

BusinessExtra

THE BOSTON GLOBE • TUESDAY, AUGUST 13, 1991

Today's Extras



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Etiquette and the job battlefield

CHERYL SOMERS AUBIN

HUMAN CAPITAL. IT'S THE NEW BUZZ-word for the strength, skills and experience employees bring to their companies. Like physical plants, machinery and copyrighted material, employees are now considered an asset — a line item for the balance sheet.

But in this area, few companies seem to take their future personnel acquisitions seriously. If companies courted other companies the way many employers court future employees, there would be few, if any, joint ventures or mergers. Unfortunately, when it comes to the job seeker, potential employers think basic business etiquette doesn't apply.

Etiquette: It's being polite; it's being civil; it's being as honest as the game of business allows you to be. Like a strong handshake or a well-written proposal, we all know the rules. Indeed, etiquette helps open doors and close deals. It makes good business sense. So shouldn't companies apply this proven approach when it comes to human resources policies?

Everyone knows that times are tough for job hunters. We've all read the newspapers, listened to the broadcasts and heard the statistics. For every new position, there are literally hundreds of applicants.

We know the odds, so we do our homework. We scour the want ads, read up on potential employers, attend seminars and form support groups around the job hunting process — all in the hope of picking up one more hint or gleaning that extra bit of information that will give us the edge. We go on informational interviews. We network with people, lots of people. We do all we can to hear about those "unadvertised" openings, which can account for up to 85 percent of jobs that get filled.

Nothing, however, prepares us for the rudeness and the lack of etiquette that greets us throughout the job-hunting process. More than 150 resumes later, after countless telephone calls and a good number of interviews, I have come to one conclusion: There is nothing "human" about human resources.

To be fair, not every person in a position to hire is without manners. In my quest, I have had good experiences and bad, even an offer or two as I searched for the "right fit." But far too many of those charged with acquiring a company's human capital have a lot to learn about the human side of human capital.

A few points of etiquette from a veteran job hunter:

■ Don't waste your time or mine. I was granted an informational interview with a marketing director. Within

minutes, it was clear she didn't really have the time to see me. After barely a smile, no advice and 10 minutes of awkward dialogue, I was out of there. If you have nothing to say or if your schedule is too tight, don't see us — we'll understand.

■ Tell us something, anything. After a very positive informational interview, a manager sent my resume on to personnel, putting me in a good position to compete with the other 400 applicants for this marketing position. I then survived my interview with personnel and was called back to meet with the hiring manager. That interview went so well that I was ushered in to talk with the man who would be my counterpart in the department. So far, so good.

I then did my part. I wrote my follow-up letters and made my follow-up telephone calls. And heard nothing. I waited another week and called again. Again, nothing. Twelve weeks went by before I finally got through to a secretary who told me "unofficially" that the position had been put on hold. The toughest part of a job hunt is the waiting and not knowing: That's what tests our spirits and erodes our self-esteem.

■ Our time is money, too. A recruiting firm sought me out for a position it was creating. When my appointment came to meet the president, I arrived on time, only to be made to wait 1½ hours. In the end, I was given 10 minutes of his time, during which he appeared distracted — it was obvious that he had no idea what he was actually looking for. All told, I lost three hours of pay at my temporary job, as well as my faith in "headhunters."

■ Honesty is the best policy. It's tough to be rejected, but this is actually not the toughest part of the job search process. We expect it. In fact, we appreciate honesty more than false hope — and we would rather know than not hear. After all, we are both looking for the right fit. So just tell us if we didn't get the job.

Maybe companies can get away with poor etiquette and poor personnel practices while the pool of applicants is overflowing, but what about tomorrow? Have any of these managers and personnel directors heard about the shortage of skilled workers that is right around the corner?

Unfortunately, human capital is not something that can be moved from warehouse to warehouse or shifted from one line item to the other. It requires the human touch. Consider then the "human" capital of your applicants and bring etiquette back into hiring.

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