

EMPLOYER/RECRUITER ADVICE

The Upside of Down

Deep economic downturns often change human and organizational behaviors forever. A generation of Americans kept their extra money secreted under their mattresses after the Great Depression because they no longer trusted banks. And until the late 1900s, commercial banks were forbidden from operating as investment banks in order to prevent a Depression-like banking collapse. Sadly, the Glass-Steagall law was rejected as old fashioned in 1999, and we are now living with the consequences. The point remains, however: that in times of stress, people and organizations adopt new ways of acting, and those new behaviors—good or bad—tend to last a very long time.

That's particularly true in recruiting. Despite all the bleak numbers in the news, employers are still adding new staff. They are hiring in a very different way, however, and it's this new behavior which has the hallmarks of a permanent change in the way things are done. What am I talking about? The strategy of upgrading an organization's workforce even as it downsizes that same population. I call it the upside of down.

To put it bluntly, a growing number of employers are now trading out their "C" performers and replacing them with "A" level talent because ... well, because they can and they must.

- They can because there have never been so many high performers actively looking for a new job. Bankrupt, merged and wounded companies are now laying off their best performers and in the process creating the most attractive pool of prospects in decades.
- They must because they risk falling behind the competition if they don't. When the recovery comes—and it will come—the organizations that have upgraded their workforce will be able to move more quickly, more creatively and achieve better results than those that are still plodding along with a full complement of mediocre performers.

So, the challenge for those of us in recruiting today is to find an answer to this critical new question: how do you upgrade a workforce even as you are downsizing it? It's a complex business, to be sure, but not as outside the realm of our experience as we might at first think. In fact, I believe you can successfully implement an upside of down strategy if you remember just three things that you already know.

First, "C" Level Performers are People Too

They deserve your employer's respect and decent treatment even if they will no longer be among its employees. That's not only the correct way to act, it's the correct way to recruit "A" level performers. The single most important criterion in a top performer's evaluation of a prospective employer is what it will be like to work in the organization. And they make that judgment based on what an organization does, not on what it says. They assume that the treatment an employer accords its displaced workers—regardless of their capability—is the

treatment it will accord a new employee—even if they are more talented or will make a greater contribution to enterprise success. Hence, you can have the most compelling employment brand ever devised and you can spend a fortune promoting it to the candidate population, but if your human resource management practices suggest a different reality at work, the best talent will always default to the more negative view.

Second, The Golden Rule of Recruiting

This maxim is as simple as it is powerful: what you do to recruit the best talent will also recruit mediocre talent, but the converse is not true. In other words, "A" level performers, even those who are in an active job search, know they are a valuable asset for employers and are determined to be treated that way. They will not respond to job postings which are poorly written and lack the detail necessary for informed decision-making. They will not condone interviews by hiring managers who are unprepared, unfriendly or both. And, they will not tolerate a lack of communications or attention during the recruiting process. They expect to be kept informed of their status on a regular basis and that we recruiters will make the effort to get to know them and their employment goals. To put it another way, they don't want what has sadly become the norm in many recruiting functions today: a supply chain experience that makes even the best prospects feel more like a widget than a talented human being.

Third, You are Trying to Adopt a New Behavior

Senior executives, even those in HR, may not recognize the potential benefit your organization stands to gain from today's high caliber candidate pool or the cost required to attain it. Therefore, sell the value proposition of upgrading your workforce up the chain of command. If possible, take it all the way to the top. Then, after they get the message, educate them on the companion reality: there's no free lunch in recruiting top talent, whether we're in a recession or a boom time. You need capable recruiters, a sensible budget, solid technology and effective leadership to succeed, and now's the time to get them. You've never been able to offer a better return on the organization's investment than right now. So, make your case as an extraordinary window of opportunity—a momentary and fleeting chance—to upgrade your employer's talent and, in the process, give it a competitive edge that will serve it well in the recovery and for years thereafter.

Improving the level of talent in an organization is normally one of the most difficult goals to accomplish in recruiting. Typically, "A" level performers have lots of choices, including the employer for which they are already working. They are seldom willing to move voluntarily and are even less frequently forced into transition. That's why it's so important to change your behavior and take advantage of today's atypical situation. The current candidate pool represents a once-in-a-career opportunity to upgrade your organization's capability and ultimately its success. Don't miss it.

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