



Firms buried in piles of résumés; software helping companies cut lists

By Andrea Coombes

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SAN FRANCISCO -- Unemployed Americans are no doubt cheering this year's hiring uptick, but managers rushing to flesh out skeleton crews are apt to make mistakes as they sort through reams of resumes.

The economy has created about 1.2 million jobs so far this year, but there are still millions of unemployed Americans eager to fill new positions.

The largest corporations get hit with up to 25,000 resumes per week, according to Alice Snell, vice president of iLogos Research, a division of Taleo, a staffing management company in San Francisco.

"You are talking about a tremendous quantity. The issue is how to find the quality out of that quantity," she said.

Small and midsize companies face a similarly daunting task: "Hiring managers are being bombarded with ... up to 1,200 or 1,300 resumes per job," said Jason Krumwiede, a founder of PeopleBonus, a resume-management technology company in Chicago. Choice is certainly better than dearth, but about 80 percent of people that apply don't meet the minimum requirements of the job, added Krumwiede, citing a study of job-ad responses his company conducted two years ago.

Given the sheer magnitude of the task, managers often overlook good candidates, even as hiring the wrong person has costly consequences.

Replacement costs run about two times that employee's annual salary due to recruiting, training and administrative expenses, said Roberta Chinsky Matuson, principal of Human Resource Solutions, a consulting firm in Northampton, Mass.

Plus, the firing impinges on employee morale and customer relationships, she noted. Hiring choices also affect productivity. "When you're looking at the difference, for instance, in what a high-performing sales executive can produce for a company vs. an average or low performer, that crystallizes [the cost] for companies of every size," added Snell.

Technology aids help, but aren't perfect

To manage resume stacks, companies are turning to tools that eliminate unqualified applicants -- from keyword-search software to online applications that force people to fill in the company's requested information, creating a candidate profile that's standardized and easier to sort.

Software by PeopleBonus conducts contextual searches that can differentiate between "Java" the programming language and "java," as in coffee, to weed out job applicants that worked at, say, a café called Java Joe's.

It's "keyword search on steroids," said Krumwiede of PeopleBonus. Still, he acknowledged that any technology that sorts applicants has its drawbacks.

"No technology is perfect," he added. It's "a means to prioritize candidates. You may want to look at these candidates first because given what you have in your job description and what they've sent in their resume, there's a high likelihood that this person's going to be good."

Not all keyword searches are so pumped up, requiring instead that managers enter any relevant words, which comes with problems of its own.

"There are so many ways to phrase things, you can't possibly incorporate everything into the search," said Heather Hartmann, a contract recruiter for Accenture, noting that one applicant's "call center" might be another's "customer service center."

"Keywords help in narrowing down the pack, but if you rely too heavily on them, you risk losing out on candidates," she warned.

Given today's job market, some screening is essential, some argue. "When you're in an employer's market and there are so many resumes to be looked at, you have to start somewhere," said Jill Silman, vice president of Meador Staffing, in Houston. "When the worm turns and there are more jobs than there are candidates, this job would be different," she said. "It's starting to turn. It's getting better from the employee's perspective."

But even in a job-seeker's market, managers must choose among resumes. The following are the eight mistakes managers most often make as they go through resumes, according to human resource experts.

1. Too fast, too furious

The current resume overload leads many hiring managers to rush through them, but spending too little time is the most common mistake cited by experts.

"It's incredible, the speed at which people go through resumes," said Mitchell Marks, an organizational psychologist and president of JoiningForces.org, a San Francisco-based management consultancy.

"If they took more time up front, they'd have fewer personnel decisions at the back end. You pay now or you pay later," he added.

2. Seduced by names, credentials

Don't let a well-known company or college, or impeccable credentials fool you into hiring the wrong person.

"Managers often get overly influenced by two things: education and titles," observed Wolf Rinke, president of Wolf Rinke Associates, a human-resources consulting firm, and author of "Don't Oil the Squeaky Wheel and 19 Other Contrarian Ways to Improve your Leadership Effectiveness" (McGraw Hill, 2004).

One of Rinke's clients, a vice president at a high-tech company, is "failing miserably," Rinke related. "He got hired because he has incredible credentials as it relates to technology, and then got put in a management job."

3. Ignoring resume inflation

Job applicants sometimes resort to lying. For example, 23 percent of executive job applicants misrepresented accomplishments on resumes, according to a recent study by recruiting firm Christian and Timbers.

For managers, "assuming that whatever they read on a resume is true is a dangerous assumption," said Matuson of Human Resource Solutions.

While some resumes are inflated, others are deflated. "A resume can be very misleading," contended Rinke.

Interview more people than you think is necessary, he added. "There are some people whose resumes are not that elegant, [but] when you meet them in person you get a much better sense" of their bearing.

4. Title confusion

Too often, managers scan for job titles that match their job description. "The problem is you miss a lot of really good people. There are so many different job titles," explained Matuson.

"'Systems analyst' can mean a lot of different things in a lot of different industries," said Krumwiede.

Also, beware of inflated titles allotted during the economic boom, when college grads demanded higher-level positions. "Did they really have the responsibilities a true vice president would have?" asked Matuson.

5. Thumbing one's nose at short years of service

Managers who see job stints lasting just one or two years on resumes often disqualify those candidates as job-hoppers -- and that may be a misperception.

"Hiring managers in larger companies still tend to look at [short] years of service and tend to disqualify people," said Hartmann. "In today's economy and the way organizations work, they may not be job-hoppers. They could have been laid off. They could have left for better opportunities."

6. Handing the job to inexperienced assistants

It's tempting to let assistants screen resumes, but some say that's not advisable.

"You'd be surprised how much resume review is passed off to an administrative assistant. They just don't have the knowledge in hiring and what to look for in resumes," said Krumwiede.

Still, others say you should get help in screening resumes. "If you're a manager, you tend to hire people who are most like you," added Rinke. "They ought to be different from you. That's why, if you use three people as screeners, I would want to have two employees. They're going to be much more sensitive to what the needs of that job are and who the right person is and who has fit well before."

7. Failing to hedge for your own subjectivity

Reading a resume is inherently a subjective process, and managers too often don't take that into account. Dragging a stack of resumes home to read after dinner means you'll likely miss some good candidates.

"You can look through a stack today, and tomorrow you can look through the same stack and assess it differently. It's what mood you're in, what you're thinking about," said Meador Staffing's Silman.

Carve out some time to focus on the activity. "You've really got to be in the right frame of mind to sit down with the resumes so you're giving everyone a fair shake," she asserted.

8. The "I still haven't found what I'm looking for" syndrome

Finding great candidates entails knowing exactly what skills and experience are needed for the job, but too often managers skip the step of realizing exactly what they need.

"Most positions have three or four elements that are core for this person being successful," said Krumwiede.

"Many times job descriptions are written with 15 to 20 things," he elaborated. "They're so broad. Nobody in their right mind can have all those skills. You need to highlight the four or five core skills of that job description and keep it very simple and easy to understand."

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