

Contingent Perceptions are Reality

How to use your staffing vendor to check your image

By Tom Kosnik

Information about the perceptions of prospective contingent workers is typically seen as a natural byproduct of staffing vendor work. However, most companies rarely have an organized way to gather the data and use them effectively.

Some organizations rely on satisfaction surveys, focus groups and exit interviews to determine whether a department employee or a hiring manager is hitting the mark. Some will retain marketing firms to obtain additional information, namely from prospective employees, to ensure that the labor marketplace actually is perceiving the intended message and not the wrong one.

But working with staffing vendors to gather data from prospective temps can give you an edge in the race to attract top talent. Data gained through staffing vendors can be cycled back to hiring managers in order for them to make adjustments in their style or selection criteria. Such use of these data can actually increase the organization's ability to attract high-quality talent.

There is a formal way in which a company can utilize staffing vendors, to learn how the company is viewed by potential employees. The key is to focus on what information is actually needed and to start working with staffing vendors in a new capacity.

First Impressions Count

Hiring managers and HR departments want to know the initial impressions prospective contingents have of the organization as well as the company's reputation. Clearly, a positive impression and reputation mean that the company is doing something right. A negative impression and reputation, even if attached to only one part of the organization, can disclose whether some work needs to be done and where.

Prospective workers very well might have a distinct — and fresh — opinion of the organization. Existing temporary employees are tainted because they have a history with the company. In the challenge of acquiring high-quality talent, organizations need to impart a positive message and solid reputation in order to get off first base with prospective employees. Staffing vendors can obtain these perceptions for your company.

Many candidates will conduct extensive research about a company's culture

prior to scheduling an interview. This research goes beyond hitting the corporate Web site. Accessing blogs, Internet searches of articles written about the company, and talking to existing employees are some of their techniques.

Most people want to land at a company where they can make a difference, where they can make a contribution. They are concerned



about training, the general morale, turnover rates and whether the organization is encouraging of employee performance along with a myriad of other cultural issues. Again, a staffing vendor can help discover what prospective employees are digging up about the company's culture.

Management Matters

An HR manager working at a large law firm recently told me that she started hearing that her organization was perceived as a "sweat shop"

and that qualified people took it off their lists because of that image. What concerned her most was that these comments were coming from recent law school graduates.

Prospective employees will seek information about the company's management. Hiring managers want to know what they are hearing. Surprisingly, a good number of prospects will actually dig up information on specific managers. This is information that might not surface in a focus group or on an employee satisfaction survey, but can be obtained through a staffing firm.

Potential workers also will gather hard information about the job itself, compensation, location, travel required, working hours, adjustable schedules and the like. Some companies may be losing out on high-quality employees due to the basic requirements of the job itself before they even have the opportunity to answer questions.

Typically, hiring managers assume that most prospective contingents are mainly concerned with the basic terms of a job. Research shows that issues around

“hard vitals” (the job itself, compensation, etc.) are in the bottom half of the top 10 reasons most prospective employees sign on the dotted line. Staffing vendors can validate that this is the case for certain jobs that the company is attempting to fill. This is valuable information for them, as well, when they discuss bill and pay rates.

So, how would an HR department or hiring manager go about working with a staffing vendor to extract some of this information? My advice is to start with just a couple of trusted staffing vendors and with just a few items.

Use Your Vendors

Choose a staffing vendor

that has a good and long relationship with your company — preferably one that has direct relationships with the hiring managers.

Meet with the vendor's fulfillment team. This first session will be sure to deliver some interesting information for the HR department back home. Service coordinators and recruiters may already have much of this information either stored in notes in their database or have an operational understanding of how your company is being perceived in the market place.

With the staffing vendor's fulfillment team, develop a plan to systematically gather opinions and store them in a safe and secure place in their

system. Remember to keep the plan simple. Your supplier should be happy to assist to better serve their customer and deepen the existing relationship.

Determining a follow-up method will be critical to the success of this endeavor. The staffing vendor will need to provide information in a written report that can easily be distributed. At first, the report may consist only of a list of anecdotal statements. Meeting face-to-face on a monthly basis with a representative from the fulfillment team will help so that statements can be more clearly and fully understood. Regular follow-up will be needed to develop the process of gathering such

information about prospective employees' perceptions.

A naysayer may argue that this is all a waste of time and reality is all that matters. On the other hand, it is clear that regardless of how finely tuned internal operations are, all that truly matters is perception. In the end, if you are trying to attract high-quality contingent talent, you should look to turn an informal staffing vendor byproduct into a formal value-add. ●

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