

## **E-screening all job applicants**

### **Mequon consultant helps phone centers find best prospects**

Becca Mader

Customer call centers lie at the center of many large service companies' operations yet they suffer from frequent churning of employees that can extinguish the company's profitability.

Turnover is rampant — ranging from 25 to 100 percent annually —and finding a steady supply of candidates to pick up the dropped headsets is challenging for retail, telecommunication and financial service companies that traditionally use call centers.

Banks & Dean is a firm with a Mequon office that consults with, and sells technology for, human resources departments, especially at companies with call centers. The firm is tackling the turnover issue with the very tool that call centers rely on — technology.

Banks & Dean helps clients determine how they can better test, recruit, hire and manage people, said partner Kathy Dean, who runs the firm's U.S. headquarters at 1001 W. Glen Oaks Lane in Mequon.

"We're creating strategies to help them move to real profit centers," Dean said.

The 2-year-old company develops Web-enabled assessment tools to help businesses, particularly call centers, streamline their recruitment and selection processes. Dean and her partner, Berta Banks, who works at the firm's headquarters in Toronto, have worked in human resource consulting for about 15 years, she said. They met at a recruiting conference in Toronto and decided to pool their expertise and start a new company, which they incorporated in Wisconsin.

The firm has 10 employees. The partners maintain two offices because of the client base they each had built in their respective home areas.

"Our vision was to provide an economic and efficient way to recruit, hire and retain top performers in call centers and outside sales," Dean said. "It was a practical solution to a real problem."

Outbound call centers — better known as telemarketers — experience more turnover than inbound centers, where customers call for requests or inquiries, Dean said.

The tools automate the call centers' often overwhelming hiring process and help improve retention as well as aid in training and development, Dean said.

## Reducing turnover

The firm has helped reduce turnover by 10 to 50 percent in some cases and reduced staffing costs as companies do not have to hire additional staff to handle the larger candidate pool. Face-to-face interviews will not disappear but the Internet has elevated the hiring process to a new level by automating it.

Newspaper advertising will always have a place in recruiting, but many companies are looking to technology to make the process more efficient, said Wayne Tarken, chair of the human resource technology and management committee for the Society for Human Resource Management in Alexandria, Va.

Banks & Dean consultants developed customizable profile and selection tools to help companies choose candidates that would best fit their culture and help recruiters measure employee performance and retention.

The cost for the service varies depending on the tool. A simple assessment profile ranges from \$85 to \$175 per person whereas the whole integrated system could be \$100,000 or more, Dean said.

Banks & Dean has profiled about 3 million people in sales, service and management positions through its integrated tools, which connect screening, selection, training and career management components.

Consultants first help companies complete a study to describe their mission and the type of candidates they desire. Questionnaires are tailored to select those candidates.

E-screen — the first stage of the Banks & Dean process — contains questions that help identify candidates who are the right fit for a company's culture, Dean said. Candidates complete the test as a part of the screening process before an in-person interview.

The first step helps recruiters manage a large pool of applicants by advancing only qualified candidates and also provides the candidates with instant feedback, she said.

Companies can tell where the candidates are recruited from — whether it is the Web, advertising or referrals — who is a new applicant and who has been hired.

"The traditional form takes too much time, it is paper driven and information is scattered all over the place," Dean said.

After candidates pass, they call an automated 1-800 number where they will answer additional questions, which gives the recruiter the opportunity to listen for enunciation, diction and clarity.

Following the screening process, the candidate completes a psychometric profile, which contains questions about character traits, communication style and performance, including topics such as stress management and dealing with conflict. Different profiles are used for management positions, sales-people and call center representatives.

"It is multifaceted business intelligence," said Kevin Johnson, vice president of First Hawaiian Bank's 100-seat call center.

The Honolulu bank started using the Web tools in 2001 to hire managers, supervisors, sales and service professionals. Prior to its use, executives had just tested for skill sets.

With the Banks & Dean tools, turnover has decreased by 25 percent and "we're making smarter hiring decisions," Johnson said. "A 25 percent savings in turnover is an easy six-figure savings."

Banks & Dean hosts the software for its clients, which range from financial service companies like Catholic Knights in Milwaukee to retail firms such as Old Navy, a division of San Francisco-based Gap Inc.. Each company provides a link via its Web page to the tools.

Though assessment works, it is not a guarantee, said Mary Bowser, vice president of human resources at Catholic Knights.

"It definitely eliminates people who don't stand a chance," Bowser said. "In an industry that has high turnover, you want to get the best possible candidate and any tool to help reduce that is valuable."

Catholic Knights started using the selection and profiling tools three years ago to select financial service representatives. Bowser said company executives have noticed an improvement in the quality of salespeople they have interviewed.

The hiring process "is like a big funnel and these (steps) are the gates in the funnel," Dean said.

Banks & Dean is not the only consultant offering assessment tools but is unusual in tailoring its services to a specific industry, said Tarken of the Society of Human Resource Management. Companies such as Employment Technologies Corp., Aon Consulting and Recruitsoft provide assessment and applicant tracking systems.

For Banks & Dean to remain competitive, "the bigger vision is how do we help companies get the best fit people who will perform well, stay with the company and add value?" Dean said.

First Hawaiian uses the information to coach its employees and "steer them to a career path," Johnson said.