

Job hunting in the - 21st - century

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With more organisations using online methods to recruit new staff, Caroline Horn examines the importance of making sure you get your corporate website right.

Online recruitment can be a powerful tool in helping companies to reach and attract the best candidates, but while many companies might claim to be recruiting online, in reality very few are doing so in any meaningful way. Effective online recruitment could be as low as 10 per cent in the top blue-chip corporates.

Bill Shipton, commercial director of workthing.com and chairman of the Association of Online Recruiters, says: "Some companies only use the website to ask candidates to send their CV to the HR department. At the other end of the scale are the organisations that have really grasped the nettle of what their corporate website can do for them." These are the ones that are using online recruitment to make the recruitment process quicker, more effective and less expensive, and to enhance their employer brand.

For companies planning to recruit online, the main message has to be, get it right - poor site management can do more harm than good to a company's image. Robert Leggett, managing director of Omni IT, says: "When you put job advertisements online, you might get 200-300 responses within 24 hours and you have to respond to them all because it will reflect on your company brand. You also have to keep everything up-to-date."

From the outset, companies have to be clear about what they want their site to do for them, says Leggett. "Will they be using the site as a marketing tool to attract candidates, or to manage recruitment and to help build a company's talent pool? Do they want to process a certain number of candidates through the website, or do they just want a web presence? And how much work do they want it to do for them?"

Maintaining your system

Companies also need to decide who is going to use, manage and maintain the system - IT, HR and other departments will be involved and their activities need to be co-ordinated. Tim Elkington, managing director of Enhance Media, suggests that most recruiters will chose to use an ASP (Application Service Provider), like i-GRasp, to set up and run the online recruitment system - the advantages being that the ASP will assist with the technology and system processes.

However, if a company has bespoke requirements, or wants to include more distinctive tools like videos, it might be better setting up an in-house system.

Whatever route is chosen, the outcome should be an easy and straightforward experience for candidates, says Shipton. "The first thing a candidate wants is to be able to search a job by function, and if they have seen an individual job advertised, to be able to apply for the job online."

Website features should, therefore, include: a clear, one-click link on the homepage to the recruitment site; a good search engine, allowing candidates to highlight their preferences; clear job descriptions and skills requirements; a clear and concise application process; and an interactive link to an HR contact - not just a mailing address. Information about the company and its corporate culture should also be available - companies should be aiming to impress a potential candidate and to persuade the best that they want to work for them.

Get the basics right

Simple enough, but Carl Gilleard, chief executive of the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR), says that there are many basic things that companies are still getting wrong.

Students - among the most demanding of candidates - are unimpressed by sites that put style over substance, and offer their own checklist for recruiters, which includes: tell it like it is, keep the site simple and easy to work through, give up-to-date information (things like salary and job vacancies can date quickly), and keep applicants informed at all stages.

A study by Cambria Consulting, Boston, highlights best practice in web recruitment. As well as clear navigation tools and information on corporate culture and career opportunities, the best sites will include a number of additional functions - tools such as a 'job cart' to allow applicants to search and apply for multiple openings, r"sum" builders and other supplementary job-search advice, and personal search engines that allow applicants to create, and update, personal profiles in a company's database.

There are other technical issues that companies have to get right - applicants don't like being kicked off a site because they answered a question wrongly, for example, or being cut off mid way through an application without having had the facility to save the information.

Once applications are in the system, companies should not have to spend hours perusing every application - the system can filter candidates with questions ranging from 'do you have a degree?' to online questionnaires or more complex psychometric testing. Leggett points out that HR at Madame Tussauds managed to reduce its recruitment processes in time terms by two-thirds, having used the system's abilities to filter applicants.

i-GRasp has moved towards tailored application forms for specific jobs, not 'one-size-fits-all' applications, says managing director Andy Randall, which is more satisfying for the candidate than a standard set of questions. "You want the processes to be fast for the applicants, but you also want to ask questions that show you are interested in their skills and you want to find out whether they answer your requirements."

Achieving a balance

A company needs to achieve a balance between asking enough information to satisfy its needs, while not asking so much that the candidate is put off at the first hurdle. Randall advocates that, initially, a company asks three screening questions to help candidates know if they are wasting their time by applying. This could be a simple 'Do you have an MBA?' to a more complex, 'Do you have five years working in the soft drinks industry?'

"In other words, a single point that is a key requirement for the job," says Randall - there is no point in the candidate going any further if they don't have that experience.

Once a candidate knows if they have the relevant skills, a company can ask more open questions, perhaps around the job itself. "If it's about marketing in a soft drinks environment, ask what launches have you done in the soft drinks market in the last three years?" says Randall.

These are application-specific questions to the job and to the type of individual applying. As well as helping in the decision-making process, it ensures the candidate feels that the process is more personal, as well as relevant to the job they are applying for. Further down the line, online psychometric testing can help screen out those whom the company does not want to interview.

For those candidates who are offered an interview, companies can help to keep them interested through a number of electronic tools. i-Grasp, for example, offers an 'interview zone' on the company's recruitment site to help candidates prepare and giving them a choice of time and location for interview. A web cam at the company's premises gives them an idea of what the building looks like when they arrive, so they know they're at the right place.

But while aesthetics are important in online recruitment, so is speed of response. "A lot of companies have a flash website but then once you've filled in the forms, everything is very slow," says Randall. HR departments should be able to measure how long every stage of the online recruitment process takes, so they know how long a candidate has waited for a response.

Alliance and Leicester, for example, tells applicants that they will get an initial response to an online application within seven days.

Linking-up to HR

Successful online recruitment also depends on HR departments linking the web-based recruitment facility to their in-house HR systems, says Elkington. "The full back-to-front integration, from someone coming to the site, filling in a form, being interviewed and becoming an employee, is better. It's a question of getting all the people involved to work together."

Major players in this area include i-GRasp and Axiom, which use both software and consultancy to bring automation and standardisation to the process.

There is also more back end technology available to bridge the gap between the web face and SAP HR management systems. For example, a new software package from Snowdrop, called CV Extractor, has been developed to extract key information (eg, name, address, skills) from a candidate's CV. It then sends that information to the recruiter's HR system, reducing the amount of manual intervention required by HR.

Companies do not need to bring all the information in-house, however. Departments using online recruitment to build a 'talent pool' can develop their database in a secure site provided by the ASP and can access that information when recruiting for future positions.

HR should also keep itself informed about which website and job board is being successful for which jobs, by using the applications it receives to find out who is responding to certain advertisements. "Find out the kind of people it's attracting so you can check your own strategy," says Leggett.

As well as promising efficiencies and speed, online recruitment is increasingly being seen as an effective branding and marketing tool for individual companies and as a good way of attracting people to a corporate site.

Railtrack, for example, used its recruitment site to challenge preconceptions of the company, while Scottish Power used a fairly simple quiz to help applicants find out more about the firm.

With companies now keeping a watchful eye on costs, and keen to extend their reach, online recruitment is likely to grow in the next few years.

A study by iLogos Research showed that 76 per cent of Euro 500 companies have developed a careers section on their websites, with all 500 expected to have careers sections and be accepting online applications by 2004.

And the technology is improving all the time. Just a few years down the line, says Randall, we could all be using the ad-breaks on television to hop over to a website on our digital television, and search for a new job.