

the dating game

The world of human resources has changed. Attracting the best talent, and the means to do it, is becoming essential for any hotel, as Chris Mumford, managing director of HVS Executive Search, explains.

The chief executive is representing his company at a hotel investment conference to discuss the current industry investment trends and his company's accompanying strategy. When asked what will differentiate his company's future development in the region from that of his competitors the chief executive steals a look at his notes, prepared for him by his head of acquisitions and development and his director of public relations, and proclaims that what will make his company more successful in the region is the quality of its employees. No mention of the company's brand strength, or its development pipeline, or its distinctive design philosophy, or its strong owner relations network.

It is difficult to find fault with such a well-intentioned concept, especially from a company in the service sector. We are now all familiar with the variations on the theme, such as 'it is our employees that make the difference' or 'we are nothing without our people'. Publications such as *The War for Talent* and the heightened dialogue on issues such as employee attraction and retention in recent years have forced companies to pay greater attention to their people asset and to make the right noises publicly when stating their high value. The recognition of the contribution of each employee to the success of a company is certainly to be welcomed and encouraged. The struggle for the hospitality industry to attract and retain talented employees is well documented, and there is no doubt that a great number of hospitality organisations have begun to place greater emphasis on the value of their employees and are genuinely committed to the development of a talented workforce.

It appears, however, that not all companies have wholeheartedly adopted the talent mindset. Despite what they may say, they have yet to develop a fundamental understanding and appreciation that having better talent is what elevates a company above its competitors. Adopting this mindset means throwing out some previously held

beliefs about people management, one of which is the approach to attracting employees in the first place.

The recruitment of an individual into an organisation is like dating. Prior to the first date, both parties will endeavour to learn each other's vital statistics. They will then meet, see if they like one another, try to learn what they did not already know and aim to obtain a sense of their potential compatibility. All being well, this first meeting will lead to a second meeting to check that they really do like one another now that the ice has been broken and they are more relaxed. A third meeting might involve meeting the parents, or board of directors, for the seal of approval. By this point love should be in the air and, with just one more meeting to exchange rings or contracts, both parties are hopefully on the path to a long and rewarding future together.

The right attitude

Sadly it seems that all too often in the recruitment dating game it is the candidate who is expected to do all the work while the hiring organisation sits back and admires itself in the mirror. Traditionally the employer has felt that it has the upper hand, that it is the employee who needs the company, not the other way around. The attitude communicated by the company is one of 'you should be honoured to join us' rather than one of 'yes, we are really interested in you and feel that you could make a significant contribution to the success of our company.'

The initial interaction that a prospective employee has with an organisation sets the tone for the entire working relationship. If the individual does not feel valued and appreciated on day one, why should things be any different after one year or even ten years? Employees of generations X and Y are not going to express signs of loyalty and commitment to their employers unless they are nurtured and cherished. As Jeffrey Catrett, dean at Ecole Hotelière de Lausanne,

points out, 'Generation Y is focusing on career development, personal recognition, involvement in decision-making and a good work/life balance.'

Creating an impression

Why for example, at hotel level, are so many interviews conducted by human resources in their offices? In my experience, the HR department is invariably tucked away in some windowless basement. To get there you have to enter through the back-of-house entrance and report to security. You are then led down a maze of corridors, complete with a myriad of pipes and cabling, to the HR department. Of course the offices are located where they are out of necessity so that they do not take up any revenue-generating space in the building. Such office layouts are also the reality of the hotel world and this is where the employee will spend a great deal of time. But why does this have to be the first impression a candidate has of a potential employer when attending an interview? Why take a first date to the local bar when you can go to a fancy restaurant?

Surely, asking the candidate to report to the front desk where they can be asked to take a seat in the lobby creates a more positive impression. The candidate has the chance to have a one-on-one interaction with an existing member of staff (and possible future colleague) at the front desk and a chance to watch the hotel in operation while waiting in the lobby. The interview can then be conducted in the restaurant or in one of the hotel's meetings rooms. Naturally the candidate will need to see back of house later on, but this initial welcoming experience may be one of the few occasions they have to see the hotel through a guest's eyes and will create a lasting reference point.

Wooing techniques

At senior management level, where an individual's impact on company performance is more keenly felt, the need to woo a candidate is paramount. In this global industry, companies often find that its shortlist of candidates for a key position are spread far and wide around the globe. A hiring company therefore needs to recognise that it has to invest in order to obtain the right candidate and that it is not a time to scrimp or quibble over trivial issues. The cost of paying for a candidate to fly in for an interview is negligible when compared with the value which that employee could ultimately contribute to your organisation. It is still negligible if the



flight is business class, if the accommodation is in a top suite and if the candidate's spouse is also invited.

It is not just money which needs to be invested. Employers should ensure that they carefully prepare a detailed schedule for a potential employee's visit and set aside enough time. If they are coming from a long distance, this may be the only chance a candidate has to meet the key decision-makers, visit the company offices, explore the city, and assess housing and schooling options. Think how valued and respected a well-prepared visit, allowing as much time as necessary, would make the candidate feel. The notion that if a candidate is motivated enough for the job then he or she will arrange and pay for his or her own flight and attendance at an interview is misguided in today's open job market. When the best candidate for a job is typically a passive job-seeker who is currently happy and successful with their current employer, a hiring company needs to employ its full arsenal of seduction techniques.

There is no denying, of course, that job candidates need to make themselves as marketable and attractive as possible to a potential employer. Successful dating requires commitment from both parties. In an age, however, when the hospitality industry as a whole is increasingly competing against other industries to hire and keep talented employees, hotel companies can no longer afford to let the candidate do all the chasing. HMI