

Ready, Aim, Hire

Use targeted approaches to recruit the best and the brightest of any generation

BY LYNNE LANCASTER AND DAVID STILLMAN

When developing recruitment messages for prospective students, colleges and universities work long and hard to identify the institutional qualities they will find most appealing. As a result, admissions officers have the mindset of Millennials (born 1982-2000) down to a science.

It's astonishing, however, how little effort they and their cohorts in advancement put into understanding what attracts potential employees.

One of the most strategic plays campus managers can make in the recruitment game today is to figure out not only what prospective employees are looking for in a potential employer, but also how those qualities differ for each generation.

We offer here our best advice on dangling the appropriate carrots during the advertising stage and the interviewing process. Recruitment isn't a one-size-fits-all undertaking.

Make a well-rounded pitch

In most cases, Traditionalists (born prior to 1946) or Baby Boomers (born 1946-64) are the hiring managers who communicate the pitch to a headhunter or write the copy for employment ads. And there's nothing wrong with that – as long as resulting messages resonate with prospective hires of all generations.

When we examined the recruitment Web sites and employment ads of dozens of colleges and universities, we discovered a theme. The vast majority describe when the institution was founded, how large it is, the size of its endowment, and how many students, faculty, staff, and alumni it has.

For Traditionalists who helped build the advancement operations on these campuses and Baby Boomers who competed so hard to get jobs in them, messages about size and history are very attractive. But more often than not, these messages won't attract Generation Xers (born 1965-81) and Millennials.

These prospective hires are more interested in hearing about innovation and flexibility than they are about tradition and policy. By putting a little incentive for each generation in recruitment messages, education institutions are likely to draw a broader and better prospect pool.

Choose interviewers with care

Once an employer has a candidate in the door, he or she still needs to make a good impression. So don't choose an interviewer solely on the basis of knowledge of the institution

or length of service. In fact, that could be problematic if the interviewee is considerably younger than the interviewer. Similarly, a younger hiring manager might not relate quite as well to an older candidate.

In addition to the hiring supervisor, consider having each candidate meet with at least one interviewer who is about his or her age so the candidate has a greater chance of seeing that generation's values reflected in the workplace. If a candidate and an interviewer communicate across a generation gap, the employer may be in trouble. For example, an Xer candidate might be appalled by a Traditionalist interviewer who says he hasn't taken a sick day in 23 years with the institution. The Traditionalist might make the comment as a proclamation of his dedication to and enjoyment of his job. To the Xer, however, it can communicate a disturbing lack of balance and an inflexible work environment.

Likewise, a Boomer interviewee might be turned off by a Generation X staffer who states that she has arranged to leave the office by 4:30 p.m. every day. For many Boomers who had to compete for jobs against 80 million peers, this may come across as a poor work ethic. To the Xer who saw her Boomer parents sacrifice their personal lives for their jobs, the statement might be intended as testament to a forward-thinking employer.

If you don't know the age of an incoming prospect, leave a little flexibility in the interview process for closing walk-around introductions. That way – if a promising candidate who seems generationally mismatched with your recruiters shows up, you'll have an opportunity – to introduce him to a few staff members closer to his age.

Create the appropriate ambience

Many Traditionalists and Baby Boomers believe that the best way to impress a candidate is to conduct the interview in a board room, seated at a conference table the size of an aircraft carrier's landing deck. Depending on the position and the age of the interviewee, being formal may be completely the wrong approach, however.

As office dress codes have loosened, neckties making way for tie-dyes in some workplaces, younger applicants' expectations have changed. While a Traditionalist still might prefer an interview in a clean, well-organized office followed by a tour of campus, meeting for a cup of coffee or an early-morning jog around campus might be a better way to get acquainted with a Generation X candidate. And, yes, that means shedding your suit in favor of shorts and a T-shirt. Being flexible on where interviews take place, who the interviewers are, and what they wear will result in better connections with applicants.

Ask the right questions

The one-size-fits-all approach to scripting interviews doesn't work either. When Traditionalists and Boomers went to their first interviews, they hoped to give the right answers. Younger members of the workforce want to be asked the right questions.

Again, tailor the message to the candidate. An entrepreneurial Generation Xer who expects to hit the ground running and doesn't relate to any notion of paying dues in a workplace

would be thrilled to hear. "What kind of projects and donors would you be most excited to work with and why?" A typical Boomer, who is assessing whether he's accomplished enough in his career, would appreciate being asked about his long-term goals. A Traditionalist, part of a generation that has sought to build a lasting legacy, might be honored to answer a question such as. "What kind of a contribution could you make to building this institution for the future?"

Have the right answers

It's not uncommon for today's recruiters to find themselves in the hot seat facing a question such as, "What are three reasons I should consider joining your advancement team?" Be prepared. Similarly, a Traditionalist who spent years positioning for a promotion might resent being asked by a 25-year-old candidate how soon she can expect to be promoted. However, recruiters who are thoroughly prepared to be interviewed themselves and who are trained to answer such questions with aplomb are bound to fare better in the process.

It's also important to understand the motivations of the candidate across the table. When a Baby Boomer development officer asks about perks, for example, she may be hoping to negotiate a university car to be as productive as possible during a long commute and frequent regional travel. An interviewer who proudly informs her that she'll receive a laptop, cell phone, and university Internet account to make it easier to work from home could be missing the mark. For a busy working parent with a house full of noisy offspring, the prospect of taking more work home might be the last thing she wants to hear. On the flip side, a Generation Xer might jump at the offer of the latest technology and the freedom of not being tied to the office.

As the U.S. labor market loosens, advancement managers face a growing pool of talented workers of every age. That doesn't ensure that these candidates will find campus openings appealing, however. To attract and land the best hires, it's time to include generational awareness in your recruitment strategy.

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