

Recruitment in challenging times

A Badenoch & Clark guide

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It may seem something of a paradox, but challenging times, such as a recession, can be a very good time to recruit talent into your firm.

With a wealth of candidates on the market, many of whom would not ordinarily be available, forward-thinking managers are taking the opportunity to build their talent pool and to prepare for the inevitable upturn.

But how do you unearth the right talent? How do you position your practice? What support is available? In this guide we provide some practical pointers.

1 Don't compromise

Find the right person rather than the available person. Don't feel compelled to recruit someone if they don't have the competencies and cultural fit you are looking for, regardless of if they are available immediately. A survey from the Equal Opportunities Commission estimates that it costs a business anything between £1,000 and £28,000 if they make the wrong hire. Add to that the impact on existing colleagues of having the wrong person in post, the potential decrease in productivity and the damage to your reputation as a hiring manager; it's a costly business.

On the plus side, recognise that if a person is willing to leave their current job to join you now in tough times, they're a lot more likely to stay with you when times are good – as long as you treat them well.

2 Look for genuine enthusiasm

Take care to spot the difference between enthusiasm and someone whose long-held aspirations fit with your firm. There are plenty of people who need a job and will fight hard to get one, but do they have a genuine desire and passion to work for your practice? According to Badenoch & Clark's Employment Study, one in five candidates (19%) are applying for roles without doing any research into the employer or their own suitability. To ensure you make the right hire, you need to look beyond a great CV and polished interview technique, and find the person who sees you as part of their career path.

In the long run, hiring someone with genuine enthusiasm will hold you in good stead for the future. Someone who has singled out your practice as their next ideal career step is far more likely to have a higher level of engagement, higher productivity levels and will probably stay with you in the upturn. As Alan Leaman, at CEO Management Consultancies Association says: "If a candidate doesn't bring that to a role, you've lost a big opportunity from the outset."

3 Position well

It's no good battenning down the hatches and hoping the economic storm will spit the best talent in your direction by chance. You need to position your firm as being a more interesting prospect than others and you need to keep yourself visible and accessible. Think carefully about where you need to be seen and who you want to be seen by. Get comfortable with what your brand genuinely offers which sets you apart. For example, we have seen that being a niche player in a market place where the big guns have been decimated by bad news could make you a more attractive prospect. Clear some budget for maintaining your brand visibility and spend it wisely. With Web 2.0 playing a bigger part in corporate life, it's well worth considering as a low cost part of your attraction strategy.

But a word of caution: be authentic. Don't be tempted to oversell your practice and what it offers to new recruits. As it is, our research reveals that over a third (34%) of office workers say they view their current employer in a more negative light than they did before they started working for them.*

*Badenoch & Clark Employment Study, www.happinessatworkindex.co.uk

4 Be really proactive

Be proactive, get in front of the right people and make sure they know what your practice has to offer. Go out and tell people about your firm – the vision, what you're doing to get there and the kind of people you need to achieve it. Demonstrate that your practice remains in good shape despite the recession. Do this well and you will attract the right talent. But make your messages clear and concise – essential if you are to stand out in an already noisy market. As Andrew Pullman of HR Consultancy People Risk Solutions recently summed up: "If your business is in good shape make sure people know about it."

5 Look beyond the tried and tested

When everyone's fawning over the same candidate pool, don't just recruit from the tried and tested routes. As lawyers reconsider their career options and the number of applications per job rises in times of high unemployment, many more people tend to consider careers in sectors they might previously have glossed over. They potentially bring with them a wealth of new skills, experience and ideas that will benefit your firm both now and in the future. So get the cultural fit right but make the most of the skills and experiences available from other practice types.

Work on your employer brand's profile to attract the top talent from comparable backgrounds. Tracy Robbins, HRD for Intercontinental Hotels Group advises: "If you can become a magnet for talent, you'll attract strong performers from other organisations that are either not doing so well, or at least not looking after their employers quite as well."

6 Build relationships

Now more than ever, building your external talent pipeline is key to future success. With most firms still needing to attract top class talent to fill key roles it's essential to get your brand out there. Have a clear and consistent message of where your practice is heading and how you intend to meet tomorrow's opportunities. If you are not in a position to recruit people immediately you will still need to sit up and take action – build relationships now and when opportunities do arise you will get the best talent quickly. And remember, the people you need may be sitting tight. According to Badenoch & Clark's Employment Study nearly one in seven (16%) have put off the search for another role. So, carefully consider how you engage them and what you can offer to really make them want to come and work for you.

7 Make your agencies work harder

With more candidates on the market, it's easy for your in-house recruitment team to get overloaded sifting through unsuitable applications. But now is the time to take advantage of your recruitment partners, and get full use out of their services.

By spending time with your recruitment agencies to ensure they fully understand your business and its requirements, the less time you spend on managing the recruitment process. Remember where their expertise lies – don't inundate yourself with mountains of CVs when a recruitment agency can screen them for you.

Likewise, a trusted recruitment partner that really understands your practice will make sure that you only see candidates that are truly up to the job and are genuinely interested in working for your firm. They'll be adept at promoting the unique merits of your employer brand and dispelling false assumptions. An agency who truly understands your needs will be able to help you identify and deliver the right talent for now and the future.

8 Look to the future

It's reasonably straightforward to plug today's gaps in your firm, as you know what skills and experience you need immediately. But what of the future? Have you considered what opportunities will exist in your practice next year, in three years' time? Consider your firm's vision. Where do you want to be and have you already got the skills and latent talent onboard to get you there?

Leadership expert Judith Leary-Joyce summed it up for us, saying: "Don't simply focus on developing the round peg for today's round hole. Understand what your practice needs to overcome the downturn, then decide what the future opportunities will be and the kind of talent you'll need to challenge your rivals. Look at people's core talent – their innate expertise – and recruit those who can both accomplish the present role and have the potential to enhance your firm, perhaps in a number of different roles, going forward."

Having the right talent on board is key. The challenge then is to keep your best people in the practice. It's all about creating and maintaining a culture that they want to be a part of and we'll be exploring this in another Badenoch & Clark guide, Employee engagement – getting the best from your people.

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Future guides

Throughout 2010 we will be producing a series of guides focusing on the key areas of attraction, retention and recruitment.

If you would like to get involved in any of these we'd be delighted to hear from you. Contact us at connections@badenochandclark.com

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