

Your Job Ads Are Driving Away Talent

By Liz Ryan, Harvard Business Review, 11th February, 2013.

I read job ads in my spare time. People send me especially ridiculous ones just to make me laugh. The other day I read one that began promisingly enough with:

"If you're ready to work hard on a top-drawer team of hard-chargers, keep reading"

and then went on to list twenty-two tedious "Essential Job Qualifications" that could only serve to eliminate any actual top-drawer candidates who bothered to apply. After the hard-charger opening, that job ad fell right back into the usual territory ("are you good enough for us?") without bothering to give the reader any good reason to consider the available job worth his or her time or interest.

The recruiting process is broken, and if we need evidence we only have to look at any job listing.

Here's how a typical recruiting ad begins: "Acme Explosives has an immediate need for..." Really — Acme has a need? My husband, who grew up on the South Side of Chicago, loves to say, "People in Hell need ice water." The company has a need. So what? Is that supposed to make a top-drawer hard-charging job-seeker's heart beat faster?

If we want to hire sharp people in our organisations, we need to market to them. We can't assume they'll happily crawl over whatever piles of broken glass we put in front of them (online honesty tests, writing tests, three-week Radio Silence zones, terse auto-responders, and the like) in order to work for us. We have to be willing to woo as well as vet them. And we have to put a human voice into our horribly bureaucratic, robotic job listings.

Here's another one:

"The Selected Candidate will possess nine years of experience in tax accounting."

The selected candidate will possess? Now we're marketing to the talent community by talking right past them. This ad all but says "Yeah, the selected candidate will have this and we'll interview that guy — not YOUR sorry ass." It's insulting to address job-seekers this way. Who's ever seen a commercial that describes its customers in the third person, as though the viewer couldn't possibly be in the target audience? This is the opposite of marketing.

Unfortunately, too many HR chiefs and hiring managers labour under the delusion that sharp and switched-on people are dying to apply for their jobs, even when they're not. Every day, a CEO tells me that it's hard to find talent. They say that the only people they see in interviews are non-creative thinkers and yes-men (and -women). These executives don't see their role in the dysfunctional-recruitment soap opera, which is keeping the smartest and sparkiest people away.

In the e-commerce world, marketers pay close attention to the abandonment rate for online shopping carts. When you start to make a purchase online and then drop out before the deal is done, that's an abandoned cart. Corporate leaders should be paying just as close attention to the abandonment of applications on the company's ATS (applicant tracking system) portal. When job-seekers start the process and then drop out, that's a failure for the employer. If we knew how badly our employer branding (the kind that prospective job applicants see) was hurting us in the talent acquisition arena, we might spend more time and energy writing genuine, human job ads in plain English and rethinking the whole red-tape-laden hiring process.

Until we do that, we can keep complaining about how hard it is to find talent, but we can only delude ourselves for so long. Eventually, we're going to have to look in the mirror and see that we've created the talent shortages we complain about, by driving the best candidates — the ones with the most options in the talent marketplace, that is — away with a stick. There's time to bring them back, if we act fast. Is your organisation up to it?

To view the article online: http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2013/02/your_job_ads_are_driving_talen.html

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