

Management recruitment under extreme time pressure with selection quality having to be guaranteed at the same time

Time pressure is not an uncommon extra condition in a recruitment project. This means that it is not unusual for a personnel consultant to have to occasionally work with time restrictions. Particularly ambitious time schedules, however, sometimes constitute a certain challenge as well as an unusual situation for our occupational group.

In this case, in which three managers had to be recruited and selected at the same time, top management's heavily restricted time availability established the major milestones for the customer. On top of this was an important, media-effective company marketing presence, in which the new managers already had to participate. The customer, the world leader in a branch of medical technology, had approved the newly-created, vacant management positions only three-and-a-half months before the new managers appeared in the market for the first time. On top of this was the limited availability of the decision-makers (managing director from Germany and CEO from Switzerland). After rearranging the calendar of events, the closing date was produced, which already fixed the final decision-making discussions for the appointments for the sixth week after creation of the job specifications.

For a recruitment project to be successful under such conditions, a series of pre-requirements must exist or be created.

The time schedule

In such a case, both parties, customer and consultant, must decide on a time schedule which excludes any postponements, as early as the project start meeting/briefing. Only in this way is it possible to keep the capacities necessary for the project available, despite the influences of daily business. By adopting this procedure you necessarily deprive yourself of some freedoms but you are able to concentrate fully on the candidates and their interviews. Candidate availability within such a limited timeframe becomes, however, a highly decisive factor. One advantage, however, is also the opportunity to inform the applicants at a very early stage of a project's progress and end. This allows applicants, too, to synchronise their own time schedule with the progress of the project.

Choice of candidate introductory phase and of media

In order to approach candidates within such a short time and still select and assess them with the necessary care, it is essential to quickly establish candidate mobilisation. By no means would there be enough time to firstly produce and agree on a list of target companies and possible appointments. This eliminated the direct approach. The sphere of activity and the required knowledge had however no absolute connection to any sector in the case described. That is why we have to work here with fast media and persons from a database who are immediately available. In the case described, all three positions were placed in a suitably large job advertisement in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and on the Internet job sites with the most visitors in Germany. Since the customer's market was an attractive sphere of activity in the Health sector, and it was not essential to be trained within that branch for any of the three positions, it was possible to address a wide public. Thus there were already nearly 500 applications to choose from two weeks after advertising start, with the numbers divided almost equally between the positions. In order to make access easier for potential candidates and to speed up the project at the same time, telephone information was offered at the times published in the advertisements, on the first two weekends of the placement. Not only was this offer enthusiastically taken up but it demonstrably encouraged attention to the advertised positions as well as a rapid response to the particular job advertisement. It is essential in such a project to consider making use of any available day, even the weekend, for contacts with candidates and this was already factored into the planning, right from the start. Within approximately five weeks at the most, all the candidates on a shortlist were finally given four appointments of which at least three would be on a weekday.

Project management/task profiles

Because of the tight time schedule, managing the project is extremely important, as enough time must be available for careful candidate selection and assessment, in addition to coordinating the times of interview. For this reason, all candidates must familiarise themselves from the start with the tight appointment schedule. Since the time for an initial interview with the customer was already fixed before project start, it was possible to mention the exact date of it in the advertisement. Publishing the date made it clear to the candidates in good time that flexibility for making quick decisions is required. These project specifications are not, however, sufficient in themselves. The task profiles and the positions which the suitable candidates then occupied were equally important. Since the persons sought were exclusively managers in field sales and marketing, more time flexibility could be expected from the outset with such a target group than with people from strategic or processing and production positions. That is why it is possible almost exclusively in the Sales and Marketing area to agree to successful project completion (introductory phase, selection and decision to appoint) within such a short period.

Candidate management and focus

In order to keep the project development running at the projected speed, rapid communication with the candidates was necessary. Every candidate under consideration thus received feedback or had to submit it to the consultant, just a few days after making contact. The fixed time schedule was already discussed in the first face-to-face meeting with the consultant, in order to test availability for the other three possible appointments or to establish it in advance. In order to avoid any disappointment on the part of the applicants, the individuals must be quickly informed of the project's progress. At the same time, as a consultant you must concentrate from the outset on the group of applicants with the highest potential. Evident here was the success of the impressions gained on the telephone at an early stage, which gave both sides an impression as realistic as possible of mutual expectations. It produced a very low candidate dropout rate on the one hand and, on the other hand, increased the proportion of suitable candidates in the personal interviews. Early focus on the group of applicants recruited in this way then creates the scope for careful selection in the form of methodical suitability interviews as well as for obtaining references.

Customer enthusiasm/attractiveness of the package

All the measures the consultant has taken as well as the carefully-structured time schedule are of little value if, within such a project, the customer does not play his part in its success. It should be taken for granted that no changes can be made to the appointments, once they have been fixed. It is more a question of offering outstanding prospects to a group of applicants which would like to switch jobs within a certain period. These prospects, of course, consist in the task and in the remuneration package attached to it. Often, however, the personal impression made by the superior carries more weight. Here it is vital for the customer to make patently clear, at project start, the results that he expects from the new managers, how they can achieve them and what type of person he sees in the particular position. Only clearly-expressed requirements at this stage prevent high candidate losses and rejections by the customer. Applicants recruited and selected in this way made it through to the initial contact with the customer. Out of eight candidates recommended and put forward, only three were rejected. No candidate dropped out of their own accord. Instead, a few days after the initial contact with the customer, all the candidates expressed, in a written statement he had requested, that precisely his charm and his clear expression of objectives caused them to maintain an interest in the particular post. The consultant must be able to transmit this customer enthusiasm in his initially anonymous contacts with the candidates, in order to achieve such a low applicant withdrawal rate. One week later, all five candidates already had a personnel interview with the Group CEO. The decision to appoint was made on the same day. Three candidates received their contracts within one week and they all signed them. All three participated in the first engagement, a customer event in the USA - they took leave from their current employers for this engagement.

Conclusion

Many prerequisites and extra conditions are necessary to successfully run a recruitment project of this nature in such a short period of time, simultaneously maintaining the selection quality at the highest level. Even if only one of the conditions described above is not met, it is not possible to call the project a success. That means that either the project is lasting much longer than planned or that not all of the positions are filled within the fixed time limit. Considered in this way, projects such as that described above are feasible but they tend to remain the exception.

Direct search for a highly technically-qualified person in a restricted competitive environment

To successfully fill a position with applicants from a company's direct market, several dozens of target companies with at least as many possible candidates are usually necessary. Moreover, it can be assumed that not every potential candidate is motivated to switch to a competitor's company. For that reason, it is always necessary to define a search area active in closely-related areas (sector, products, applications and customers).

It is thus a total exception to accept a search assignment with only two companies and eight possible candidates. The extreme limitation of the search area in this case was excused by the fact that only two companies share the field for a particular application and solution of production-related intralogistics. The customer wished to establish himself as a third force in this market but needed to acquire existing product and application know-how from his competitive environment. The personnel search was preceded by a market study which confirmed the growing need for similar solutions and contained the market information that a third supplier was practically being desired by customers in this highly oligopolistic supply market.

Just such a market study already contains the initial success factor for a search project of this type. Anyone employed to assist the customer as a valuable expert requires a high measure of assurance of the success of such a market move, for him to find the motivation to change jobs. Any suspicion that it might be an "experimental project" or indeed a rather half-hearted, ill-prepared project, will be punished by disinterest and rejection by specialists among the candidates. For the consultant, preparation of this kind is both a sign that the customer has become deeply involved in the case and that it is possible to conclude the assignment successfully, despite the high risk connected with such a narrow search area. In order to be armed against the failure of the operation, it is still necessary to have a "plan B" in the introductory phase, both for alternative sources of candidates and for the procedure.

In addition to eliminating risks, motivation for the interest in a change and also in the post on offer constitutes another crucial success factor. In a search area which is restricted in this way, in addition to traditional motivating factors such as monetary factors and expansion of skills, demands regarding personal development opportunities, structures, economic strength of the company and the company culture as well as management style must be satisfied. At the same time, the superior responsible for the position to be filled must be aware of his crucial role. One of the criteria most frequently mentioned in a candidate's decision to change jobs is the charm and kindness of the future boss. Of particular significance in this case is the fact that the consultant knows the effect that his customer has had on candidates for many years or has learned to evaluate this effect in the course of the analysis for preparing the customer.

Thus prepared, the introductory phase involving the potential candidates could now begin. It was clear that not only the motivation which makes a new job or new employer attractive can

be used. At the same time, reasons had to be found to firstly prepare a potential applicant for the introductory phase. For this, you have to examine the basic conditions which allow an employee to perform his work in a motivated way. The actual basic conditions are the task components, the salary proposed and the superior's character. After the improvement in the task components and in the salary have been firmly established, at the same time an opportunity must be found during the preparation phase to find starting points as a motivation for change which can be found within the relationship with the present superior. A condition of that is that you deal with the potential applicant in a considerably more intensive way than is feasible in a distinctly larger target group. At the same time, both consultants and customers are required to allow the current information on the company and personalities surrounding it to flow into the search project, in order to exploit other possible starting points quickly. In the present case, the recent replacement of the Country Manager responsible for the German market constituted such a source.

A quick establishment of contact with the interested candidates followed the identification and approach phase, brief because of the manageable target group, as the time factor is also important. The customer must also be geared up to preventing valuable time being lost before contract negotiations, after approach phase and selection. Since all the possible candidates had been in their present position for a fairly long time, they fulfilled all the professional criteria, with the result that it was possible to concentrate intensively on the assignment to be covered and on determining reasons for changing jobs. In fact, with some candidates there turned out to be a combination of several of the reasons given above indicating a change, so that a selection could be made even from various candidates. At this point it was possible to exploit the situation whereby a certain lethargy had set in, among the two market leaders, which was noticeable even among their customers. Becoming active as a third force in the market became one of the stimuli for the candidates. As the customer was geared up at an early stage to react quickly, towards the end of the search project, to the candidates' wishes regarding appointments, decision and contract, the final appointment of the candidate was arranged quickly. In total, the search project took only eight weeks, from task analysis to contract submission. We were able to dispense with the idea of a second start with alternative target fields.

Conclusion:

In a search project with a highly limited target group, great value must primarily be placed on the motivating factors for a change of employer, factors which go beyond the usual supplementary conditions, such as monetary or skills-related ones. The company must also support these factors by demonstrable facts. Having the choice between several applicants at the end of a search project of this type will remain a total exception. In addition, the speed at which such a project is completed is a totally crucial factor.