Recruiting the four generations

Different generations require different tactics from employers looking for talent

BY GISELLE KOVARY and ADWOO BUHENE

Recruitment has evolved into a complex courtship ritual, one in which both recruiters and candidates try to avoid the major faux pas while seeking to impress — employers with their career opportunities, exciting projects and benefits and candidates with their competence, charisma and commitment.

Now layer on the fact that the workforce is comprised of four distinct generational identities — traditionalists, baby boomers, generation X and generation Y — each shaped by differing life-defining events and motivated by different needs and wants. (See chart.)

Recruiters who use a one-size-fits-all approach to attracting new employees ignore the unique requirements of each group. To attract high-performing employees from all the generations, organizations must create an integrated recruitment strategy that speaks to all four generations.

Five steps to building an integrated recruitment strategy

Understand the characteristics of the four generations: The unique life-defining events that each generation experienced translates into core attitudes and values that influence each generations’ viewpoint of employment and working life.

These differences are behaviorally demonstrated through the type of work they seek, the organizational culture that they desire and the compensation and benefits they negotiate.

Naturally, recruiters should be careful not to pigeonhole candidates by making assumptions based on age alone. But it is critical to success for recruiters to learn the generational identities as it is for their marketing colleagues to learn about different consumer identities and behaviors.

Evaluate existing recruitment practices: Evaluation will identify the gaps in an organization’s ability to successfully attract candidates from each generation. For example, a corporate website should highlight organizational innovations and what it is like to work there.

Those in generations X and Y will evaluate the cultural fit of an organization as much as the role for which they are applying. The website should include specifics on training programs, career paths, mentorship opportunities, rewards, work-life balance and diversity.

Recruiters and line managers should also be evaluated on their ability to sell their organization in a way that will interest and excite potential candidates from the four generations.

Create recruitment messages that appeal to each generation: To ensure an organization can attract and retain the best and brightest from each generation it should tailor its recruitment messages. The messages need to address generational values, motivations and expectations.

When constructing job postings tell a story that includes:

• Traditionalists: The history and legacy of the organization as well as part-time work options.

• For baby boomers: Industry awards and evidence of market leadership.

• For generation X: Flexible work policies, work-life balance and opportunities for formal and informal learning.

• For generation Y: The organization’s use of cutting-edge technology and its social responsibility at a regional, national and global level.

• Establish transparency and alignment between promises and reality: All generations are interested in challenging work, a supportive manager and a great work environment.

But the younger generations are much more likely to try “peek behind the curtain” during the recruitment process. They want to ascertain whether the organization’s promises are likely to come true. Candidates may request to speak to current employees to evaluate a prospective manager’s reputation, and to review policies and procedures related to work-life balance, sabbaticals and performance management.

It is crucial that there be alignment between the messages communicated and opportunities proposed by the recruiter and the line manager. Otherwise candidates may sense a disconnect and will question the organization’s ability to deliver on the employment deal. Generations X and Y will hold the manager accountable and the promises made during the courtship ritual.

Learn to interpret each generation’s responses: Because each generation views work and their relationship to an organization differently, candidates will not all respond the same way to the recruitment process.

A recruiter at a global consumer products company was shocked when a generation Y candidate questioned her about the importance of his or her promotion would be and whether he could expect a career move. The baby boomer recruiter felt that his or her promotion was well-deserved, and inappropriate — the candidate had not even proven himself and yet he already wanted to know the next step.

But for the generation Y candidate, opportunities for career advancement at which they could take place based on performance, was a valid criteria to evaluate the job.

It is important that recruiters understand how different generations respond to the process. The younger generations frequently define employment terms in a more pragmatic way. But loyalty is not a dead concept to them. Whereas traditionalists define it as a long-term commitment to an organization, generation X and Y define it as their ability to achieve results and in being dedicated to their managers and colleagues.

Since most HR practices and processes are founded on traditionalist and baby boomer values, it may be a challenge for recruiters and managers to adjust to the increasing demands and straightforward negotiation style of younger candidates.

By understanding generational motivations and expectations, recruiters can actively and successfully manage the recruitment process. The five steps allow recruiters to approach the courtship ritual in a holistic fashion, resulting in employment relationships that may make both individual and organizational needs.

Giselle Kovary and Adwoa Buhene are managing partners with n-gen People Performance Inc., a Toronto-based performance consulting firm specializing in attracting, orientation, retention, talent management and succession planning. For more information visit www.n-genperformance.com.