Turning Passive Talent into Enthusiastic Candidates

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Is your company doing enough to engage passive talent? Charlene Bergman explores this hidden talent pool and offers insight on how to build relationships and convert them into enthusiastic candidates.

In Walter Isaacson's critically acclaimed book, *Steve Jobs*, the polarizing founder of Apple is depicted as both a visionary and a tyrant in the boardroom. When it came to recruiting talent, this couldn't be more accurate. When Apple was looking for a CEO in the early 80's, Jobs worked with an executive search firm to find the perfect candidate. Ultimately, they landed on John Sculley who, at the time, was the CEO and President of Pepsi.

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Coming off a very successful Pepsi Challenge campaign, Sculley wasn't considering a career move, but after a few of Jobs' famous 'walk and talks' and a bit of cajoling, he was sold on the opportunity and went on to have a 10-year run at Apple. In the world of executive search, Sculley is a classic example of passive talent.

What’s passive talent and why it can’t be overlooked

Passive talent refers to candidates who are currently employed. In other words, they aren’t necessarily looking for a new role but are willing to listen if the right opportunity comes around. They might already have one foot out the door or they could be perfectly happy with their current role and company. Either way, this hidden talent pool deserves your attention.

Clearly, attracting passive talent is much different than attracting active job seekers. This is especially true for C-suite candidates. These professionals won’t be browsing LinkedIn daily, they won’t be networking with the intent of finding a new career, and they won’t be knocking on doors anytime soon. They are simply too busy in their current role and discretion is extremely important.

That said, going the extra mile—to engage and attract them—is key. The goal for companies, and their HR departments, should be to create and build trusting relationships with this elusive group. Once established, over time, you can convert them from passive talent to enthusiastic candidates. It won’t be easy, but attracting exceptional talent never is.

Building deep and trusting relationships

LinkedIn research suggests that, “you need to reimagine the candidate journey as traveled by passive talent and be a discoverable, compelling, and authentic tour guide as they find their way.” In other words, companies must engage these candidates differently in order to build a strong relationship over time. The common approach of ‘posting and praying’ won’t work with this community. Instead, here are just a few things that will help pique their interest, build a strong connection, and ultimately convert them into willing candidates:

- **alter your communication style** – persuasive job descriptions, listening, flattering, and persistent follow-ups are key. You must be compelling, especially during your first interaction
- **exercise patience** – suggest a brief exploratory call before asking them to invest too much time and allow them more time and space to make decisions at every step in the process
- **remain flexible** – be prepared to accommodate their schedule for calls, meetings and follow-ups
- **keep them excited** – once you have their attention, assess their pain points, determine and communicate the potential opportunity. Provide and remind them of a value proposition not met by their current employer
- **tweak the opportunity** – in a talent scarce market, you want to attract the best and in doing so, you may need to position the opportunity differently to fit their specific needs.

Identify the right opportunity gap

Convincing passive talent to consider a career move gets easier once companies have built a trusting relationship. The lines of communication have opened, their schedules have been accommodated, and they have been engaged throughout. What comes next? For some C-suite executives, an increase in pay or a new title will suffice, but others might need different incentives. This comes in the form of identifying a well articulated and customized opportunity gap.

In other words, what will a new role provide that their current role doesn't? Will it provide a greater purpose? Will it allow them to make an impact in a new industry? And most importantly, will it challenge them?

When recruiting Sculley, Jobs didn't use the usual selling points—job stretch, larger organization, and growth opportunities—instead, he challenged Sculley and asked, "do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water, or do you want a chance to change the world." Less than two months later, Sculley reported for duty in Cupertino.

How does passive talent look in a rapidly changing Canadian workforce?

In today's increasingly fluid and robust business market, employers are vying for the attention of promising and experienced talent. It is, in fact, one of the bigger challenges facing Canadian businesses today. However, due to aging demographics, globalization of the workforce, and demand for new skills in the wake of the intelligence revolution; unemployment rates are expected to drop even further. That said, the quest for top talent will continue to keep CEOs up at night; which makes tapping into the entire workforce—including both active and passive talent—necessary.

Start attracting passive talent

Attracting passive talent is a process, but there are ways to make the journey easier and more enjoyable for both employers and passive candidates. The traditional strategies that attract active job seekers simply won't work, and HR professionals must adapt their recruitment strategies. Opening the lines of communication—mixed with deep engagement throughout—will build the connections needed to penetrate this hidden talent pool and convert them into prospective candidates.

Unlike Apple, most companies won't be able to fly candidates in-and-out on a corporate jet but, similarly, they need to approach passive candidate community creatively in order to secure top talent for their organizations.

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