Recruiting and Social Media

Today's recruiters are dealing with more sophisticated and better informed candidates than ever before. Most job seekers are aware of every recruiting gambit, trick, technique and tool imaginable. There are online courses on how to ace behavioral questions, lists of poses and postures that project positive energy and dozens of articles and books that promise tools and tips to help master the "chi" of getting us to give them a job.

So, has the time come for us to exploit social media and its various "communities" as we recruit candidates for our jobs? Of course it has. The problem is that we have heavily invested in our own legacy systems or sophisticated and expensive applicant tracking software; spending the additional funds to post sophisticated and engaging ads on LinkedIn, Twitter or Facebook is difficult if not impossible to sell at budget time.   Corporations may be able to afford around $125 per day to advertise on Facebook or Twitter; we simply cannot spare the budget.

But what about using this tool as part of the recruitment process? Social media may be the emerging channel of communication for most of the world, but using networking to establish communication between employers and potential employees is certainly not new. Most of us have for years offered incentives to employees for successful referrals, and a premium to those who help us fill the most difficult vacancies. The difference is that we now have the capacity to cast a wider net in the search.

Of course there are pitfalls. There is the paramount issue of personal privacy. There is also the lack of control over the way in which our institution may be represented by our faculty, managers and staff. Many who inhabit virtual communities appear to be unaware of potential consequences of the wide and immediate broadcast of a word or a picture on any subject. Many organizations are (as you read this) drafting and adapting policies relative to the use and restrictions pertinent to at-work access to social networks.

At the same time, the use of these far reaching networks absolutely can work in our favor as we attempt to distribute the information about open positions and the benefits that come with employment with us. Faculty, staff and students are probably already tweeting and passing along job opportunities in an informal recruitment effort to attract and inform their family and friends about opportunities or a job opening in "the department down the hall."

I recently visited the website of a software company selling applicant tracking and related systems. SocialMediarecruitment.com[1] recently published an article about a "roundtable" discussion among three executives of recruitment software companies. A word of caution about the "data" on these sites - they are often tilted towards persuading you that their own products are the ultimate solution. Still, this article made a few salient points.

Jason Barnett, Chief Information Officer at EON Applications, Inc. participated in a "roundtable discussion with the author. He said there is an increased focus on finding what he labels the "passive candidate." This person is coincidentally engaging on the site, not actively searching for a job. Mr. Barnett asks, "What is it we need to know and do in order to take full advantage of social media as a tool to attract these candidates?" He had few ideas to share other than embedded links, likes, and pop-ups.

Another roundtable participant, Susan Vitale, Chief Strategy Officer at iCIMS, a talent acquisition software company, responded that when hiring managers leverage social networks to post or advertise their jobs and promote opportunities at their institutions, it is a "push" mentality. The information is pushed out to the network. She says a "pull" approach means we embed social media links into our own applicant tracking systems. Several of us are doing this already, and with mixed success. Perhaps this will help us create a more seamless flow of information and data in both directions. It will most definitely challenge our information technology departments as well as the staff in the offices of general counsel.

We know that social media should work well in this manner, but for academic HR people with whom I spoke, its effectiveness is questionable. The most frequently experienced challenge is the "fit". The breadth of the user community means that there are many, many applicants whose qualifications simply do not meet the requirements, and the time it takes for a small recruitment department to screen through the resumes and CV's just doesn't provide enough return on the invested effort.

Perhaps social media is more appropriate for the screening phase of the recruitment process than for soliciting candidates. In researching this paper, I found that Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn are the three most popular job search sites. (I omit sites such as Monster.Com, which are web sites devoted specifically to position listing and applicant solicitation). Mashable.com published a brief article in October of 2011[2] and reported data from a survey conducted in 2011 by Reppler[3] and Lab42[4]. Interviews were conducted with 300 randomly selected hiring representatives from a broad spectrum of industries already using those three social media sites in their recruitment efforts. (There is no indication in the report of the actual businesses represented; it is likely that few to none are academic medical schools or centers!)
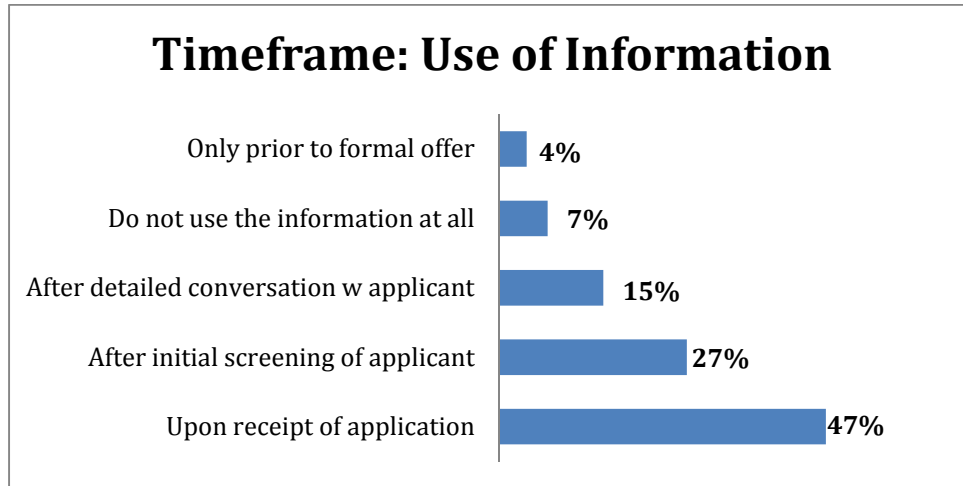
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[1] Kyle Lagunas, The Future of Applicant Tracking Systems; Executive Roundtable (SocialMediarecruitment.com, September 2, 2011)

[2] Erica Swallow, How Recruiters Use Social Networks to Screen Candidates (Mashable.com, October 23, 2011)

[3] Reppler is a social media monitoring service designed to help users manage their online image across different social networks. It does so by showing users how they are perceived across social networks, by telling users the makeup of their social network connections, and by identifying any potential issues and risks. Reppler is a free service and supports various social networking services, like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. (Founder: Vlad Gorelik)

Here are some of the data points from that survey.

At what point in the recruitment process do you access information from social media?

Timeframe: Use of Information

Only prior to formal offer	4%
Do not use the information at all	7%
After detailed conversation w applicant	15%
After initial screening of applicant	27%
Upon receipt of application	47%

The recruiters reported that when it was time to make a final decision, the information they had gathered from the sites, considered apart from what they learned in the interview, probably caused them to continue to pursue or to reject an applicant about 68% to 69% of the time. In other words they were as likely to accept as to reject a candidate based on what they learned about them. Only 5% of the respondents said they did not rely on the data gathered from social media sites at all when making the final decision.

Not surprisingly, most of the respondents' reasons for *not hiring* candidates based on the information gleaned from the sites would probably not be revealed in a face to face personal interview. Most frequently mentioned were inappropriate photos, comments or content. Also cited were the admitted use of drugs or alcohol and negative comments about prior employers. I found myself wondering how information was gathered from a site like Facebook, which supposedly requires acceptance of "friend" status when one wishes access to personal information. In reading through the readers' comments at the end of the article, I found that there are recruiters who are requesting this status as part of the interview process! *Two caveats: First, personal information provided on any site should not be illegally obtained; and second, in the interest of trust, full disclosure and institutional ethics, any recruiter or hiring representative ought to inform the candidate that this information will likely be used as part of the interview process.*

The reasons for *hiring* candidates based on site content were essentially the same as would be reported as a result of in-person interviews and include positive personality that infers good fit, creativity, excellent communications skills, and positive references.

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[4] Lab42 is an independent market research firm gathering survey responses from social media

So, do you or don't you use the available resources to help in gleaning or screening applicants? It seems to depend on several variables like inclination, need to fill particular positions, and the values of the institution. One thing seems clear – it's not just a bandwagon, and those of us who lead the way can be a resource for others in making the leap.

Are you/how are you managing this issue? We'd like to hear from you.

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