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IT Recruiting – Great Candidates Can Be Found!

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Abstract: Over the past four years, the Chief Information Officers of Wisconsin State Government and the University of Wisconsin have partnered with the State Department of Employment Relations on a number of initiatives aimed at improving the recruitment and retention of information technology staff. Two years ago, the CIOs pooled their funds and hired an IT Recruiter to lead their recruitment efforts. This paper will discuss these recruitment efforts and provide insight into how you can improve your IT staff recruitment.

State-University IT Staffing Initiatives

In 1996, the Wisconsin Department of Employment Relations began working with the Chief Information Officers of Wisconsin State Government and the University of Wisconsin to resolve a staffing crisis in information technology. At that time, hiring and retaining IT staff was very difficult due to low salaries, long recruitment cycles, and inflexible state rules regarding classification, recruitment processes, and compensation. An advisory board consisting of these CIOs and Human Resource professionals was formed. This board's major objective was to advise DER on issues related to IT staff recruitment and retention.

Since then, the processes and rules associated with IT staff recruitment and retention have significantly changed and improved. This includes reworking the classification system so that titles can be more easily matched to formal market surveys and heightening the awareness of the Governor and university chancellors regarding the IT staffing crisis. Legislative changes have included: broadbanding of IT classes, across-the-board salary increases, and streamlined recruitment procedures. In addition, IT organizations and Human Resource departments at the various agencies and universities have banded together to streamline their recruitment processes.

Hiring an IT Recruiter

The CIOs and Human Resource professionals realized that the processes of advertising for jobs and recruiting to fill those jobs needed improvement. The Human Resource staff in the agencies and universities performed those duties, but they were so busy that their efforts did not receive much attention. The IT managers themselves did not have the required expertise. As a result, the state IT recruiting efforts resulted in "boring" advertisements placed only in newspapers. The IT departments found that they were merely "trading" staff among departments and bringing few new staff to the labor market. In December 1998, as a result of these concerns, DER hired an IT Recruiter using monies contributed by some of the CIOs.

Jennifer Gebert, the State IT Recruiter, has been instrumental in improving IT staff recruiting efforts. Because she is dedicated full-time to recruitment efforts, she is constantly seeking creative methods to promote state jobs. She monitors the success of various initiatives and provides a solid link between the IT managers and Human Resource professionals.

Changing Recruiting Strategies

Staff recruiting involves two major strategies: attracting applicants and recruiting those applicants. Attracting good applicants requires careful examination of the labor market's expectations – the salaries and benefits that are expected for various kinds of work. In

trying to attract applicants, recruiters must consider what applicants expect from employers – the recruiting techniques and non-monetary items that they expect.

The recruitment strategies of the past do not address today's IT staffing challenges. Demand for skilled IT staff exceeds supply. The talent pool is shrinking. There is greater competition for skilled staff, and private sector companies are creating new incentive programs to hire these staff. In addition, today's applicants have different expectations than applicants of just a few years ago. Recruiting IT applicants today no longer involves the prospective employer saying, "Sell me on why I should HIRE you for this job..."; rather the applicant says, "Sell me on why I should TAKE this job."

Attracting Applicants – Labor Market Expectations

When recruiting a promising applicant, a public-sector IT organization must address these issues:

1. Timing – React quickly and yet sensitively to the applicant's needs.
2. Demonstrate flexibility in interviewing – consider telephone and video conferencing.
3. Follow a consistent process – be able to explain it to the applicant so that he or she knows what to expect and when.
4. Interview – handle it professionally; offer parking and travel expense coverage.
5. Follow up – Quickly respond with a thank you and further information.

Other steps can make your offer more appealing to a job candidate. Close the deal with the applicant as quickly and effectively as possible. Make the offer as soon as possible after the interview, because a delay in the offer process is often the difference between getting the applicant you want and settling for second best. Personalize the offer letter so it does not appear to be a mere form letter. Include resolution of negotiating points.

Traditional Recruiting versus Reverse Recruiting

Traditional recruiting starts with a job description followed by attention to location, salary, and benefits. When those recruitment items have been met, concerns about leading-edge technology, training and mentoring opportunities, work culture and people, and industry career growth come into play.

Reverse recruiting starts with industry career growth, then work culture and people, and so forth, ending with the job description. Many of today's applicants are more interested in what the job has to offer for their own career development than in what the job description says or what the job pays. Employers must recognize this as they try to use traditional recruiting methods with applicants who may have a different set of needs.

Where to Find New Talent and Minorities

Tough times for recruiting require creative recruiting strategies. While traditional job advertising methods such as advertisements in newspapers and trade journals continue to have value, job postings in less-traditional places can be very effective. Use of alumni association lists, trade journals, billboards, Web ads, radio, and television all expand the number of prospective applicants who see and hear of jobs. Presence at job fairs also increases the likelihood of finding good applicants. Often former and current staff can serve as sources of information about potential recruits.

A good source of new IT talent is your own university. Offering training in IT skills can be a very effective approach to providing a new career to existing university staff. Student employees and internships also offer a way of bringing in new staff. These programs may be resource intensive and labor intensive in the short run, but often are very cost effective over the long term. IT organizations can also proactively seek to hire their own graduates. Offering student jobs and entry-to-intermediate-level jobs to students at local universities can help them develop their careers as well as providing needed workers for IT organizations in those institutions.

Finding minority applicants can be difficult. Trainee programs and student school-to-work programs can offer opportunities for IT careers to the participants. They can also offer opportunities for IT organizations to diversify their workforces. The University of Wisconsin-Madison establishes relationships with area high school students by providing training and outreach programs throughout their high school career.

The Interview Process

The interview is an opportunity for the prospective employer to make the candidate feel not only needed but desired. Applicants like a friendly first impression. They like personal recommendations and professional offer letters. They appreciate finding company information on the Internet, so they can be informed before they arrive at the interview. Applicants also appreciate “little things,” such as being offered a cup of coffee, obtaining information on the local community, and receiving ready access to parking. Applicants like to be accommodated. To reach distance candidates, use video-conferencing and telephone interviewing.

Applicants do not like lengthy delays, broken promises, lack of confidentiality, conflicting information, and a lengthy interview or application process. They expect to see a job description and an interviewer who is prepared. They want the employing unit’s staff to appear professional and the process to be clear and organized.

Why Applicants Accept Jobs

Applicants accept job offers for a variety of reasons, only one of which is salary. Colleges and universities are fortunate to have the reputation of being good places to work; they should use that reputation to their advantage in recruiting IT staff.

Colleges and universities tend to be on the leading edge of technology, which attracts applicants. They often offer very competitive benefits packages and are viewed as places with good management in a relaxed setting. While most colleges and universities do not offer market-rate salaries, the extras they offer can offset the salary gap. In their recruiting efforts, college and university IT organizations need to emphasize their strengths in attracting the best applicants.

Why Applicants Reject Job Offers

Applicants often reject job offers in response to what they see as poor salary and benefit offerings. But often, they also reject job offers based on gut feelings and intangibles. Before making an offer, prospective employers need to be aware of an applicant's job priorities. If there is a fairly good match between what is being offered and what the applicant wants or needs from a job, the chance of being able to hire the applicant is good. Sometimes, forces beyond an employer's control, such as multiple offers and counter offers, come into play. Clearly, an IT organization must improve its ability to make counter offers if required.

Recruitment Changes at the University of Wisconsin and Wisconsin State Government

Over the past few years, the University of Wisconsin System and the State of Wisconsin Government CIOs and Human Resource professionals have changed the state recruitment process in a number of ways. These changes have greatly improved the quality of the organizations' applicant pools and have resulted in better hires.

1. The Wisconsin State Civil Service System has a long history of requiring applicants to take an exam to qualify for a state job. For IT jobs, the process was streamlined while still adhering to important merit-system principles. Instead of written exams, pass/fail evaluations and resume screening tools were used. The application period was shortened, and a process was initiated for prompt follow-up with candidates.
2. The Web is now used to assist in recruitment efforts. Web-based job advertising is found at www.itcareers.state.wi.us. The State and University recently joined an Internet recruiting agency, techies.com. Web resume searches are possible for hard-to-fill positions. For jobs at the entry-intermediate level, prospective applicants apply online at <http://jobs.state.wi.us/elisp>. The Department of Employment Relations also provides the hiring managers with online candidate referrals.
3. The Wisconsin State Civil Service System operates under state statutes and administrative rules regarding how many candidates the hiring manager can interview. Recent changes to the civil service statutes allow the elimination of the "rule of 5" and allow the hiring manager to interview all candidates who pass the qualification screening. Hiring managers can now interview all qualified candidates or decide how many to interview.

4. Job fairs have provided opportunities for hiring managers to contact candidates quickly and effectively. Candidates are required to complete an “exam” in the form of an objective inventory questionnaire (OIQ) that can be completed in a matter of minutes. It may be as simple as five “yes” or “no” questions about the applicant’s technical background. If the applicant passes, he or she takes part in interviews with the hiring manager onsite at the career fair. Hiring managers can issue immediate job offers. Whether or not the applicant is hired, he or she receives feedback immediately or within a few days.

Onsite interviewing and immediate job offers have enabled the University to hire far more quickly than in the past. What once involved several separate and time-consuming steps (asking candidates to submit applications, then evaluating applications, and then scheduling interviews) is now done at one time, literally in minutes. In one example, an applicant received an immediate job offer, and the new IT staff member reported to work 16 days after he was interviewed onsite.

5. With legislative and bargaining changes made in the past few years, the University of Wisconsin and State of Wisconsin IT directors now have flexibility regarding compensation. State IT jobs are broadbanded with expanded pay ranges and pay-upon-appointment flexibility. The hiring manager can offer a starting salary commensurate with the skills of the applicant. The IT managers also have flexibility to provide additional compensation awards for existing employees.

6. Colleges and universities are typically viewed as good places to work. To build on that perception, the University of Wisconsin has initiated some practices that further its positive work environment. The University offers flexible work schedules with some telecommuting options. It provides challenging work and shared decision-making, where possible.

Recommendations to Improve Recruiting

In summary, a number of key initiatives can help recruiting. These include:

- Improve job advertising using the Web, radio, billboards, and job fairs
- Emphasize the non-salary benefits of working at a college/university
- Be prepared with counteroffers
- Create flexible working hours with telecommuting options
- Streamline the recruiting process, eliminating unnecessary steps
- Use the Web to recruit
- Use video conferencing and telephone interviews for recruiting