If recruitment means building trust, where does technology fit in?

Poor use of technology turns off applicants, evaporates your talent pool

by Igor Kotlyar and Len Karakowsky

Competition for the best and the brightest is as fierce as always. But the rules of the recruitment game have changed, and trust has become a measure by which employers are compared. Enter technology.

Those companies that can communicate trustworthiness through their recruitment process will be more successful at attracting the cream of the crop. Frustrating them with the improper use of recruitment technology is no place to start the relationship.

Studies suggest applicants see a connection between the quality of the selection tool and the integrity of the organization.

The application and the pre-employment screening procedure are the first points of personal contact between a company and a potential employee. This is a powerful opportunity to make the right first impression.

On the one hand, good use of technology can greatly advance recruitment efforts. It can communicate that the company is forward-looking, progressive, leading and trustworthy — the type of employer most people would like to work for. On the other hand, poor use of technology can make a company appear cold, distant, unfriendly, and even shady — the type of employer most would prefer to avoid.

Poor use of technology

Simply posting jobs on the Internet, accompanied by lengthy pre-employment tests (some containing upwards of 300 items), can induce negative perceptions of the company and might actually hurt the recruitment effort.

Stories of frustrations with online job hunting are abundant, and have led to growing cynicism among job-seekers.

Having filed their applications online, applicants often don't even receive a note of acknowledgement, let alone any feedback regarding their suitability for the posted position. They have no knowledge of whether their personal information has made its way to those for whom it was intended or simply disappeared into cyberspace. The "not knowing" element can be quite discouraging and can only undermine a company's trustworthiness in the eyes of applicants.

The perception of a company's integrity is further dimmed when selection tests seem unrelated to the job, appear exorbitantly long, contain questions deemed too personal or ask the same question a hundred different ways. Consider these examples:

•A personality profile asks applicants to rate the accuracy of these statements as the statements pertain to them: "I believe in one true religion," "I tend to vote for liberal political candidates." This will rightly be seen as inappropriate inquiries about religious or political affiliations.

•A personality profile contains the following items: "I often eat too much," "I go on binges," "I love to eat." Applicants may find these items annoyingly repetitive and irrelevant … unless the position is for a restaurant critic.

Of course recruiters are not intentionally looking to get a rise out of applicants. Poor use of technology is more likely to occur because recruiters believe that what works in face-to-face screening Second, simulations provide employees with a realistic job preview. In a sense, it allows them to "test drive" the job before committing to it. Letting applicants try jobs on for size is a great way to promote trust. The use of this technology suggests that the company cares about the applicants by providing them with a way to determine whether this job is indeed right for them.

Third, this technology provides accurate feedback to the candidate that can be used for personal development and career planning. Assessment simulations supply valuable information about skill gaps that cannot be easily ascertained from other sources. This information allows companies to map out a larger picture for each candidate, which enhances the overall desirability of the company.

Keith Church, a real estate broker with Prudential Grand Valley in Kitchener, Ont., uses an assessment simulation to recruit for his firm and reports applicants find the simulation highly valuable.

"The simulation provides candidates with a realistic preview of the highs and the lows associated with the job," says Church, "and they appreciate the frankness. They also know that, if hired, this information will be used to develop a career plan for them."

Articles on the subject of selection technology typically look at the issue from an efficiency perspective: The best systems are considered those that provide cost and time savings. But this is often at the expense of paying close attention to the human factor.

Design your selection system to attract the best candidates to your company. Remember that while you are assessing them, the top candidates are assessing you — and high on the list of criteria are perceptions of your trustworthiness.

The proper use of technology in the selection and recruitment process can make a difference in perceptions of trust among applicants and, consequently, in the ability to attract the best and the brightest.

Igor Kotlyar oversees the development of computer-based technologies for assessment and training at Toronto-based Upward Motion Inc. Len Karakowsky is an associate professor of management at York University and the author of a recent textbook on management. For more information contact igor@upwardmotion.com.