ART OF REJECTION

We need to consider how to re-frame the perceptions of rejections and reneges within the graduate recruitment process.

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The organisation confirmed their headcount demand for the next graduate recruitment cycle and you worked tirelessly for months to attract applicants and to manage them through the hiring process. Finally, you fill all of the available positions and can shift focus to the next recruitment cycle. Phew!

However, what do you do about the large volume of rejected applicants? There is somewhat of a cruel paradox at play here. The more successful you have been as a graduate recruiter in attracting candidates, the greater the number of rejected applicants per hire.

Furthermore, it is likely that the Covid-19 pandemic will lead to an over-saturated supply of graduates who will compete against their cohort and previous cohorts for employment opportunities in future recruitment cycles (based on similar occurrences from the 2007-2008 Global Financial Crisis).

For recruiters that reject applicants with tailored verbal feedback, one of three experiences often occurs: The individual accepts the decision and shows gratitude for the feedback, they burst into tears as you shatter their dreams or they become aggressive and disagree with the outcome.

On the face of it, the rejection process can seem like an emotionally draining, time-consuming, and money-wasting exercise. Particularly as few organisations review their list of rejected candidates at the end of the recruitment cycle to help inform future recruitment strategies. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that some organisations solely provide generic rejections via email.

There is often one more dimension to the challenge of closing out the recruitment cycle in the form of reneging of contracts. When discussing reneges it is natural to assume that the applicant is the party reneging the offer of employment. The applicant excelled in the recruitment process, they accepted the position, and now they undertake graduate gazumping and head to a competitor organisation. This is particularly frustrating when it happens late in the recruitment cycle resulting in unfulfilled headcount.

However, research by ISE in May 2020 shows 14% of employers have withdrawn at least one graduate job offer due to the Covid-19 pandemic (and a further 14% are considering reneging more contracts this year), which is a particularly unusual circumstance. Furthermore, this leaves graduate recruiters with the unenviable task of having to call up successful hires and rescind their offer of employment.

Rejection strategies

In an ideal world, each rejected applicant would receive tailored verbal feedback. This is often not feasible, particularly for those rejected at the initial application phase. Therefore, it would be useful for recruiters to apply a sub-code in the candidate tracking system for each rejected applicant and to review these at the end of each cycle to inform future strategy development.

The sub-codes can be used to produce a generic feedback sheet covering the most likely scenarios for the application being rejected. This document can then be sent as an attachment to applicants who are rejected before the assessment centre or interview stages. Furthermore, if the sub-codes indicate that many applicants are failing to meet the entry requirements then perhaps this should be a mandatory question at the very start of the process, making it explicit that failure to meet the requirements will automatically result in rejection. Alternatively, it might be time to revise your entry requirements, or at the very least, check they are still appropriate.

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on the hiring panel, additional training on inherent bias or revising assessment materials and selection methods if they inadvertently discriminate against certain applicants.

The final strategy relates to the optics of an organisation withdrawing a graduate job offer. If this is necessary for the survival of the organisation due to the Covid-19 pandemic then such action is unavoidable. However, if this is not the case, it might be more prudent to honour existing contracts and then reduce headcount for the following recruitment cycle instead. This will help to protect the reputation of the organisation and its attractiveness to future talent.

Benefits

The time has come to re-frame the perceptions of rejections and reneges within the graduate recruitment process to focus on the benefits.

Firstly, by reviewing the rejection sub-codes, graduate recruiters can identify inherent bias in the recruitment process and work collaboratively with schools and universities to prepare and attract applicants with more diverse life experiences and backgrounds. When combined with a mandatory self-assessment at the start of the application process to ensure the applicant meets the minimum entry requirements, these strategies can reduce the volume of applicants whilst improving the quality. This can save time and money during the recruitment process and offers a strategic advantage over competitors.

Secondly, the provision of tailored verbal feedback enables candidates to undertake self-improvement. The rejected applicant is also likely to relay the feedback to their friends, lecturers, and university careers services, which provides an opportunity to improve the quality of future cohorts of applicants.

Finally, by honouring existing graduate contracts, organisations can build a strong reputation leading to strategic advantage. For candidates who renege, finding out why is key to informing changes in the future.

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Applicants left in the system once all roles are full need to be sent a separate template email. This should explain that all of the roles have now been filled and that they should not consider the rejection as a reflection on their capability of getting a job (employability), simply that the employment opportunity no longer exists at this time.

The sub-codes have one further function to play. Does the rejection list flag inherent bias within the selection process? If so, take action. For example, diversification of ethnic representation