

Why Recruit Passives?

Put 100 recruiters in a room and ask them to identify the best talent in the workforce, and 99 will point to passive job seekers. The problem, of course, is that passive job seekers aren't job seekers at all. At best, they are prospects. They don't act like active job seekers, nor are they motivated in the same way. More often than not, they have to be dragged kicking and screaming into our recruiting processes. And then, they have to be persuaded and cajoled into even considering our openings. In short, they are a colossal pain in the neck to recruit. So, it's appropriate to ask why even bother with them? Why not focus on people who really do want to come to work for our employers?

While acknowledging just how difficult passive prospects can be, I think we must not only recruit them, we must make them our priority. Why? There are at least four reasons.

First, passive prospects represent the majority of talent in the workforce.

A recent survey sponsored by Yahoo! reached over 3,700 people aged 18-64. It found that just 17% of the population—fewer than one-out-of-five people—were actively seeking a job. This finding correlates well with an earlier study attributed to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. It found that just 16% of the population were active job seekers. In other words, somewhere between 83% and 84% of American workers are passive prospects. There are four times as many of them as there are candidates proactively applying for our openings.

Second, passive prospects generally represent a higher caliber of talent.

Are active job seekers also qualified? Of course. But passive prospects are passive largely because they are already employed and, therefore, presumably making an acceptable or better contribution to their employers. Data collected by the Yahoo! survey tend to support this view. It found that the average experience level of passive prospects was 18.4 years, with over half reporting more than 20 years in the workplace. The average for active job seekers, in contrast, was 14.9 years of experience, with slightly more than a third reporting more than 20 years on-the-job. In addition, if pay is a measure of a person's perceived value to an enterprise, then passive job seekers are viewed as significantly greater contributors. The average annual salary for passive prospects is \$66,100, while the average for active job seekers is over 10% lower at \$54,583.

Third, passive prospects make more stable employees.

The attrition rate of passive prospects is lower than that of active job seekers. Said another way, active job seekers tend to be active more often than passive prospects. According to the Yahoo! survey, those who described themselves as "passive" changed jobs every 5-10 years, while those who self-identified as active job seekers were switching employers every 2-5 years. As a result, employers have longer to reap a meaningful return on their investment in the higher quality talent delivered by passive prospects.

Regardless of your measure of merit—availability, quality or loyalty—passive prospects are the better candidates, even if they are difficult to recruit. Which begs the question, what is the best way to turn them into active passive prospects? Since most passive prospects will elect to make a career enhancing move from time-to-time, the key is to mirror their behaviors when they do. Here again, the Yahoo! survey provides some interesting insights that run counter to some of today's conventional wisdom.

According to the passive prospects in the survey, when they do decide to look for a job, they will use the following resources or methods:

- Local newspaper (cited by 56%)
- National job board (cited by 41%)
- Local newspaper Web-site (cited by 37%)
- Phone or in-person networking (cited by 36%)
- Professional/industry Web-site/publication (cited by 26%)
- Corporate Web-site (cited by 25%)
- Search engine (cited by 25%)

This list of resources and methods is clearly imperfect. While there were other answers that respondents could pick, the total set was incomplete and unbalanced. It ignored, for example, niche job boards altogether, while it listed the local newspaper and the local newspaper's Web-site separately, but combined professional/industry Web-sites and publications into a single answer. Be that as it may, however, the findings do offer at least two interesting insights.

1. The mix of resources and methods selected by passive prospects is not the same as that identified by the active job seekers in the survey. In other words, passive prospects "shop" for employers in a very different way than do active job seekers. For example, almost three quarters of active job seekers (74%) would use a job board compared to 41% of the passive prospects who would. Does that mean, it's not worth using job boards for passive prospects? Of course not. If passives make up 83% of the workforce, then 41% of that population is still three times the size of the active job seekers group. The secret is in knowing which job boards passive are most likely to use and how to write a job posting that will overcome their inherent reluctance to move.

2. Contrary to what we may assume, the media choices among passive prospects cut across generational lines. For example, a startling 56% of Millennials said they intend to use their local newspaper when they decide to look for a new or better job. In fact, the local newspaper was their second most cited resource, trailing only job boards. No less important, at least some of the Millennials and many of the other passive prospects are also likely to use the media they selected for job search when they aren't looking for a job. That habit makes career portals (job boards that support career advancement as well as job search), newspapers, professional sites and publications and search engines effective platforms for brand as well as recruitment advertising. They are the perfect place to promote the value proposition of your organization as an employer so that when passive prospects decide to become active, it is already top of mind and pre-sold.

Passive prospects may be a pain in the neck, but they are also a powerful source of talent for your organization. If you tailor your sourcing strategy to their behavior when they do decide to look for a job, you'll likely reduce the pain and enhance the yield you recruit.

Thanks for reading,
Peter

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