

Expert Recruitment Insights: A Chat With John Sumser

With so much noise in the recruitment space, it's important that you hear from the best voices in the industry to help you become a more strategic recruitment professional – and we want to help you do that. This is the first installment in our Expert Recruitment Insights series. Be on the lookout for our next segment soon.

We recently spoke to John Sumser, principal analyst at HRExaminer, about the biggest challenges he's encountering in the recruitment space, the well-intentioned – but often failed – promotion of candidate experience, the most important part of your recruitment strategy, employment brand perception versus reality (in the form of a joke), and more.

CareerBuilder: What are the recruiting challenges you're hearing of most often?

John Sumser: It's a crazy time. Between disrupted industries, new technologies, a recession that happens by industrial sector and the changing relationship between talent and companies, a lot of recruiting departments are in disarray. It's like being in a really leaky boat with all kinds of holes with all sorts of problems. If you wanted to, you could cry in your beer about how hard it is.

Couple that with an impossible-to-define job for recruiters. In some places, recruiters are little more than glorified meeting schedulers. In other places they are the backbone of the company's talent management strategy. It's virtually impossible to tell how a company does its recruiting without going through the process.

It gets worse. The candidate experience movement is well-intentioned, but it does very little to actually promote an understanding of what it's like to be a candidate and what the damage is that's caused by corporate recruiting processes.

Let me tell you, nothing is more likely to produce a psychotic break than the stresses of being recruited or looking for a job. The very act of starting to look is enough to trigger an identity crisis, even for those lucky enough to be recruited into a job.

[“For most people, a new job involves being humiliated in a bad power structure.”]

The change in the relationship between talent and company is partially a reflection of the economy. Workers have the upper hand when the unemployment rate is low. Fewer workers means greater leverage for those that remain. But, when the recession returns (and it always does), that position is more precarious.

Finally, we are paying a lot of attention to employment branding. That's another way of noticing that there's a small labor shortage. In the areas with tough recruiting problems (meaning the market is competitive), making the case that you are a great place to work really matters.

CB: When everything is important, how do you prioritize what to address first in your recruitment strategy?

JS: The most important thing has two parts:

1. Knowing your audience, and
2. Knowing what you want from your audience.

No recruiting solution can produce interesting results without overall objectives that are larger than the number of people you want to hire. A great workforce plan helps you understand who is needed when, and for what reason. The first wave of prioritization involves separating what is critical from what is “nice to have.”

Recruiting is a full contact sport. You must do the work to tell which requisition is the most important. (Hint: It's probably not the requisition the hiring manager is currently yelling at you about. It's the one where no yelling is necessary).

Once you know who you are trying to recruit, it's time to understand the audience of potential hires. This is a group with whom you want solid relationships. To do so, you need to describe them in detailed demographic terms.

With targets and audience in place, you can let your recruiting method take the lead.

CB: What is the one challenge everyone should be addressing right now in some way?

JS: Figuring out how to keep the employment brand consistent with the organization's reality.

Here's a joke about that:

The CEO stood before the Pearly Gates, facing St. Peter. "Strange," mused St. Peter, "we've never had a CEO make it this far before. I'm not sure what to do with you. While I think it over, I'll let you experience a day here and a day in Hell."

So the CEO spent an entire day lounging on clouds, playing the harp, talking with the angels. Twenty-four hours later, she was taken to Hell. The Devil took her to a beautiful country club

where she found many of her old friends, dressed to the nines, drinking, joking, laughing and having a great time.

They talked old times, played golf, had steak and lobster, drank Champagne and danced till dawn. Soon, her 24 hours was up and she was back at the Pearly Gates.

St. Peter said, "I've considered it. I'll just let you choose where you wish to spend eternity."

She replied. "Well, Heaven was OK, but, no offense, I had a much better time in Hell."

Poof, back down she went. But this time she found herself in a desolate wasteland covered with garbage. Her friends were still there, but now they were dressed in rags, picking up garbage and carrying it from one pile to another.

"Wait a minute. I don't understand. Yesterday when I was here, there was a golf course and a country club," she told the Devil. We were having a wonderful time. Now everyone's slaving away shoveling garbage."

The Devil looked at her and smiled. "Yesterday we were recruiting you. Today, you're staff!"

In short, the way your employment brand is connected to your employment reality is the first order of business.

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