

Grace Under Pressure

I have read the many postings to our TENG-Discussion Group this past week concerning “Candidate’s Rights, A Consumer / Service Guide to Recruiters”, and felt compelled to offer some thoughts on this subject since I have been an IT recruiter for over twenty-six years. You are enduring very stressful times that force you to make decisions and endure uncomfortable conditions. I submit that many of us are experiencing the greatest turmoil of our careers. Your experiences at the hands of uncaring and insensitive recruiters and hiring officials must only add to feelings of inadequacy and insecurity. I do not condone or excuse rude, arrogant behavior on the part of anyone, and would refuse to deal again with those who display it. The shabby, unprofessional treatment you are receiving from recruiters and company officials are the fallout of our present times, not the cause. People who subject others to abusive and rude behavior do not deserve to enjoy their present responsibilities. They are the stewards of very privileged and confidential information and they are also empowered with creating the important “first impression” of their company. Even when rejecting candidates, everyone involved should speak with sensitivity, understanding and honesty. As a search professional I feel that we have an obligation to treat everyone with equal dignity. However, in these difficult times, corporate and individual bad manners abound, please read on. Earlier this week, I spoke with a long valued client and fellow TENG member. He shared with me a brief story of a colleague who following a successful phone interview with a company, was invited to fly to the headquarters for the next step in the process. Upon arriving at the airport check in counter, he was informed that his flight reservation was cancelled. Somewhat surprised and baffled, he called the company, and was informed by some functionary that his interview had been cancelled. No one ever called him to offer an explanation or an apology. While this may have been the result of an oversight on the part of a stressed company executive, it is nonetheless thoughtless and inconsiderate. I would bet that this spurned candidate would take every opportunity possible for years to come to share his story with other business contacts. Ultimately, such a vignette could prevent a potentially strategic hire by the offending company sometime in the future. The effect of word of mouth negative comments shared by senior executives can be very damaging.

Sometimes, poor behavior is a smoke screen or mask for other hidden issues. In another case this week, one executive contact alerted me to a senior level opportunity with a global systems integrator that serves some select vertical markets. She had been offered the position, but was unable to accept it for personal reasons. She indicated that the company had been searching for months to fill this one hundred per cent travel position, was having no luck and seemed desperate. She gave me the name and phone number of the hiring executive with permission to use her name. After researching the company on the Web, I called him and was greeted with a tone of voice that could have been mistaken for the Second Ice Age. He insisted that they had plenty of candidates and that “internal resources” were more than adequate to complete this search. My referring contact had previously said that the company admitted to her that it had no internal resources, and my visit to their Web site revealed that they were seeking a Director of Recruiting. When I advised her of the results of my call, she then said that as a job candidate, she had written six consulting proposals to support new business development for this company without being offered compensation. She then added that she had referred numerous colleagues as job candidates to the company, and it had turned off all of them. I could only surmise that this company is either in a death spiral or in serious financial trouble due to lack of sales. It can’t afford my services, possibly can’t

afford to fill positions unless it gets more business and to do that, it has to pick the brains of its job candidates. I feel fortunate to have discovered this early on. The silver lining in the cloud may not be what we expect.

Every one of us is suffering from the stress of uncertainty and fear of the unknown. Being unemployed, watching your investments being eroded by a fickle stock market and spending down the remainder to meet present expenses is very distressing, especially when you can't get a job interview. The poor behavior that you encounter from the ranks of those still employed becomes salt poured into an open wound. It is inexplicable because they have jobs with paychecks and at least should be compassionate toward those who don't. Perhaps many of them are under tremendous pressure and may fear losing their jobs, but that should motivate them to be more professional.

Perhaps these thoughts will provide additional perspective:

- Comparatively few CEOs buy into the economic recovery hailed in the press and are still waiting for things to improve. These are the people who “pull the trigger” for major hiring and growth initiatives and until they do it, everyone else has to wait. This is prolonging the agony for the unemployed and for businesses that sell to other businesses. Top corporate management in general is under growing and constant pressure from Wall Street and investors to deliver honestly reported, increasing profits. CEO's are wrestling with poor backlogs and weak forecasts to determine when business conditions will improve. This and the present global situation have created an uncertainty that is pervading every major corporation and its vendors. Uncertainty breeds fear, which breeds indecision, and in many cases it breeds unprofessional behavior.
- I have heard that some companies and recruiting firms alike are merely collecting resumes for when business conditions improve, however I have no proof of this. If it is true, they want nothing more than a resume to scan into a database, as they have nothing to discuss with you.
- Many corporate human resource departments are thinly staffed or are outsourced altogether. Recruiting is but one function of HR. Politeness falls by the wayside when an understaffed department receives hundreds or thousands of Emailed resumes for one position. Follow-up, if it even exists, is sloppy at best. Only the few candidates selected for hire have calls and Emails returned under these conditions.
- Most recruiting firms have downsized, including the large retained firms. They are trying to do more with scant resources. They simply don't possess the time or the personnel to respond to every inquiry, but this in no way should allow them to be rude and unprofessional when dealing with potential candidates.
- A significant number of recruiters entered the business during the 1990s, enjoyed the booming economy and have never seen a recession. Many are being let go while others are suffering compensation cuts of up to sixty per cent. All are under extreme pressure by their management to deliver results. In sales driven organizations where management's mantra is, “What have you done for me lately”, staff turnover and pressure is unbearable. Once again, it does not excuse unprofessional conduct, but may be the cause of it.

- Many people believe that the Internet is a panacea for recruiting. This is more perception than reality. Nevertheless, it has increased the speed at which positions can be advertised and candidate responses can be submitted. It has also depersonalized the recruiting process. Although having a recruiting Web site is required nowadays, I question its value for business development. My former company's Web site received countless compliments. Of all the Web-based inquiries I received from potential clients, only one turned into a solid business relationship. I later learned that another firm, which is now my present employer, had also referred this client to me. All the other companies were price shopping, and either refused to reveal their identity, or attempted to dictate their vendor policy to me in their first Email, without even attempting to build a relationship with me. The greatest majority of my best clients and candidates have developed through personal referrals. I doubt that the Internet will change that although it is here to stay.
- While corporate senior management may state that their employees are essential to their success, many treat them as a commodity. Trust, loyalty and mutual commitment are no longer valued the way they once were. Quarterly profits and immediate results are all that matter. As one financial services CEO allegedly remarked some years ago, "If I want loyalty, I'll buy a dog". If employees are treated with this kind of contempt, prospective employees may not fare much better. The rise of the contingent work force is making human capital look more like cannon fodder. Some companies let their people know, albeit subtly that they don't want them to be long term.
- Unfortunately, the recruiting industry has bad apples, but it also has shining stars. You need to look for them. Don't judge an entire industry by the actions of only part of it. Recruiting is very much a sales business. That can be good or bad depending upon each recruiting firm's processes and ethics.
- Corporate management also has good and bad players. This is front-page news nowadays. Choose your next boss carefully. Try entering her or his name into a Web search engine and see what comes up, before you accept an offer.

In spite of all our technology advances, recruiting and hiring is about relationships. During the dot.com craze a few years ago, I recall hearing stories of candidates who Emailed resumes to startups and were hired over the phone or via return Email, with no personal interview. Maybe this form of recruiting contributed to some of the many business failures. The employment market has shifted dramatically and rapidly from short supply and high demand to the reverse. No one has a clear vision as to when hiring activity will increase and how long it will sustain although it has improved slightly in recent months. Some experts advise that our present condition is nothing more than a momentary pause in a continuing demand for people. The oldest "baby boomers" are about to begin early retirement, although I probably will not be among them. Nonetheless, there will not be enough younger workers to fill the void. Hiring activity is expected to re-intensify. Let's hope it happens before we slip into financial ruin.

In light of the present conditions, I would suggest that you carefully consider the following ideas:

- You are a senior executive. People get to your level in part because they don't complain, display their temper or lose their nerve under pressure. While not easy, these traits are the hallmarks of a leader. Leaders are selected because they set a positive example and are a source of strength and

motivation for others around them. They are gracious and calm under the most negative and stressful conditions. Companies look for these characteristics in job candidates.

- Learn from your present experiences. Developing a list of recruiters to avoid when in future hiring mode should be balanced by developing trust-based relationships with a select few recruiters who can help you. They are information brokers and competitive intelligence specialists. Your effectiveness and future success in your next position will be measured in part by how well you hire. Your overworked and understaffed corporate human resources department will not always find the best people by looking solely at those who haunt the job boards and attend career fairs. The Web will have some recruiting value, but it will probably be more effective for lower level candidates. For your direct reports, a reliable network is a good asset. A reputable search firm who understands you, your company and your requirement may help to find the best talent available to make you look good. If you have a good rapport with them, they will also keep you apprised of market trends, and competitor activities.
- Whatever your means of acquiring job candidates, remember that when hiring, others are judging you, will remember your behavior and will develop an impression of your company. Utilize only those employees and search firms whom you can trust to display exemplary courtesy and make your company attractive to potential job candidates.

Don't let the negative actions of others impact your job search. You may wish to share the names of discourteous recruiters and company officials in private conversation, but to distribute lists of these people only wastes your energy on negative endeavors. Right now, your time and efforts are best spent selling you. After you are hired, simply ignore those who treated you poorly during your search. Your silence will be sufficient.

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