



Viewpoint

Recruiting Graduates in a Recession

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First the good news. Approaching half (42.3%) of graduate recruiters who responded to a recent survey from GRADdirect reported that they were going to hire a similar number of graduates in 2009-10, compared to the current season. More than one in ten (11.5%) actually said they were going to increase the number of graduate hires.

With 2009 graduate numbers similar to those in 2008, and more graduates from previous years still in the job market, the clamour for places onto next year's graduate schemes will be greater than ever. Factor in the advice being given to graduates to widen their job search criteria, and it isn't surprising that two-thirds (65.4%) of graduate recruiters predict applications will increase. In fact, 15.5% said they thought application numbers would increase by more than 25%.

More candidates = greater choice = improved intake calibre?

Given the deeper pool of graduate talent to choose from, the expectation within many organisations is that their graduate recruiters should be delivering an even higher quality of candidate. The desire for an enhanced calibre of recruit is also fuelled by a recognition from within the business that to succeed in these particularly challenging economic times, new recruits have to be of an even higher standard than would have been acceptable in more positive trading conditions.

However, with many graduate recruitment teams having had budgets cut or headcount reduced, they are now less well equipped to deliver against these raised expectations and cope with increased numbers of applications and candidates.

The greatest handicap - a shortage of time

Nearly a quarter (22.7%) of graduate recruiters already say that the most time-consuming aspect of their role is reading or screening CVs and application forms. So, with an increase in applicant numbers widely expected, the time demands at this early stage in the selection process will be even greater for the 2010 season. Unless initial screening criteria are made more stringent, these increased time demands will continue throughout the remainder of the recruitment process.

Also, candidates will add further to the time pressures on graduate recruiters by making an increased number of requests for updates on the status of their applications. Already worried about their prospects of securing a much sought after place on a graduate scheme role in these difficult economic times, as each day passes their anxiety will increase from a level which is already greater for this generation of graduates than for their predecessors. As a result, so too will their propensity to contact their recruiters for any news on the status of their application.

On top of this, the increased number of applications made by individual graduates will put even greater time pressures on recruiters, who are already acutely aware of the need to be first past the post in trying to secure the best talent for their organisation.

At present, some graduate recruiters will try to fast-track outstanding candidates to minimise the chances of losing them to other organisations - whose recruitment processes may have started earlier, are swifter or more flexible. Going forward, graduate recruiters should look for innovative ways to speed up the whole recruitment process, as this will allow them to remain competitive and enhance their employer brand - through reducing graduates' anxiety and the time they have to wait to receive the outcome of their application.

Time to change the status quo

When asked where they considered the graduate recruitment team should spend the majority of its time, 22.7% of graduate recruiters ranked 'Engaging with the wider business' at the top - which was second only to 'Attending recruitment fairs', thought to be most valuable by 40.9% of respondents. Meanwhile, 'Reading/screening CVs and applications forms' was deemed to be most important by a mere 9.1%.

So even without the predicted increase in application numbers and a greater importance on managing candidates more quickly and efficiently, graduate recruiters already face significant time challenges. Any shrinkage in team size will add further to this time shortage and leave graduate recruiters facing the very real prospect of failing to deliver the quantity and quality of candidates that their business demands.

Work smarter not harder

To meet the heightened challenges faced by graduate recruiters, it simply won't be possible to keep a 'business as usual' approach and just work harder to compensate for the reduced resources. At the moment, the majority of graduate recruiters employ a multi-step recruitment process based upon candidate attraction, response handling (assessing initial applications), assessment centres and face to face interviews.

Along the way, a number of actual and potential candidates remove themselves from the process for a wide variety of reasons – from inefficient attraction activity and lengthy response times, through to candidate management that fails to match the initial employer brand experience and candidates receiving and accepting offers from other organisations mid process. So what could be changed?

1: Smarter attraction

The more accurately targeted and candidate-relevant the attraction strategy is, the greater the quantity and quality of applicants it will deliver to the start of the recruitment process. Recruiters could free up significant time in the recruitment season and save money, by using data from previous campaigns and engaging with experts to design an attraction strategy that is focused on delivering the candidates the business requires, rather than simply generating the highest number of applicants possible.

By bringing in external experts to assist in attraction design and to manage the associated response, the in-house team is freed up to spend more time on activities that they feel deliver most value to the organisation – attending recruitment fairs (40.9%), engaging with the wider business (27.3%) and attending assessment centres (22.7%).

2: Smarter candidate management

Good candidate attraction work can be undone, and the time and money invested in it wasted, by poor candidate management. Inefficient candidate management damages the employer brand and increases the number of applicants who drop out mid-process.

Worst case scenario is that recruiters can then be left with too few suitable candidates to put through to the final stages of the

recruitment process, which necessitates costly repeat advertising to attract a fresh group of potential employees.

Giving the responsibility for candidate management to a third party expert provider will not only allow the in-house team to concentrate on other elements of the process, but also help save money by optimising the number of high quality candidates who are delivered to assessment centres. The calibre of candidates at this stage is in itself often a critical measure used to determine how effective the graduate recruitment team has been.

3. Smarter use of time and processes

Recruiters know what they should be doing – which activities are most important to the business and those that will deliver the most value. The problem for many though, is that they don't currently spend their time as effectively and efficiently as they would like.

Now must be the time to make the necessary changes to graduate recruitment processes to ensure objectives are achieved. Selecting the most suitable recruitment processes and considering the use of third party partners to carry out specific activities will maximise the effectiveness of each stage of the process. If these partners are engaged to conduct the initial application screening, recruiters could realise huge time savings whilst also increasing the calibre of candidates delivered to the business at the latter stages.

Think outside of the box

In these particularly challenging times, the spotlight on graduate recruitment has arguably never been more intense. Businesses require new recruits capable of not only helping drive the organisation through the downturn, but also with the potential to become future leaders, making it imperative to focus on the activities that are going to deliver the maximum return.

How ironic then that in order to successfully meet the new and more demanding challenges that lie ahead, graduate recruiters will have to demonstrate the same innovative thinking and approach that so many seek and value among candidates.

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