

absolutely business



Caring for customers – let's get back to basics

By Denise Walker FREC

If good recruitment is simply a case of understanding our clients' and candidates' needs and matching effectively, why is it that so many of us get it wrong?

During the past 3 years I have spent in business support, I have seen many instances where recruitment consultants struggle to implement the basic concepts of good recruitment and where management is at a loss as to how to rectify this situation. It's not that recruiters purposely set out to fail customers; their intentions are invariably sound; the vast majority want to do a good job and work very hard to try to achieve this. Yet somehow, success continues to elude them. This is not as rare an occurrence as one would imagine and I am sadly now past the stage where it shocks me.

In 1986, when I started my career in recruitment, there were no computers for us to use a manual system was the only option. Because of this, my colleagues and I had the basics of good recruitment instilled in us from the start, rather like learning the theory of maths without a calculator. Many of us later used this solid grounding to go on and start up our own successful recruitment businesses. For fear of sounding like my grandmother, I am convinced that service levels in our industry have slipped in recent years. I strongly suspect that a key factor is that we have become too reliant on IT and forgotten our true purpose for which we are paid – which is to find the right candidates for clients' jobs and to find the right jobs for candidates.

“I agree with this,” says Andrew Carr, Head of Training for the REC. “Recruitment consultants are becoming database technicians and the danger is that if computers are misused, all of a sudden candidates become a number, not people any more. And with this, the skill of relationship-building that is vital to good recruitment is lost.”

The solution is not as elusive as some would imagine, as long as a few of the basics are in place to start with:

1. Set the scene

A customer care strategy must come from the top, to be distilled throughout the company. I always recommend that owner/managers devise a succinct statement, which illustrates the organisation's values and standards of service. This should not be just a glib mission statement – it should be detailed enough for everyone to know exactly what the company is about and how they are expected to contribute to this. And it should be taught to all new staff and practised throughout the company at all levels. Without exception.

2. Be specific

It's no good presuming that all people have the same views about what denotes good service levels. So, if you want your telephones answered after a certain number of rings and in a certain manner, then communicate this to your people. Similarly, whether you want enquiries dealt with by a set deadline, candidates registered thoroughly, data entry to 100% accurate or full job descriptions and key matching criteria 'extracted' from clients, then spell it out to your team. And make sure they are measured and rewarded on this and on the quality of the service provided, not just the numbers.

Linda Beddows FREC, Managing Director of Lancashire-based Fylde Office Service Bureau, states that her company's consistent 98% job fill conversion rate is purely due to ensuring that the fundamentals are looked after. "In other words," she says, "building relationships with clients and candidates, asking lots of questions, so that we know exactly what their needs are and through being completely honest and ethical in the way we do business."

3. Keep complete and accurate records

Ensure your paperwork and records, whether on a computerised or manual system, are relevant and bang up to date. This helps to build and maintain business relationships and is an important factor when it comes to providing a seamless service.

4. Have a good contingency plan

We are all human and therefore we will all make mistakes at some point. It's how we deal with them that can make or break client relationships. In my experience, as long as they are dealt with openly and honestly, customers can be very forgiving. So give yourself the best chance of achieving this by having a complaints policy already prepared and fully implemented when appropriate.

My last two points are these: First, I make no apology for saying that it is a poor state of affairs, when it is easy to outshine the competition purely by providing a half decent service; second, I realise that some will say that my suggested solutions are basic and I wholeheartedly agree. So let's implement them.

About Denise Walker FREC

Denise Walker owns and runs Absolutely Business, a specialist management consultancy, designed exclusively for the recruitment industry, delivering **business consultancy, interim management and training services**.

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