

## **Candidates Are Customers** *By Laura Jacob*

Throughout the USA and Canada there are predictions of dire skill shortages as the baby boomers retire. Outsourcing to less costly jurisdictions, which is still popular, won't be the solution to all of the upcoming skilled staffing needs. In an employee-based market, qualified candidates will be able to choose from among a number of offers, as shoppers do when they choose one car, sweater or book over another. After price and quality considerations (or salary and benefits) a customer (or candidate) evaluates the quality of the service they receive. Why do you go back to some stores more than others? Superior customer service is often a key differentiator and does not increase cost. With the market on their side, a candidate's treatment during the recruitment process will influence their decision-making process to accept job offers. We'll look at simple yet effective tips to increase an employer's customer service during the recruiting process.

As shoppers, all of us have experienced poor customer service. Recently, I called ahead to my local bookstore to order a copy that I wanted. On the designated pick up date, I went expecting to get the book and be out in a few minutes. The bookstore was relatively empty that morning, but it still took about 10 minutes to get the attention of the salesperson who was chatting on the phone with a friend. When I managed to get his attention, he couldn't find the order form and asked me to wait while he went to the backroom to look for the book. Ten minutes later the salesperson returned saying he didn't have my copy and asked me to restart the order process. Needless to say, I have no plans to go back to that store soon and have shared the story of their poor service with friends and family. This store lost one customer and gained some bad publicity that might also impact other peoples' purchasing decisions.

What if the bookstore above was a company looking to hire? Hiring managers and other interviewers often keep candidates waiting passed the time of their appointment. Would the same manager keep a customer waiting? Some candidates are asked to interview on multiple occasions and then are contacted if they aren't the successful candidate. Not only do bad hiring incidents portray the staff involved in a poor light, but they also create bad publicity for the employing organization. Many people can tell tales of employers who are eager to fill a role but are not as interested in how candidates are treated during the staffing process. Some examples:

- One candidate was asked to wait while the interviewer took a phone call. Later, the same candidate was again asked to wait, this time in the hallway, while the interviewer had another meeting.
- Another candidate was invited to interview with multiple people over a few months and was never told he had been rejected.
- One organization rejected a candidate and then sent the same rejection letter three months after the original.

- Another organization sent a rejection letter on a piece of crinkled paper with no letterhead.
- The CEO of a Fortune 1000 business asked a female candidate if she planned to have more children.

Organizations hoping to be “Employers of Choice” should consider approaching the staffing process as courting a potential client, not just a number in the candidate pool. An innovative shift in the general approach to the staffing process, from job posting to on-boarding and beyond, gives employers an edge over their competition. Companies take great care in the business development process with potential customers to ensure they are treated respectfully, and communicated to in a timely fashion. Organizations should treat employment candidates with the same care.

It doesn't take a great deal of effort for an organization to make the staffing process as pleasant as possible. Simple tactics include emailing acknowledgement of online submissions and ensuring that candidates being interviewed feel comfortable (e.g., a glass of water and the location of the washrooms). Decisions should be made as quickly as possible, and updates or rejections confirmed expeditiously via a brief phone call, email, or letter. Keeping the candidate informed does not take much effort.

Prospective employees learn a great deal about a potential employer and hiring manager from their treatment during the selection process (from the moment they walk in the door to when they start and throughout their career). Bad experiences get shared and technology is making the world too small to risk negative exposure. If hiring is the most important decision a company makes then recruiters and employers alike, must take this opportunity to review how they can make themselves more attractive to candidates, not only after they are hired but before as well.

The faster life gets the more we've been encouraged “not to sweat the small stuff.” When recruiting, however, the devil does appear to be in the details. Be the company that gets the great referrals, best exposure and keeps its employees by creating simple yet effective communications and treatment of candidates in the staffing process. Use the tips below to take care of important details and build relationships with candidates as you would with potential customers.

### **Tips for Candidate Friendly Staffing**

- Create automatic acknowledgements for online job submissions.
- Send applications for completion ahead of time to candidates coming in for interviews, in a simple Word format, or ensure there is enough room on the printed hard copy form itself (i.e. spaces between questions and 12 pt fonts or larger).
- Provide interviewees with an agenda of their meetings including names, titles and contact information.
- Encourage interviewers to stick as closely to the schedule as possible to respect the candidates' time.
- Provide breaks during long interview sessions (e.g. half or whole days).
- Stay in touch with candidates if the staffing process lasts more than a few weeks.
- Contact any candidate who had a phone or in-person interview and was not selected, as soon as a decision has been made.

- Remember, candidates who become employees will remember how they were treated during the staffing process; and they may also one day be your customers.

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