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Employers, job hunters flocking to Internet recruiting

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Just a few years ago, job hunting involved a huge amount of paper -- resumes, individualized cover letters, envelopes and stamps. Now, for many people, much of the process has become electronic.

"It's a lot faster and a lot simpler," asserts Brian Johnson, recently hired as senior project manager for Direct Energy, after applying at the company's career site -- www.directyourenergy.com.

He found companies are less apt to want a paper-based resume these days and will either ask applicants to e-mail a resume or to participate in an online submission process.

The Direct Energy site was launched in June, meant to be a branded career site for the energy retailer. In the first 2 1/2 months, the site received more than 8,000 applications.

(At press time, about 1,000 candidates per week were registering with the site and the company's been hiring approximately 35 per week. About 100 people work for Direct Energy in Calgary; out of 2,500 North American workers.)

Cost savings are a big draw, says Michelle Malfait in Calgary, manager of human resources for the Western region.

She says cost-per-hire has dropped from about \$12,000 per job position to \$5,000. That includes savings from dealing quickly with stronger candidates and from reduced costs associated with maintaining and managing paper processes.

The company will use other job boards and print advertising as well, but the goal is to lead people to the Web site. Candidates who send paper resumes receive acknowledgements by mail, but are also directed to the site.

Malfait recently used the company's new career site to hire two director-level people for the Houston office. (Once the best candidates were identified, she flew to Houston to participate in the interview process.)

Janice Thomson, Direct Energy's senior vice-president of human resources, says the new Web site "gives us direct access to people. We're building relationships right upfront."

(In her previous employment, Thomson was involved in launching a career Web site at Alliance Atlantis - www.getacooljob.com.)

By treating people properly -- with acknowledgements, for instance -- "a few months down the road they're still there and interested if we have a need. I believe very strongly that we are enabling people to take charge of their affairs," she says.

"If we're successful in branding ourselves and our industry, we'll have a powerful database of relationships."

Thomson says it's possible the Web site could eventually become a revenue source as a platform for hiring across the energy industry.

However, Thomson didn't outline a timeline on that possibility.

The technology at www.direct-yourenergy.com, based on software from Recruitsoft Inc., allows for screening of "ace" candidates, and managers will receive alerts at their desk tops when someone matching their hiring goals appears.

Of note, Johnson -- who works out of Toronto -- applied online Aug. 27 and was contacted for an interview Sept. 3. "I was surprised at the quick turnaround," he says.

When he was unemployed, Johnson says he spent as much as four hours per day perusing job sites. He says there's a big difference in the quality of online career postings, particularly when it comes to adequate descriptions of specific jobs.

Johnson says the questions asked on the Direct Energy site were quite extensive.

"The questions are very specific; it's clearly used as a filter."

A recent Ipsos-Reid study found that more Canadians have looked for a job online than those who have ever banked online, shopped online, comparison-shopped or downloaded music. Specifically, more than 80 per cent of respondents had looked for a job at a job-posting site, 62 per cent researched a potential employer online, and 62 per cent sent in a resume by e-mail.

Internet job site Monster.ca boasts about one million unique visitors per month and a Canadian database of 1.3 million resumes. The service is free for job searchers, while corporations can post a listing for \$395 per 60 days.

Jennifer-Lee Thomas, Monster.ca's senior director of communications in Montreal, sees no conflict between job boards and specific corporate career sites.

She recommends that companies need to maintain career sections or pages at their own sites, because that's the first place candidates familiar with the company will go. (Those are the best candidates, Thomas points out, because they're knowledgeable about and interested in the company and industry.) Monster.ca's services include setting up corporate career sites.

But she also advocates reaching out through other avenues such as job boards, particularly when companies aren't well-known or they're trying to attract someone outside of their specific industry -- such as a healthcare company looking for an information technology worker.

Also, the Monster network can reach international workers, should that be necessary.

"People are turning to the Internet to search for jobs," says Thomas. "It's important for a company to have a strategy to be on the Internet."

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