

Where Are the Good Candidates? Companies Don't Always Get What They Want

I'VE BEEN AN ACTUARIAL RECRUITER FOR 30 YEARS, the last 20 of which have focused on the actuarial and employee benefits marketplace. I've seen both strong and weak job markets. And in order to adapt to a changing job market, savvy employers and job seekers alike have had to improve their processes and procedures for working with executive search firms. Unfortunately, however, a good number are still approaching the job market blindly and not reaching their maximum potential.

It has been my observation that the highs and lows of the marketplace can be attributed to a changing cycle of supply and demand. Right now we're seeing the signs of heavy demand, but this follows one of the most difficult employment periods in recent memory. In analyzing the factors that affect this ever-changing cycle, one has to examine some of the history behind it.

Employment History

The late 1980s was all roses for the actuarial marketplace. Benefits consulting firms were anxious to add to staff simply on the anticipation of new business. Many companies were over-hiring. Then in the early 1990s, the economy tanked and the hiring demand dropped off practically overnight. Companies had to find quick solutions to improve their bottom lines. Some of the victims of these cost-cutting efforts were the benefits consulting firms that employ a great number of actuaries. They suddenly found that their clients stopped requesting special project work and were reluctant to pay for consulting work overall.

When clients pulled the plug on their consulting budgets, the consulting firms in turn had to improve their own bottom lines. They quickly moved to lay off mid-level actuaries they felt were expendable. It was the corporate consensus that the mid-level managers and senior project management staff were earning too much money and that their responsibilities could be absorbed by employees above and below them in the organization. The rationale was that the consulting firms still needed business developers to seek out new clients and increase sales revenue, and they still needed the lower-end "doers" to get the work done.

Then, when the economy improved, employees who had tolerated being overworked and underpaid showed their confidence in a better job market by finding jobs elsewhere.

The economy and the job market continued to grow through the late 1990s and into 2000. When the tragedy of

9/11 hit the United States, uncertainty wracked the economy and the job market again. People hesitated to leave the security of their current employers and clung tightly to the jobs they had, even if they weren't totally happy.

On the employer side, companies were constantly second-guessing their hiring decisions. Because they weren't sure in what direction the economy would be going, many backed off on hiring altogether. Nagging at the consulting firms during this period was the memory of the early 1990s hiring frenzy that had resulted in forced lay-offs when the economy slowed down.

Now it looks as though the uncertainty of the past four years is here to stay. Terrorist activity, oil price fluctuations, and a certain amount of unrest are a constant presence. Despite these perceived problems, however, the United States has been able to retain a surprisingly positive outlook and a stable economy. Employers are eager to hire, but employees are being much more cautious about changing jobs. Companies want to grow, but many are being hampered by not knowing how to add the best people to their ranks.

Hard to Get

Employers are pushing hard to spread the word to multiple outside recruiting firms that they have positions to fill. But in their rush to get their jobs to the market, they're falling short on truly selling their jobs to recruiters. Typically, they neglect to provide position details, the key features that make a job interesting to candidates. Employers are often missing opportunities to partner with recruiters and aren't really inviting them into the "real" recruiting process. Frequent and hurried parting comments to the outside recruiter are "If you think you have someone from the 25 words I've given you, send the résumé. But don't call for feedback; we'll let you know if and when we're interested."

Unfortunately, this process can take weeks, often resulting in a rejection without explanation. This inefficient, dismissive approach to working with outside recruiters and candidates means companies hear only about active job seekers who have résumés on hand and ready to go. The effect is an inefficient recruiting process that focuses more on tasks than on people. Simply keeping track of ré-

SCOTT ROLLINS is president of S. C. International, Ltd. in Downers Grove, Ill. He can be reached through its website at www.scinternational.com.

sumés that filter in, feeding the company database, and screening résumés, instead of specifically going after and recruiting strong candidates who fit the position, is a mistake. This approach is probably no more effective than running ads in a trade journal or posting jobs on the Internet or company websites.

Furthermore, it's potentially more time-consuming because of wasted effort. Companies that rely on this recruiting philosophy are missing wonderful opportunities to attract strong but passive candidates who may be a much better choice for the company.

Recruiting firms are themselves constantly contacting potential job seekers and compiling their own stockpile of candidates. But by providing incomplete information, employers are limiting any specialized recruiting that could be done for their positions.

In addition, contingency recruiters, fearing that their competition might beat them to present a candidate, often rush in and submit candidates that don't really fit the position. Too often the same person's résumé is presented from multiple sources, adding to employer frustration and wasting everyone's time. Employers are annoyed by this situation but don't realize they're at the root of the problem.

Watered Field

So many recruiters contact so many people that the marketplace has become numb to being enticed to new opportunities. Recruiters tend to grab good people, or even mediocre but qualified people, and try to shop them around to any firm that will listen. But because companies have failed to do anything more than announce an opening or ask to be alerted to any good candidates, the entire recruiting process has become watered down.

Good candidates who are tired of getting "shopping calls" just sit tight. They may listen to an opportunity once in a while when they're having a really bad day, but generally they close their ears to many calls. It may be the greatest opportunity to come along in years, but if the recruiter has only enough information to provide a general ad-sounding pitch, the person indicates no interest.



The next recruiter then comes along with the same half-informed presentation, and the candidate again says no.

By the time the executive recruiter who really knows the scoop on the job calls, he or she immediately gets shut down before the discussion even begins because the candidate is insulted and tired of feeling like a piece of meat. "Leave me alone; I'm happy; I'll stay where I am for now" is the common refrain. The truth is, he or she might have really been thrilled with the position, but it's a missed opportunity and the candidate and the company have lost a chance to get together.

And what's the result of all this? Unfortunately, companies are forced either to settle for less-than-ideal candidates or to see their jobs go unfilled for a long time, leaving the current staff feeling overworked and underappreciated. The potential for added profits is never reached.

What's the Solution?

The best approach is for companies to partner with search firms they're comfortable with and to bring them into their recruiting effort. Providing the recruiter with all the necessary information to go to the market and to approach likely candidates will bring positive results. Arm the executive recruiter with the right ammunition to entice candidates into listening to the opportunity, and follow up by offering the candidate an opportunity to speak with company representatives.

What information will the recruiter need? Details on company culture, the office environment, personal profiles of the managers and peers, salary structure, benefits, life/work relationship, professional growth support, and career path are all important, as is why someone should want to work at the company. Companies aren't going to share all of this information unless they trust the recruiter, and it must be available to everyone involved in the process.

Unfortunately, in-house recruiters often lack this knowledge themselves, so they can only share what information is given to them. Therefore, everyone involved with hiring must work together to achieve maximum results. Companies should recognize the need for this type of partnership and must also work hard to develop an effective, knowledgeable team if they want to hire the best people available.

Candidates should also try to make good decisions when choosing a search firm and recruiter to work with. Those looking for a new position must keep in mind that they'll need someone who is going to really help their career, not just find them a job. They should get to know the recruiters they interact with as much as possible and to partner with those who know the marketplace and have their best interests in mind.

They should always remember that it's their career someone else is influencing. The misguided recruiter who blindly sends out résumés to just anyone or who ultimately presents someone in a bad light can hurt the job seeker's chance for a successful interview with a firm that just might have been the best employer ever.

When investigating the marketplace, candidates should keep track of where and when they're presented to a company. Candidates should stay in control of their job search at all times and never allow themselves to be talked into anything they're not comfortable with.

The need for talented individuals is at a peak right now, and the job market is expanding rapidly. To capitalize on the many opportunities for employers and candidates alike, it will be important to make certain that the right person is matched up with the right company and in the right job. ●