

Phantom Resume

Third annual phantom-resumé prank pokes holes in online recruiting, suggests benchmarks for improvement

By Bruce Shutan

With rugged good looks, Josh Randall is a man of few words and many talents. Long ago, he was known as a bounty hunter who also tracked missing people, delivered ransom money, and hunted for hidden gold treasure. His impressive resumé, updated to stress his skills as a "top-gun recruiter," recently made the rounds online across the Fortune 500.

Trouble is, he's not real. Actor Steve McQueen portrayed him in the TV series "Wanted: Dead or Alive," which ran from 1958 to 1961, but don't tell that to "fellow" recruiters, who happily sent 175 e-mails thanking him for his resumé and/or encouraging him to apply for additional matching positions. He even received four calls for an interview.

The prank has a point: Pressure Fortune 500 companies into stepping up quality control for online job applications, making it faster and easier for job seekers to apply for work by streamlining navigation. Such improvements will help scores of firms when the talent war heats up for highly skilled laborers who are in short supply. Now a high-profile research project, this annual exercise is the brainchild of CareerXroads, a recruiting technology consulting firm in Kendall Park, New Jersey, that recently released its third mystery-job-seeker study.

Results were largely disturbing, indicating that the problems associated with online recruiting have gone from bad to worse. "We feel the quality of job pages for the Fortune 500 has gotten worse and the best ones have gotten better, but there are too many sites that just are not thinking this through," reports Mark Mehler, who founded CareerXroads with Gerry Crispin. He chose not to single out the worst offenders, noting the study's purpose is to learn from their mistakes and not embarrass any organizations.

HR Heroes and Heroines

Assisting these two gents with their comical but dead-serious research were 20 unemployed HR professionals who, in exchange for volunteering to help out, received job leads and a better understanding of how to apply for work online. All are members of the elite Princeton Human Resource Network Group founded by Dick Stone, whose list of alumni across Philadelphia and the New Jersey suburbs has ballooned to more than 500 from just five folks sharing job leads in a McDonald's 15 years ago. To belong, they must have earned six figures with at least 10 years of experience in the HR field.

"[Their input is] very valuable because they're job seekers," Mehler explains. "It's like a focus group and, if their experiences aren't good, they'd say, 'I wouldn't work for that company on a good day,' and that tells us something." At a post-study debriefing, the HR execs shared strategies to help simplify their own job searches.

Each unemployed HR exec assisting CareerXroads was assigned five of the 100 Best Companies to Work for in America, though the study encompasses the entire Fortune 500 (and volunteers in the first year divvied up 20 firms apiece from the entire universe of public companies). Their assignment: Apply for work online on behalf of Josh Randall and hold onto all e-mailed correspondence for later discussion and analysis.

Little attempt was made to conceal the identity of make-believe job seekers in each of the two previous years. Golde Locks was said to possess finance-management skills, while Vinnie Boombotz toiled away as a credit and collections expert for Bad-a-Bing Corp. Then, CareerXroads decided on a more subtle approach with Josh Randall, whose name might ring a bell with people age 50 and older.

What these HR heroes and heroines found were scores of typos and poorly written job descriptions, software glitches, and generally awful communication with job seekers.

One of their recommendations is that job applicants be allowed to simply cut and paste their resumés into job-application boxes. While nearly half the HR professionals who lent their assistance reported that it took only five or 10 minutes to apply for a job, Mehler says the fact that the rest took longer is alarming but telling when it comes to identifying an important area for improvement.

Dehumanizing Process

George W Gardner, Sr, an HR executive for more than 25 years who has worked primarily in Silicon Valley, was one of the foot soldiers in this battle against impersonal and inefficient machinery. He believes employers should conduct an ongoing audit of their e-recruiting processes and even attempt their own internal test involving a phony job applicant, suggesting the use of so-called Six Sigma quality metrics and training for all staffing personnel.

Gardner, who was director of human resources for Digital Equipment Corporation, Compaq Computer, Sybase, and Hyperion Solutions, is sanguine about the prospects for change. He expects that artificial intelligence will continue to improve to the point where the right linkage can be established based on an advertised position's competencies as it relates to a job applicant's background and skills.

Dan Charrow, an 18-year HR veteran who recently served as vice president of human resources for a Swedish-based medical-device manufacturing and sales organization, was taken aback by the breadth of disclaimers during his virtual encounters and just how cold and impersonal the online-solicitation process had become.

“They should keep in mind when they are building these processes that there are human beings on the other end,” notes Charrow, who also encountered elitism along the way. He recalls, for instance, how a law firm invited only attorneys to apply online once its newly designed site was completed, while all others were instructed to follow up offline. “It was like a class system,” he says. “I found it to be very distasteful and figured I wouldn't want to apply to this company as an HR person.”

Another seasoned HR exec was astounded by how many Fortune 500 firms were not following the gold standard for Web-site construction when she participated in the first mystery-job-seeker survey three years ago. “Their Web sites were cumbersome, time-consuming, and difficult to manage,” gripes Emily Thorne, who has worked in the field for more than 25 years and is contemplating a return to full-time corporate HR work after several years of home-based consulting work. She was just as disappointed this time.

Bright Spots

Despite these negative musings, the group of HR professionals spotted their share of redeeming characteristics. Charrow, for instance, was impressed by Plante & Moran PLLC, a professional services firm, noting how it took just a few clicks of the mouse to get right to the job-opportunities page. “You also could do a quick search by department, which provided hyperlinks to a list of job descriptions,” he says. “Two of the five firms whose sites I visited didn’t even have this option; you had to mail in your resumé. It was amusing.”

Thorne singles out Timberland for doing “a superb job” of articulating its vision and says the company made a compelling argument for working there. It also was easy to apply since job seekers had to answer just a few basic questions before cutting and pasting their resumé. “Within a matter of minutes, I put in the phantom resumé and received a nice acknowledgement,” she says. If Josh Randall were a minority, he would have been welcomed with open arms.

Thorne liked how the company touted the importance of diversity, which gave the impression that management was sincerely interested in leveling the playing field for new hires.

Gardner liked the Wachovia Bank site so much he applied for a job there, noting how it offered candidates a simple application to fill out, plenty of direction, interviewing tips, and an accurate picture of how the process would unfold.

The job interview went exactly as outlined online, with every person who walked by asking if he needed assistance. “They even responded to my follow-up letter, which was a first,” he quips, heartened by how professional and customer-oriented everyone proved to be. Both the interviewer and recruiter got back to him within three days.

Although Gardner was runner-up at Wachovia and three other places where he applied for high-level positions, he’s hopeful that something will come from at least three more interviews lined up as this issue went to press. “The whole process has given me a better focus for applying,” he says. “I am a little more selective about the companies I submit my resumé to, and I look more closely at their Web sites.”

No Substitute for Networking

Despite all the shortcuts and lessons learned from the online application process, Charrow says there still is no substitute for networking two or three times a week with peers and other business people, as well as contacting hiring managers on the phone or in person. “More people are

landing positions based on who they know—not what’s on their resumé, which half the time doesn’t get to the right people or sits on a big pile,” he says. During his seven months of unemployment, he found that most organizations are looking for organizational development skills in their HR departments. After landing about 25 interviews from contacts he made while volunteering on the mystery-job-seeker project, Charrow was poised for a third and final interview at a medical-device company where he had, thus far, met half a dozen executives.

Some paths that lead back to corporate HR after a stretch of unemployment may zigzag. Consider the case of Thorne, who founded Infinity Enterprises in January 2001, which she describes as a consulting firm specializing in “HR strategies and tactics.” She decided to unfurl her own shingle following multiple HR stints at CIGNA through much of the 1990s and higher-level involvement in the North American business units of a specialty chemical company in Germany named SKW AG.

While consulting has enabled her to benchmark and learn from client practices as well as enjoy a flexible work schedule and avoid heavy travel, she has grown somewhat tired of always having to hustle for her next assignment. However, Thorne also is apprehensive of high-profile companies that cannot seem to walk the talk.

What was most surprising to her is how little thought the firms she investigated gave to telling prospective hires about their inclusion on the coveted annual list of the 100 Best Companies to Work for in America. “They invested a lot to get this certification but did not follow through in capturing that distinction for top talent,” she observes, “and they weren’t set up to handle job inquiries.”

Her sense is: “[The Fortune 500] needs to start taking seriously the claims to being the best companies and how it looks to prospective employees who also could be future customers. We don’t think of our recruiting practices as a public-relations effort. It’s the one place outside of your day-to-day customers where you have inquiries from all areas and your Web site is globally accessible.”

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