is skill-intensive and little influenced by the people skills or creativity of the incumbent. (Computer programmers, dental hygienists, welders and fork-lift operators come to mind.)

When push comes to shove, human beings outperform computers in finding other human beings. The experienced search consultant is much like his or her relative, the police detective – piecing together clues, talking to one's informants (or "bird dogs," in recruiter jargon), asking the right questions and looking beyond the usual suspects until the right individual is found. It's part pounding the pavement and part intuition; sometimes the solution comes quickly, but most often it's the result of long and careful digging.

Good recruiters also know that candidate identification is only the start of the recruitment process. Candidates must be vetted, to make sure that their educational background, work history and personal accomplishments are indeed as described. They must be evaluated, in terms not only of their ability to do the job but also in terms of their cultural fit, their likely ramp-up time and probability of on-the-job success, their relative attractiveness compared to other potential candidates, their salary expectations and so on. They must be sold on the long-range career advancement and personal rewards offered by the new job opportunity. And last but far from least, with all obstacles carefully overcome, they must be carefully encouraged to accept an offer.

Moreover, with companies as picky as they are these days, the search consultant must perform that miracle with not just one star contender for the job – but generally with three or four.

Constancy and consistency in the midst of change

Networking and cultivation always have been critical to the successful practice of executive search at any level, as have been the techniques for evaluating and closing candidates once found. What has changed since the early 1990s is the emergence of computer technology and the Internet, both of which have provided a new array of tools and techniques for practicing the constants of search. Online databases may have replaced the little black book, but someone still needs to make the telephone calls and woo the candidate. Online friend's networks may have enhanced the ability to communicate quickly with many individuals, but someone still needs to sift through the results and evaluate the data.

When all is said and done, the fundamentals of search have changed remarkably little over the years. It's "human intel" that still makes the difference.

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