

Putting People First

by Jane Owen, UK Sales Director, BrassRing UK

Ask a random sample of senior managers in large companies to name their most important asset and, chances are, the majority will unhesitatingly place their people in pole position. We are nothing, they will say, without our people.

But how do they square this with their often careless approach to looking after their people's careers? Why is it that so many ideally qualified internal candidates are overlooked when it comes to filling important vacancies? It's not just a case of favouring external people: very often potential internal candidates don't even learn about the opportunities until it's too late.

Take the case of a typical global company with offices in perhaps four continents. What chance do people in Singapore have of finding out about a job opportunity in London? The answer is none at all unless they are told about it officially in advance, or hear of it on the corporate grapevine. And if they have to rely on keeping their ear to the ground in order to plan their progress through the company ranks, they will hardly have time to do their jobs properly in the first place.

When good internal candidates are cut out of job opportunities within their own companies they are bound to feel aggrieved. And pretty soon they will start looking at other companies that have a more enlightened approach to internal communications and career progression.

However, a straw poll of people applying for jobs with large companies would also tell a depressing story. We hear tales of woe the whole time: applications lost several times over; no acknowledgement of applications and candidate emails; interview times changed again and again; interviews not followed up, or only after many weeks.

The bottom line is that there is massive contradiction. On the one hand, company chiefs fall over each other to say how important their people are to them. But on the other, they preside over outdated and under-funded recruitment processes that are damaging their



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relationships with their own staff and their reputation among quality people out there in the employment market.

These days, people applying for jobs make important and lasting judgements, both as consumers and potential employees, about the companies they apply to. If they are treated badly, they will tell anyone who is prepared to listen about their experience. In other words, they have the power to inflict lasting damage to that company's brand both in the employment and the commercial market.

These judgements are based on the efficiency and courtesy with which their applications are handled, even if, in the end, they are unsuccessful in winning the job they want. People expect to be treated well and taken seriously, but the degree to which this happens is wholly dependent on the standard of recruitment practices and processes.

I know of one large pharmaceutical company that files all its incoming CVs for

vacancies in cardboard boxes strewn all over the floor of its recruitment office. There are literally thousands of current applications for many different posts in these files at any one time. Naturally, they get mixed up. One candidate was advised to apply at least four times for the same job to be sure of her CV getting into the right hands. No doubt this company's top management are among those who say people are their most important asset.

But some companies are beginning to wake up to this problem. Perhaps the inadequacies of their recruitment systems have been exposed by the downturn in the economy, which has prompted many companies to focus on cost control and redeployment. In many cases they have looked into their recruitment processes and management practices and have not liked what they have found.

The problem with recruitment is that the importance of process management is under-estimated. A sensible approach for corporations is to create a technical infrastructure to enable them to build an ongoing relationship with talented people both inside and outside their organisations and dip into that pool as recruitment requirements occur. It allows them to take a considered, planned approach to recruitment and gives them the opportunity to focus on building the value of the company's human capital rather than simply filling vacancies.

Many large companies are running their recruitment around inflexible, worn-out manual processes that are costing them significant sums and damaging their reputation in the employment market every single day. When the economic recovery comes, they will still be paying a high price and will be unable to meet the surge in demand for new people from their own managers.

Meanwhile, no doubt, senior management in these companies will still be telling the world that their people are their greatest asset. **EG**