

8 Essentials for Effective College Recruiting

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The level of college recruiting is starting to increase. More organizations are on campus this year than last year. This trend will accelerate as the economy picks up and experienced labor becomes scarcer and more expensive.

Engineering, medical, and computer science remain very competitive, and college graduate unemployment has hovered around 3.0% throughout this recession. I believe we will see unemployment for college grads dropping to 1-2% within the next year.

Yet college recruiting remains a very traditional practice. The methods that most firms employ are exactly the same as those used 5, 10, or even 20 years ago. Most organizations have a list of key schools (almost all with the same schools on their lists), send managers (often alumni) back to campus to conduct information sessions (for a handful of semi-interested students who are only slightly knowledgeable about the organization presenting), and then conduct short interviews with an even smaller handful of students chosen mostly because of interest and GPA (which does not correlate with job success).

The Internet and other related technologies, including video, the mobile phone, instant messaging, and blogs to name just a few, have the capability of changing this process entirely. In fact, I think there are eight elements that need to be the core around which you build your college recruiting program. Take a look and see how many of these your organization has adopted.

You have the beginnings of a 21st-century college recruiting strategy if...

1. Your college recruiting strategy clearly defines the key reasons why you do college recruiting and how your organization expects to benefit from it.

Most organizations do college recruiting for obscure reasons — often because they have always done it, and not because they have a specific need or appropriate jobs for this level of

employee. I have worked with clients who have abandoned their college recruiting efforts because, after careful thought, other levels of candidates were more suited to their needs and they did not have the capacity to nurture and develop new graduates. Be sure your organization can use college students well and has the infrastructure, promotional opportunities, and management skills to develop and utilize the students well over time.

2. Your organization has developed a clear brand at the college level that differentiates you from other organizations.

Brand — i.e., the perception about what your company does and what happens to the college grads who get hired — is a significant factor in your success or failure in college recruiting. You need to work with your public relations people and your recruiting advertising agency to develop and communicate a clear brand. You need clarity around who you are looking for and the benefits of working for your organization. You need to identify and promote the benefits of a career with your firm. Developing a unique recruiting brand is important for all organizations, but especially so for those without strong product brands.

3. You educate students about your organization and market jobs and positions using the Internet, email, and your website.

This is the Internet generation that you are now recruiting. They have always had the Internet, and they turn to it and their email for almost all information about the world. The Internet has high credibility. You have to use it heavily and in place of traditional media such as newspapers, brochures, posters, and on-campus signage. These all have a small impact compared to the Internet. You will have to get email addresses and learn how to create short, interesting messages about your organization. Think about buying Google ads to promote jobs and your recruiting website when terms related to your industry are being searched.

4. You have built (or are building) talent pools of interested students at all levels — from high school through graduate school, and even beyond.

The number of students studying engineering, math, and related technology subjects has been declining for several years. To attract the best students you cannot wait until the junior or senior years of school. You need to be building your brand and loyalty to your organization as early as high school. The more you communicate with students, screen them for cultural fit and skills, and let them know about positions that might fit those skills, the more effective your recruiting will be. Even if you are not successful at recruiting a desired candidate at the undergraduate level, keep in touch and seek them out later — even after two or three years. They will be impressed with your ability to do that, and you will gain an employee who knows your organization to some degree and is clearly motivated.

5. You have a dedicated, interactive college recruiting website that is prominently advertised to students.

The key to any modern college recruiting program is a website that educates, informs, explains, and demonstrates what your organization and the people in it do. You need to develop a site that does all this and that also screens students and lets them know if they have what it takes to work for you.

6. Your recruiting processes find, qualify, and communicate with students using Internet-based technology.

The way you recruit sends a message to candidates. If you do things the traditional way, you signal that you are a traditional (i.e., not exciting, innovative, or fun) company. Your website needs to match your corporate philosophy and culture. You need to streamline procedures and make getting a job with your organization as simple and fun as you can. Get rid of, automate, or hide bureaucracy. Focus on selling the benefits of employment at your

firm — not on the administrative process to get hired.

7. You communicate with and solicit students from hundreds of schools, not just a handful of key schools that everyone else is also using.

The concept of key schools emerged when it was physically necessary to go to every campus. If you had more than a handful of these schools, time and cost became too high to make the program effective. But with the Internet, we have been released from the need for key schools. You can extend your reach to hundreds of schools — in fact, you can forget about schools and focus on people with the skills you need. The flaw with the key school concept is its assumption that the best students are always found at those schools. In reality, almost all schools have some great students and a whole lot of mediocre or bad ones. Your job ought to be to find the best ones no matter where they are. By extending your reach, you can also access many more minority students and improve your diversity slate.

8. You have put in place an aggressive and comprehensive set of measures to educate hiring managers about the college labor market, changing expectations of college students, and the need to move away from traditional college recruiting methods.

The largest and most important barrier to making the changes I suggest is the hiring manager who wants everything to be the same as when he or she was recruited. You need to use your powers of persuasion and educate them. Use this article, as well as facts and data from your own research, to show them why these new approaches are better. Get market information, ask the schools for the number of people majoring in the subjects you are interested in and build a portrait of the labor market you face. Present the information to the hiring authorities and get them to help you architect a new approach. Offer to do a trial of these methods for a few schools and see how successful you are, or send people to some schools and use the Internet at others and get student feedback.

My point in this article is that the world has moved on from where we have been in college recruiting. The concepts of key schools, campus information sessions, close interface with college placement offices, and short on-campus interviews with graduating seniors are nostalgic remnants of the 20th century.

The 21st century requires new methods and techniques, some of which I have outlined above, and others that will emerge over the next few years. I urge you to try doing things differently — it will pay off in a big way by bringing great students to your organization at less cost and in less time.

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