

Recruiting a la The Apprentice

iLogos Research : By Alice Snell

The newest reality TV phenomenon showcases a common activity: getting a job. Contestants—or should I say candidates—compete for a coveted position, and just like in “real life” a hiring manager has to make a decision on who to bring on board. Surely this is compelling television (18.5 million Americans tuned in to the first of 15 hours of television), but is there any relationship between NBC’s hit show The Apprentice and the methods and best practices in today’s recruiting processes? Let’s view The Apprentice through the eyes of staffing professional.

The Recruiter

The Apprentice producer, Mark Burnett, can be regarded as the recruiter. Burnett brings deep expertise to his role; he produced the reality show mega hit, Survivor. Burnett is skilled at presentations that rivet the attention of audiences, similar to the sales skills all recruiters need to develop and draw on their talent pools? Just as product placements leverage The Apprentice’s appeal, savvy recruiters use strong employment brands to further their goals. Branding, advertising and carefully designed content drive Burnett’s productions and are equally important components of a successful hiring strategy.

The Hiring Manager

Real estate and casino tycoon Donald Trump stars as the hiring manager. Although hiring managers worth \$2.5 billion are atypical, Trump is tasked with deciding which one of the 16 people on the short list will ultimately win a job (\$250,000 salary package) as president of one of his companies for one year. It is an important position (aren’t they all?) and requires this hiring manager to give it significant time and attention. In an interview Trump commented, “You know, Mark [Burnett] told me -- he sort of misrepresented [my time commitment]. He said two or three hours a week, that would be it, and it turned out to be a little bit more than that.” Hiring managers of the world – listen up!

The Requisition

The requisition and job description for The Apprentice contain both familiar and unique items. For example:

- “Contestants must be legally eligible to work in the United States and live in the United States;
- must be at least 21 years of age; must be in excellent physical and mental health;” Somewhat
- standard stuff. But how about: “...must not now be a candidate for public office and must agree
- not to become one until six months after initial broadcast of all programs in which you appear, if
- selected as a player.” Seen this before?

Skills criteria are detailed: “Prospective applicants should: be able to take risks, bounce back after failing, succeed in a cutthroat environment, go against the tide, remain focused, think creatively and be a leader.”

Although the bar is set high, important information for potentially interested candidates is outlined at the start.

The Candidate Pool

Candidate management appears to be cumbersome. Surprisingly, application details have only a minor online component:

- "Interested candidates should arrive to one of the open calls listed above. [15 locations, major cities.] Though it is not required, we recommend candidates to bring a photo i.d. and a
- completed application form available at www.nbc.com. If prospective candidates are unable to
- travel to any of the locations, it is possible to apply on www.nbc.com..."

Nevertheless, Burnett's sourcing strategy worked well. The talent pool for *The Apprentice* contained 215,000 applicants. To date, there is no word from NBC on which staffing management technology platform was used. After the casting (prescreening) sessions, 16 people (reportedly hand-picked) ended up on a short list.

Good candidate relationship management communication was lacking. One message board entry read, *"sent in an application for The Apprentice and was disappointed I never heard anything, I thought maybe they weren't going to do the show since they extended the deadline for applications, I figured they didn't have enough entrants. Now I see the line up, I can see why. No one is over 35! Disappointing, but I guess this is what sells."*

Non-disclosure policy, however, was made clear; contestants will face a \$5 million fine if they talk about the details of the program.

Other legal aspects of pre-employment also were covered:

- "Prospective contestants, if selected to be interviewed, must timely complete, sign and return
- (prior to the date of your personal interview) a completed interview Agreement Package that
- includes a Background Questionnaire Form and authorization to obtain background information
- from third parties..."

But, given the ages and looks of the candidate shortlist, might EEOC compliance be at risk?

The Process

Standard operating procedure dictates that once a short list is established, the process of assessment begins. This is the basis for the show: predicting who will be successful. The onscreen "job interview" includes a variety of activities designed to probe the working skills of the candidates.

Today's corporate world often requires teamwork. *The Apprentice* divides its candidates into two teams for evaluation on both individual and team performances. Unlike today's work world, though, these teams pit men (who named themselves Versacorp) vs. women (who took the moniker Protégé Corporation). And unlike a typical hiring process, unsuccessful candidates on *The Apprentice* are "fired" from the shortlist one at a time through a now familiar reality TV formula.

Although it may make for good television, evaluations including lemonade sales on the streets of NYC and fast-track ad campaign designs likely would not fall into the realm of "validated" assessment testing. In reality, assessment is always a trade-off between using tests that are practical, expedient, and cost-effective, and getting at actual on-the-job characteristics. Simulations may be the most telling of actual on-the-job performance, but are impractical, time-consuming and costly.

The Metrics

The Apprentice is entertainment, not a portrayal of best business practices. Calculations for some of the metrics of staffing management such as time to hire could be made. Other metrics—such as cost per hire—would be off the charts, even at the relatively low half million per episode cost for producing reality TV.

At the end of the day (or at the end of this TV season), is there anything real to learn from *The Apprentice*? Perhaps hiring managers and staffing professionals alike can reflect on the importance of identifying and assessing the skills it takes to get any job done, and the necessity of allocating the right budget and time resources to match talent to task. After all, star performers are the key drivers to corporate as well as television ratings.