

Choose the right staff during a crisis

By Tom Addyman on Monday, October 12, 2009

It's been a tough time for hundreds of businesses and thousands of employees in the Middle East and when you get to an expat haven like the UAE, there are despondent faces with nice suits practically littering the streets. Bad news for them, but those companies which are still going now have the cream of the crop to choose who fills new vacancies.

Dubai has been described as a great new start for many professionals from overseas. The harsh truth is that many of them may not be as professional as they should be. While many experienced and diligent expat workers were enticed by great packages, others actually needed a new start rather than wanted one.

So how is it that the less able managed to find jobs in the first place? The answer in many cases is that they do possess at least one highly developed skill, and that is a remarkable chameleon-like ability to morph into their surroundings. No matter what the role, there are plenty of unscrupulous candidates who will tell you that they have been in exactly the same position before, but after 15 years, felt that it was "time to move on".

There is also a common perception that the more impressive the previous employer, the more impressive the candidate, which isn't necessarily so. I once hired an extremely promising candidate, who had a great CV and gave an extremely polished interview. She was able to reel off the successes of her previous company – a large and reputable firm. In a company of that size, you often don't have to be exceptional in your role; adequate may be all that's required; there is the room to be anonymous and ride on the back of the achievements of colleagues. With an SME, there isn't that opportunity. Employees are far more easily recognised by their ability – or lack of it. I know from experience that there are candidates who will be incredibly imaginative in their CV in the first place and then deliver a performance that would be worthy of an Oscar nomination during the interview itself. Their true calling would probably lean more towards a career on the stage. It is essential to get under the skin of your applicant. Rather than be a good listener, it pays to be a good interrogator. Some intelligent research and an air of confidence can certainly give the impression of a great potential employee, but how much do they really know about what the job entails? Never be concerned about putting an interviewee on the spot. No one wants to embarrass, but if they are a real prospect, ask them tough technical questions.

Another rule for decreasing the odds of hiring the dud is that you must become detached and objective in your assessment in the first instance, and make sure that an initial interview is conducted in a formal rather than social environment. Enjoying someone's company is no guarantee that they can perform the duties you are seeking. There are plenty of instances where the bond has even been strong enough for an employer to create a position. Not a good move.

If you were impressed enough on a professional level with an applicant, that's when it may be worth a second interview over lunch

or dinner. It's a good way – and often an interesting way – to gauge your candidate's social skills. They may be extremely polite to a prospective employer but if they click their fingers for service or belch in the face of a cashier, it may not reach the levels of etiquette you were looking for in the head of sales.

And from the start of a beautiful friendship, to the dangers of an existing one, recruiting a friend is a nightmare waiting to happen. The chances are that if you didn't know this person, they would not be the perfect fit for the job. It is much more difficult to be objective with someone you are close to and almost impossible to treat them with the same even hand the rest of your team expect.

Thankfully, we are living and working in a far more progressive arena than even 10 years ago, when there was a tendency to recruit people who were good – but not that good. The fear factor meant a lot of senior managers in particular did not want to take on a potential threat to their own position within the company. I think now there is more credit given to making the right appointment, managers are far happier to hire new team members with experience and expertise in their own fields – perhaps evidence of a more mature business model, which encourages knowledge sharing and a more holistic approach to company success. One of the best appointments I have made was very much an expert in his own field. Not so much of a technical asset, but one of the best networkers I have ever seen. He had a contacts book the size of the New York Yellow Pages and was a rare mixture of diplomacy and charisma. His industry knowledge was extremely good, but his front-of-house role was fantastic.

Depending on the size of your business, a great way to take the strain from the whole shortlist and interview process is to hire someone whose judgement you trust at least as well as your own. Whether that is through your own HR department or outsourcing to a third party, this can be a blessing or a curse, depending on, yes, who you recruit in the first place.

Whatever you decide to call the department (or individual), all SMEs should still have some form of HR, and this could be one of your most important appointments. To have a member of the team who has in-depth knowledge of your industry can save you time and stress by at least separating the wheat from the chaff in the first instance. Take on the wrong person for the role and you could be losing out on some great human assets.

If you can't justify the expense of a full time HR presence, another option is hire the services of a recruitment agency. As ever, with the less reputable companies, there can be pitfalls. It is in everyone's interest to place the right candidate in the right position in the shortest possible timeframe, but that's not always going to be the case. Recruiters' compensation tends to be commission-based, and so there may be more pressure to find the right placements rather than the right applicants. In the long term, of course, this is corporate suicide. These companies rely on reputation to continue trading.

It may sound obvious, but for SMEs in particular, when time is of the essence, you can not rely purely on gut instinct. We're talking business here, and a rash decision could have disastrous implications. No harm can come of checking not just their given references, but maybe a couple of former colleagues they haven't listed. Do some research and if they really are the perfect fit for the role you have in mind, it can only be good news. Remember not to go over the top though. So, if you are looking to hire in these difficult times, make sure you ask the right questions, check the right references, and under no circumstances accept a degree certificate with Tipex.

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