

2000

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Research in Progress

Recruiting the Best In These Very Tough Times: A Study of Recruiter Behaviors Preferred By MIS Graduates

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Computer and data processing services are the single fastest growing segment of employment in the United States today.¹

Nationwide, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that about 190,000 information technology jobs are open in medium and large companies.¹ Small company searches are not reported through the BLS. 68% of companies surveyed by the *Chicago Sun Times* cited the lack of trained workers as a barrier to the company's ability to grow.² The same study reported a 43% drop in the number of computer-related Bachelor's degrees awarded annually between 1986 and 1998. It appears that entry level positions in information technology are a "sellers' market."

We have entered a stage where people are essentially stealing each other's employees because there aren't enough to go around....47% of business owners say recruiting and retaining workers are the biggest challenges they face in business today (NSBU & Arthur Andersen enterprise Group, Seventh Annual Survey of Small and Mid-sized Business Owners).³

Clearly, then, today's company recruiting practices can affect not only the filling of specific job duties, but also have the potential to impact the very capacity of the company to deliver its mission and task. Several studies have explored what attracts employees. "In these days of talent wars, the best way to keep your stars is to know them better than they know themselves—and then use that information to customize the careers of their dreams"⁴

However, relatively few studies have focused on the human interaction with recruiters which young information technology graduates perceive as differentiating an attractive employer from an unattractive one.

COMPANY RECRUITER BEHAVIORS

One might assume that companies differ from one another so greatly on characteristics such as compensation, nature of work and opportunity for growth that such dimensions make choosing among job options easy. However, Ohio University and Rochester Institute of Technology students are frequently faced with choices to be made among Ernst and Young Consulting, Anderson Consulting, Pricewaterhouse Coopers and Arthur Anderson. The consulting task, training programs and opportunities, while certainly not carbon copies of each other, are quite competitive. Faced with offers from more than one of these major firms, what tips the balance in favor of one as opposed to others? The answer may well be the management of the recruitment process.

In the current environment of talent scarcity, encouraging applicants to remain in the applicant pool is a major goal in the recruitment process.⁵ The recruitment process is more than a doorway for the firm.⁶ Anything that occurs between the candidate and the firm becomes a part of their (potential) long term relationship.⁷ Applicants infer from the recruitment process what life will be like once hired.⁸ "If an applicant feels treated with care and consideration, perceives he or she is treated on an equal basis, and there is mutual decision making...[these factors] will shape expectations about future cooperation."⁹

It is reasonable, therefore, to infer that the behavior of the frontline recruiter plays a special role in this regard. Hence this study addresses the question: which recruiter behaviors are likely to influence candidate choice in favor of or against the firm?

STUDY PROCESS

The study took place among graduating senior MIS majors at Ohio University and Rochester Institute of Technology. The domain to be explored emerged from a series of structured interviews conducted with a group of thirteen high achieving students who constituted the "Corporate Leadership Fellows" at Ohio University. These students are competitively selected to represent the College of Business for one year as ambassadors. They are widely acknowledged to be the "best and the brightest." Each had accepted a position within three months of the interview.

Each Fellow participated in the interview during which they were asked to identify recruiter behaviors which fostered or inhibited job acceptance. All interviews were recorded and content analyzed for specific factors linking recruiter behavior with career choice. The resulting elements were used as the core of the questionnaire which was tested for reliability in the quarter prior to June Commencement. The

refined questionnaire was then completed by all June graduating MIS majors at both RIT and Ohio University in 1998 and 1999.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

20 RIT students and 111 Ohio students participated in the survey. While Rochester Institute of Technology is private, considerably smaller and less diverse in its population than Ohio University, the surprising results demonstrate that certain behaviors on the part of recruiters do, in fact, play a role in choosing the employer.

The Most Appealing Recruiter Behaviors

The following "top ten" lists indicate the behaviors noted by students at each school as positively affecting the company choice.

OU

1. Kept in touch with me throughout the time I was interviewing with other companies.
2. Remembered things I said earlier in the interview process.
3. Asked questions about my professional goals and desires.
4. Talked about specific training, certification or licensing programs.
5. Related to me as a person, not a "prospect."
6. Talked as if the firm would be pleased to attract me.
7. Asked questions unique to me and my situation.
8. Talked about how one makes career progress at the firm.*
9. Spoke highly of the firm.*
10. Invited me to company sponsored activities (training sessions, leadership conferences, company celebrations).*

RIT

1. Kept in touch with me throughout the time I was interviewing with other companies.
2. Asked questions about my professional goals and desires.
3. Talked about specific training, certification or licensing programs.
4. Talked as if the firm would be pleased to attract me.
5. Asked questions unique to me and my situation.
6. Related to me as a person, not a "prospect."
7. Acted as if he or she understood what it was like to be starting out as a young professional.**
8. Remembered things from earlier in the interview process.
9. Made the interview feel more like an informal conversation.**
10. Emphasized travel opportunities for the employee.**

Behaviors Adversely Affecting the Choice of the Company

The following "top ten" lists indicate the behaviors noted by students at each school as negatively affecting the company choice.

RIT

1. Treated me like a "number"--like one of many candidates.
2. Suggested personal unhappiness with the company.
3. Commented negatively about the company s/he works for.
4. Commented negatively about other interviewees.
5. Could not locate my resume.
6. Appeared to be very rushed.
7. Criticized the firm's competitors.*
8. Emphasized that entry level employees would spend some time "paying their dues."
9. Was dressed inappropriately for the interview.
10. Was late for the interview.

OU

1. Could not locate my resume.
2. Suggested personal unhappiness with the company.
3. Treated me like a "number"--one of very many candidates.
4. Commented negatively about other interviewees.
5. Commented negatively about the company s/he works for.
6. Appeared to be very rushed.
7. Was late for the interview.
8. Emphasized that entry level employees spend some time "paying their dues."
9. Was dressed inappropriately for the interview.
10. Interruptions occurred during the interview.**

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

Three meaningful outcomes appear to be emerging from this work-in-progress. First, it appears that new hires are willing to acknowledge that recruiter behavior does, in fact, play a role in the choice of jobs. Second, it appears that recruiter behaviors can be identified which enhance or discourage the likelihood of an individual's choosing one company over another. Finally, it appears that students in similar situations at very different institutions exhibit many of the same values when considering recruiter behavior.

*Signifies item not on OU Top Ten List.

**Signifies item not on RIT Top Ten List

Clearly the study is in its very early stages. The results noted here suggest that a first step in continuing the research would be to expand the population to a greater number of information technology graduates. Subsequently, insight might be gained from a comparison of results between information technology graduates with those from other business disciplines to determine whether the positive employment outlook in any way influences candidate preferences.

In the longer term, the researchers hope to provide a clearer message to firms that must successfully recruit to survive.

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