

The communication issue... getting the balance right

By Gaynor Lowndes of The Recruitment Training Company

The recruitment industry has changed drastically in the past 15 years. It is no secret that the major catalyst for this change has been the increasing prominence of web-based technology. Many recruitment companies, focused on the convenience of online features such as social networking sites and email, have forsaken the personalised service that a people industry such as ours inevitably thrives on.

Online recruitment is the extreme of this trend, and of course it has its place in our industry. However, if traditional agencies continue to rely too heavily on web technologies, then the success and prosperity of the industry is at risk, because we are taking the intimacy of personalised service out of the equation.

Don't get me wrong, email is a convenient and highly effective means of efficient communication but should never replace face-to-face or telephone communication. Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn provide exceptional opportunities for dynamic communication, and market intelligence, but should not replace telephone screening or face-to-face interviews techniques.

I use an old cliché to describe the role of online technologies in recruitment today: "Too much of a good thing". These technologies have to a degree sabotaged the connection between candidates and clients that is, and always will be, the key to success in this industry.

The two key issues are now clear: convenience and personalised service. Why can't we have both? Is it too much to ask for a balance to be achieved between technological convenience and personalised connection, be it face-to-face or via a telephone conversation?

Email

Email is the best and worst thing that ever happened to the modern workplace.

The basic premise of any sales technique is that at the very bottom of process is a hu-

man connection. And in a people-oriented business like recruitment, this cannot be ignored. The old marketing saying goes: "People buy from people they like... people buy from people like them." How can a mutually beneficial recruiter-client relationship be built and maintained when the client is forced to interact with a computer? This is one of the main reasons why so many of us are forced to work on a contingent basis rather than on an exclusive or retained basis. Put simply, our clients don't trust us, because they don't really know us!

Client visits

I maintain that the good old-fashioned client visit is an all-important but neglected sales technique, and it is even more important in the current economic climate. The client needs face-to-face conversation in order to discuss their needs with complete ease and honesty. Taking away the face-to-face component throws up an immediate barrier, however subconscious it may be.

Follow up conversations

Once face-to-face rapport has been established, discussions throughout the relationship should be done via telephone, not email. By discussions, I mean conversations, not brief or minor matters that only require a little information to be exchanged, such as a "yes" or "no" question. A "conversation" via email is time consuming and sometimes the meaning of statements can be misunderstood. None of this contributes positively to your recruiter-client rapport.

So the basic message is this: build rapport with face-to-face interaction, conduct subsequent discussions on the telephone, and deal with minor, non-urgent matters via email. Be mindful that increased productivity is essential during these difficult times, so make sure that all your conversations and communications add value, and are well worth the time spent.

Social networking sites

Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn have increased in prominence over the past four to five years, and are now considered part of the future of the recruitment industry. The key issue here is whether a candidate's profile can be a sort of substitute for a pre-screen interview.

I have always argued that there is merit to checking out a potential client or candidate on these sites. A candidate's Facebook profile, for instance, offers a goldmine of transparent information that would not be accessible in a pre-screen or interview, where the candidate is inclined to tell you what you want to hear. Issues such as uncooperative temperament, disrespect for authority, and tendency to miss work may be identified here.

However, social networking intelligence should be viewed by recruiters as an additional screening process, not as a replacement for personalised screening techniques. To neglect social networking is to miss crucial transparent information, to neglect telephone and face-to-face methods is to risk developing a personal bias against the candidate that doesn't account for their professional qualities.

Web-based technologies continue to drive improvements in the efficiency and convenience of the recruitment process. But they are only as effective as the people who use them. They are additional tools to complement, not to replace, our relationship building. As recruiters, we cannot afford to neglect this important truth. ■



Gaynor Lowndes set up The Recruitment Training Company in 2001 to provide specific recruitment skills training to recruiters. It has grown to be the largest provider of skills-based training to the recruitment industry. In addition, Gaynor provides success coaching services via GaynorLowndes.com.