

May 31, 2009

PREOCCUPATIONS

Be Nice to Job Seekers. (They're Shoppers, Too.)

By JON PICOULT

IN an environment of rapidly rising unemployment, scores of managers and executives have had doctor-as-patient, “aha” moments, as they find themselves among the millions of American workers looking for new jobs.

Now on the other side of the hiring table, these people are seeing for themselves how job candidates are often treated during the recruiting process. And it's not a pretty picture.

Companies' interaction with job candidates is often devoid of basic professional courtesies that were routinely accorded to these managers and executives in their previous roles: prompt responses to phone calls and e-mail, personalized attention and frequent “keep in the loop” communications. Indeed, as these former executives soon discover, the rules of engagement in the recruiting arena are quite different from those they were accustomed to in the corner office.

In this new world, candidates' correspondence to companies is rarely acknowledged. Calls are seldom returned. Status updates are not routinely provided. Rejection decisions are not consistently communicated. As I've heard many a job seeker describe it, this is the “black hole” into which résumés, inquiries, follow-up calls and any other types of communication are lobbed.

These discourtesies are not reserved only for the masses of “poor fit” candidates. They even manifest themselves in interaction with job finalists — people you'd think a company would want to woo and impress.

In their defense, human resource departments receive lots of inquiries from job seekers. It's hard to pay personal attention to each and every one — though with most job applications now submitted or recorded electronically, companies can and should be more communicative using automated means.

But in the whirlwind of daily activity, a business can lose sight that there are real people behind all those résumés. And how the company treats those people, well before any of them become employees, says a lot about it, its brand and its values.

In the current labor market, where there is a glut of supply, perhaps some companies think they have the upper hand and can afford to skimp on the niceties. They are mistaken, though, because every economic cycle eventually turns, and there is always competition for the best talent, regardless of economic conditions.

It's for this reason that human-resources professionals and company leaders need to treat job candidates like customers. After all, these candidates are buying a “product”: a new company, a new role, a promise of career fulfillment and advancement.

A Stanford Business School case study found that some companies get this concept and capitalize on it. Southwest Airlines, for one, recognizes that employment candidates are not only career customers — but that they could also be, or become, customers of the airline.

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The New York Times

Southwest's core principles of respect permeate its recruiting, where there is a focus on making sure that no applicant feels inferior or rejected. Many Southwest job applicants have a better experience being rejected by Southwest than they have being hired by other companies. As a result, Southwest gets the best people, and it shows in its superior financial results.

Another example comes from the food industry, where I recently heard a story about a manager from Nabisco who was attending a human-resources industry conference. When he declared that his company responded to every résumé it received — solicited and unsolicited — he was met with incredulous stares from his peers.

"Why respond to every résumé when that's clearly not necessary?" someone asked.

The Nabisco manager smiled and replied, "Because — everyone eats cookies."

Companies reveal their true colors during the recruiting and selection process. If an organization pays only lip service to principles like respect, kindness and service excellence — that will become apparent through the process and evident to job candidates.

The experience that a company delivers to prospective employees will undoubtedly influence their perceptions of the company, both as an employer and as a business they might consider patronizing.

Companies have much to gain — in talent, in positive word of mouth and in basic corporate responsibility — by bringing greater civility to their recruiting. Few, though, are stepping up to the plate.

So for all you job seekers out there, the next time you hear nothing after contacting a potential employer, don't take personal offense — that's how most companies operate. And when you walk out of an interview knowing that you nailed it, but then never hear from the company again — don't theorize about whether you had toilet paper stuck to your shoe or a stain on your shirt. It is, unfortunately, par for the course.

Let's hope that some basic human courtesy and kindness find their way back into recruiting. And, of course, when those of you who are out of work do land that next job, don't forget what it was like on the other side — and be sure to treat your prospective employees accordingly.

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