

Assessing the atypical candidate — your future resourcing solution

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In Resumé Screening 101, the first thing a recruiter is trained to look for, after spelling and grammar, is whether the candidate has had a consistent job history. “Atypical candidates” — entrepreneurs, returning retirees or “job-jumpers” with non-traditional employment histories — are to be avoided. When assisting people in developing their resumé, career coaches know the importance of encouraging this type of client to use a resumé design that plays down an out-of-the-ordinary employment route.

Take Robert, who has been working as a successful commercial real estate broker for more than 15 years, but now wants to transfer his expertise into the field of finance. As a broker and an owner, he has honed an expertise in marketing, sales, customer relations, and acquired extensive transactional and negotiation experience. However, to be considered a viable candidate, he has to develop an inspiring “bio” in place of a resumé, and to rely primarily on networking contacts to uncover opportunities in his target market.

In their book, *HR, The Value Proposition*, David Ulrich and Wayne Brockbank spend a lot

of time emphasizing the importance of recruitment. Yet many organizations still treat this function as entry level and, as a result, perpetuate the application of old paradigms when evaluating backgrounds like Robert’s.

In the past decade, reorganizing, downsizing and outsourcing have become the business norm, leaving many previously long-term workers struggling to find stable employment. As a result, re-entrants to the job market — the self-employed, stay-at-home parents and internationally trained professionals — have found it even more challenging to find suitable work, often forced to accept whatever contingency positions came their way or to refocus their careers multiple times to fit into whatever the marketplace had to offer.

But the balance of power is shifting away from employers. As baby boomers begin to retire and the talent pool becomes progressively shallower, the job market is turning in favour of the jobseeker. Savvy organizations are starting to pay serious attention to applicants who previously would have been dismissed as “not suitable.”

A different set of skills

In the process of moving from job to job, or of setting up new businesses, atypical candi-

dates have honed characteristics and skills that position them well for a lean, agile and globally focused business environment.

To survive they have learned to:

- adapt quickly to different environments, and pick up new skills and jargon that enable them to size up and deliver on the terms of their employment contracts;
- be resilient and persevere in the face of uncertainty;
- be confident in decision-making and adept at problem-solving;
- multi-task and work well both independently or as part of a team;
- effectively market themselves to potential clients; and
- assess the competencies they are offering and the work environment that suits them best, which reduces the risk that they may not fit into an organization should they choose to work there.

“The entrepreneurial traits of risk-taking, self-reliance, tempered resilience, and grace under pressure have proven to be excellent for start-ups, crisis management and business turnarounds,” said Debbie Dimoff of executive search firm Lovas Stanley/Ray Berndtson in Toronto.

“We also find that first-time retirees returning to the work-

force have the ability to see around corners, to mentor younger employees and to tap into well-established business networks.”

Internationally trained professionals offer a global perspective to a local business and a competitive advantage when developing foreign markets. One Brazilian-trained geotechnical engineer has successfully negotiated South American highway technology contracts for his employer’s Canadian consulting firm.

Assessment strategies

As with any candidate, not all atypical applicants will be the perfect fit for an organization. How will an HR professional qualify and validate the potential of these recruits to satisfy the rigours of the corporation?

Begin the process with a thorough understanding of the requirements of the position, including clear criteria for what it takes to be a successful employee in the organization.

Beyond listing the job description, the necessary skills and the competencies, it is also important to detail performance expectations.

Then, screen and select resumé for skills paralleling job requirements, along with a

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■ RECRUITMENT

Don't ignore atypical candidates

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demonstration of achievements aligned with company expectations. Next, develop a set of generic and behavioural interview questions that probe for competencies, past experiences indicating a potential to deliver and the candidate's propensity for success.

In addition to all of the above, go one step beyond by following the example of professionals such as Dimoff, who "assess the hiring company's ecosystem for its ability to successfully integrate a candidate who brings a divergent background."

Finally, to validate the findings scientifically, use job-focused assessment tools or the services of an industrial psychologist.

"Even the most skilled interviewer may not get a deep enough understanding of a candidate's motivations, drive and overall fit," said Michael Gravelle, vice-president of Toronto-based McQuaig Institute, a consulting firm on assessment and retention. "A validated pre-employment assessment is an effective way to get a 'second look' at the candidate."

Combining these steps gives recruiters a comprehensive view of the candidate. When

some of the above are applied independently there is a risk of skewing the perspective and failing to develop a complete picture of the candidate's suitability for the position and the organization.

A tight job market necessitates flexibility and innovation. The days when a company's wish list turned up multiple highly qualified candidates are fast disappearing, according to Pamela Ruebusch, president of TSI Group, a human resources solutions company that specializes in supply chain management and logistics.

"Our industry is increasingly seeking professionally

trained talent from a very limited supply," said Ruebusch. "When our clients hire great-fit talent with a non-standard background, the key is to take the search process one step further and offer training and coaching services for successful integration."

During the first few months, integration of new recruits into the workplace beyond basic orientation is vital, she said. Taking additional steps during and after the hiring process is time and money well-spent. It helps ensure the organization is attracting and retaining good talent.

So, the next time an atypical resumé appears on the pile, don't dismiss it because of an inconsistent work history or an entrepreneurial background. Focus instead on the skills and experiences and relevance to the operation's strategic needs. Take a chance and have the applicant in for an interview. By looking beyond the resumé of candidates who do not conform to the "norm" and tapping into this rich resource pool, employers may be pleasantly surprised. And even better, the organization will get a head start in the war for talent.

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■ EVALUATING ATYPICAL CANDIDATES

10 steps to the right fit

For a company's recruitment expert, it's important to stay on top of innovative practices and not to fall into the trap of considering only resumé from conventional candidates. To assist in the evaluation of atypical candidates, here are some tips:

- If you're not familiar with the industry or type of work outlined in a resumé, conduct some research to broaden your understanding of the skills presented and to better determine their transferability. Don't make the excuse you're too busy — taking the time to learn now will provide you with a competitive edge as the recruitment market tightens.
- Begin interviews by asking individuals to tell their work history in a chronological order, including how it transpired. Investigate any inconsistencies or areas of concern to ensure you are satisfied with the narrative. For example, if there are gaps in experience, explore why and how they have been managed, and find out whether there are valid reasons behind them or if they are indicative of someone with a serious attitude problem.
- Determine the individual's core competencies, how they align with the job and the organizational profile.
- Drill down to uncover specifics that enable the

evaluation of someone's candidacy against stated selection criteria. If "relationship management" is a key criterion, then delve into the person's qualifications in this area and follow up with references to validate the information gathered through the interview.

- Probe to get a clear sense about their vision for successfully navigating or delivering in the position.
- Make every effort to ascertain their true motivation for assuming this new path and find out if the candidate is running away from or toward an opportunity.
- Ask questions that enable you to assess whether someone can make the shift both successfully and happily into a "T-4 person."
- Consider using a reliable assessment tool that will measure the individual's behaviour against the organizational and job profile.
- Employ the services of a qualified professional career coach to conduct an in-depth analysis of the individual's competencies, attributes and values.
- Take the time to confirm references. Perform background checks — for credit, criminal history, and education — and carry out a full 360-degree reference check to validate key data.