

intelligence vault

LEADERSHIP AND TALENT DEVELOPMENT

how to scout talent

~ Mark Healy / Partner / Torque

When it comes to leadership and talent development, it all starts with having the right people. Recruiting is a key element in the hiring process, and the traditional recruiting model for pursuing new graduates, is broken. The more managers and business owners I talk to, the more I hear about hires that looked good when the offer was made yet turned out not to be a great fit a few months into the role. Speaking from personal experience, well north of 50% of my MBA class changed jobs within two years of graduation. Some turnover is healthy, but investing in new grads and then losing them quickly thereafter is very costly and disruptive.

Everyone knows the game. This is the game:

- Identify the schools (normally business schools) at which you plan to recruit, and the level at which you will recruit (undergraduate such as BBA, or more senior such as MBA).
- Contact the career centres at said schools early in the summer to book times in the busy recruiting calendar. September is the silly season to recruit new grads, eight to twelve months before they graduate.
- (If you are big enough and/or have the gumption) Hold a private party or BBQ for select (career centres normally help with selection) graduating students sometime in August. Sell, sell, sell on exclusivity and firm smarts.
- Post a job at the end of the summer.
- Head to the school in early September to hold an information session. At the information session: sell, sell, sell. Try to convince students you are different and offer the best environment for development and work-life balance.
- Head back to the school in late September for first round interviews, normally behavioural.
- Hold second and third round interviews, normally technical and fit interviews, in October.
- Make an offer(s). Make a hire.

Why is this model broken? First, consider that the process can be 'gamed'. Candidates for business degrees understand the game so well they can fake their way through interviews. The result can be bad for both sides, as you end up with someone who is not a great fit, and the new grad ends up with a job he/she doesn't really qualify for or want.

Next up is the differentiation argument. Haven't you just spent months or years trying to be different, trying to get a leg up on competitors or new entrants by innovating in your customer service or on your website or with your technology? Well, if you play the game above, how differentiated are you? Without meaning to do so, you are telling top grads you are just like everyone else.

Now ask yourself this: which industry relies most heavily on talent for success? There are many good answers, but I would argue it is pro sports. In hockey, if you have good talent, you win, you put bums in seats and sell jerseys, and you make money. If you have a poor level of talent, you lose and you are in the red. Do you think hockey teams hold information sessions and interview players with hypothetical questions like: "What would you do if the puck is in the corner, and you drop your stick?" Of course not – it is laughable. Hockey organizations don't have a recruiting orientation at all. They scout talent. They watch talent actually perform the function live before pursuing anyone.



There are three good lessons here regarding looking for fresh talent at schools:

- You may be competing with larger organizations, and you have to realize that and leverage the differences, just like the sunbelt hockey teams do when talking to free agents. Perhaps you offer a wider scope of experience and better lifestyle than the larger players.
- The term 'recruiting' itself implies you must convince or entice someone to join your organization. Is that what you want? Don't you want candidates to want to work for you? Then they have to know and understand you.
- For talent scouting to be effective, the candidates have to be looked at under 'game conditions', not in 'what if' scenarios. This means observation, not interviews.

So, what are the alternatives? In business, if you want to get above the fray, one high potential route to follow is thought leadership. Instead of selling, demonstrate expertise and let potential customers or the audience decide how differentiated you are and what your value proposition or culture really is. Mapping this onto talent scouting for new graduates:

- Consider approaching the schools you are interested in with a unique value proposition. Instead of holding an information session, offer to give a talk (in a classroom) on your industry, or teach case examples which connect the theory learned in courses to the real world you live and work in.
- Offer to participate in case competitions or to host some type of unique challenge where you tap your network for interesting guest speakers/judges. Whatever you do, keep it interactive.
- Contact the student-run clubs and ask them for guidance on how to deliver something of unique value to graduating students, and customize the session around the club(s).
- Once involved, resist the urge to sell your organization. Instead, speak from experience and ask students a lot of questions. Use specific examples when answering questions.
- Most importantly once involved, put yourself in a position to evaluate students on the criteria most important for your organization and/or the role you are looking to fill. It might be smarts (who is asking the best questions?), communication skills (who is articulate and confident?), or problem solving skills (who is gathering and analyzing data effectively?). Then either let students self-select and approach you (at least you will know they want to work for you) or selectively approach those in whom you see the talent you are seeking.
- If possible, arrange for students to carry out micro versions of the work you/your firm does (pick a stock, make a marketing recommendation – whatever the case may be). These 'game situations' are the most indicative of who will be successful in your organization, and who will not.

Two things to keep in mind here: 1) you do need to be mindful of the calendar – if you hold your unique session in November, some top students will have already signed elsewhere, and 2) the key to this process is to pull back the curtain and let students get a real look at what you do, such that those who approach you/you approach understand what they are getting into.

The benefits can significantly outweigh the investment required. Some colleagues of mine push back on me and say: "But this will require more time on our part." I doubt it. It requires more creativity and a willingness to break process. The upfront time investment might be slightly higher, but countless hours will be saved on the back end in not wading through hundreds of resumes and cover letters – many of them from candidates that don't really want the job anyway, and in not interviewing as many candidates.

If your business relies on talent, and I can't think of many that don't, it might be time to have a long look at your recruiting processes.

A closing note to those thinking I am not a fan of career centres. On the contrary – career centre professionals do a fantastic job of educating and preparing students for the process of interfacing with companies with hiring



needs. Career centre professionals can be your biggest allies and sources of information to help you make a plan. The commentary above is not about circumventing career centre process, it is about cutting through the noise to differentiate and get the talent you need.

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