The Scourge of Bureaucratic Correctness

There is today a scourge of bland communication oppressing the performance of corporate and staffing firm recruiting teams. While social media have captured their imagination, the vast majority of recruiters continue to rely on job postings—placed on commercial job boards and in the Career area on their own sites—to reach and reel in top talent. And the content of those postings is so dull it would put a brick to sleep.

Why do we engage in such blandness even as we try to acquire the high performers and rare skill holders our organizations so desperately need? I think it's because we are reluctant to step outside the bounds of "bureaucratic correctness" or BC for short. We want to be fair and accurate, so we use the formal organizational title of our openings to ensure we don't inadvertently mislead or misinform prospective applicants. We also know that there will be no subsequent recriminations if we use a term that has already been approved by the corporate general counsel or the chain of command.

But here's the rub. There's not a single candidate on earth who thinks of him or herself as a Legal Secretary 2 or a Systems Analyst VI or a Junior Med Info Coder/Abstractor. Yet, those are real titles that I've pulled off of job ads posted on the Web. They may be bureaucratically correct, but they will never motivate anyone but the most desperate of job seekers to apply.

So, here's my simple proposition. Let's agree that a job posting is not an official statement positioning a job within the organizational structure of an employer. It is a sales document. Its role is to convince talented and often passive individuals to "buy" your company's or client's employment value proposition. And the key to accomplishing that goal is the title of the posting.

When prospects search a job database or the Web at large, the results they receive aren't the results they want. They don't get back a list of jobs; they get a list of job posting titles (and maybe the first line or two of the ad). If the title works, it will induce them to click open and read the ad. If title doesn't work, the ad is a waste of money because no one (or only someone with no other options) is going to view it.

How do you create a job posting title that works? It has to be unusual enough to catch a prospect's attention despite all of the information clutter in contemporary society. It has to be compelling enough to get them to invest their most precious resource—their time—in reading about and considering your opportunity. And, it has to do all of that in just 30-35 characters, the space typically provided for the title of a posting.

Here's a simple, two-step process for developing a job posting title that will work even with passive prospects.

Step 1: Figure out the "triggers of acceptance" for your target demographic.
Pull together a focus group of some of your "A" level coworkers in the career field for which you're recruiting. Ask them to identify the single most important factor that convinced them to accept your employer's offer. Don't worry if you don't get universal agreement on a single factor. That's normal. While there will often be a couple of outliers, however, your colleagues will probably divide into two or, at most, three groups, each of which favors a different "trigger of acceptance."

Step 2: Create your title with three distinct elements, following the formula LSS.

- The L stands for location because even in today's down economy, most people don't want to move to take a job or simply can't. They want or need to work where they already live.
- The first S stands for the primary skill a person must have to accomplish the job. That's how candidates think of themselves. They are people with a specific talent, not someone who fills some BC slot on an org chart.
- The second S stands for sizzle, a phrase that communicates the trigger(s) of acceptance you identified in Step 1. To optimize your yield, you will have to connect with all of the groups in your prospective candidate pool, so post the ad multiple times, each with a title that communicates one of the triggers.

Here's what such a job posting title might look like: WI—C++ Programmer—$1.2 million bonus. That's an actual title from a job posted on the Web in 1999 by a company in Wisconsin. I don't program, but I was intrigued enough to click on and read the ad, so you can bet that anyone with C++ on their resume probably did so, as well.

The recruiters in this company had conducted a focus group of their best programmers and found that there were two primary reasons why they had agreed to work there. One group was motivated by money. The company had promised its IT Department that if they stayed around to fix what everyone thought was going to be the Y2K problem, they would split a $1.2 million bonus.

The second group had a very different motivation. The company was located in upstate Wisconsin, and their decision to work for the company was based on the quality of life it afforded. How did the company reach other prospects who might be similarly motivated? They posted the ad a second time, but with a little bit of sizzle just for them. It read WI—C++ Programmer—Great Fishing!

Employers and staffing firms continue to spend billions of dollars every year on job postings. To ensure that you get the best return on the investment you make in these ads, avoid BC titles. They may communicate on org charts, but they say nothing at all to top talent.

Thanks for reading,
Peter
Visit me at CareerFitness.com