

Building the Perfect Beast

Is it an outgoing personality, top-notch sales and admin skills or a sharp commercial awareness? Or maybe some are just born to do it?

Steve Hemsley finds out what makes the perfect recruiter.

The perfect Olympic sprinter has legs bursting with fast-twitch muscle fibres that work without much oxygen. He is also tall enough to produce long strides that can manage at least five steps every second.

Only a handful of people come close to perfection in any sport, and the same is true in business. Being the very best in the recruitment industry may not win gold medals and media stardom, but it will certainly mean a successful and financially rewarding career.

The recipe for the perfect recruiter is almost as complicated as making an Italian meringue requiring the use of a sugar thermometer. And, just as mastering a great food dish can take many years, finding someone with every skill and personality trait needed to excel in this industry can be a lengthy process.

ClickAJob chief executive Yngve Traberg and Thomas International director Tony Kaye are about to publish some joint research outlining the main personality differences between the industry's best and worst performers. It will hopefully answer the question of why some people are great billers while others can struggle to reach their targets. The study has examined the sales and human interaction skills of about 100 consultants.

"A lot of extroverts are not so good at the administration side of recruitment, but you must be strong at both to be the best", says Traberg. "The perfect recruiter arguably does exist and is among the top 10% of billers in the country. We are also seeing top-quality people migrating from other industries such as estate agency and classified advertising sales."

Of course, the outgoing nature of many recruiters means they are keen to move things on quickly, and the fact that keeping reliable records is not always their strong point is one reason the best consultancies invest so much in support staff. Yet good sales and administrative skills would not be enough on their own if a company was building the perfect recruiter from scratch. A softer, caring side to a person's personality is also essential to win the trust of candidates and clients.

"A person must be able to sell, but in a caring way," says Denise Walker, executive director of the Recruitment and Employment Confederation's RITE Start Up Service, which helps entrepreneurs launch their own recruitment companies. "The perfect recruiter can spot opportunities for all parties and must be goal-driven and fast and accurate, but he or she must also be ethical and understand they are dealing with people's lives and businesses."

Walker believes the most complete recruiters are made rather than born, and that consultancies should identify raw potential during the interview and assessment stages and then mould people to the needs of the job. Yet assessment psychologists are not so sure. They argue that like great Olympic sprinters you either have the core qualities or not.

David Sewell is managing partner of Assessment and Selection Psychology and he works with numerous recruiters to assess potential consultants. He is also called into agencies to discover why someone might not be performing to their expected potential.

“The best recruiters are certainly born because we are fundamentally what we are, which is why people can come into this business from different sectors, such as estate agency, and do so well,” says Sewell. He rates potential and established consultants on their personality traits such as how extrovert, open and conscientious they are.

According to Dr David Pendleton, a member of the British Psychological Society, there are various ‘C’ words that describe the model recruiter. As well as being caring, the super recruiter must be:

- competent (it’s hard to trust people who lack ability in their chosen profession),
- consistent (is his or her performance today of the same high standard it was last week?) and
- courageous (will they stand up for themselves in the workplace?). “The best recruiters become trusted advisors and learn to sell without aggressively selling,” says Sewell.

Despite the growth in assessment to identify the perfect recruiter, there is a general view that the industry still employs unsuitable people. This is one reason why recruitment, and like its cousin estate agency, has earned a reputation for not always putting the needs of customers first.

Roger Holdsworth, chairman of talent acquisition and optimism specialist Capital Consulting’s assessment practice, says there are a lot of unfair stereotypes about the typical recruitment consultant and a greater use of assessment would ensure more exceptionally talented people entered the industry.

“There is a profile of the most effective recruiter, and anyone from any walk of life can fit the bill,” he says. “It is a good thing people do not need to be graduates to excel in recruitment. Anyone can be a high achiever as long as they have the required common sense and personality as well as the core sales and administrative skills.”

However, the fundamental abilities and personal characteristics required to be the best are being added to all the time. New technology and changes to employment law mean the cream of recruitment’s crop must also be flexible and able to adapt.

This means mixing sales and people skills with an ability to use new media such as online job boards, as well as understanding the often complex software systems being installed by consultancies. Younger high-flyers brought up with computers may adjust more easily than some older billers who may have to work that bit harder to remain among the elite.

Employment law is constantly being updated, and the perfect recruiter would keep abreast of changes to legislation affecting, for example, disability and age discrimination.

“Recruiters can get tripped up by legal issues in such a sales and target-driven environment,” says Sue Dodd, director of industry analysis company Agile Intelligence. She adds that as the industry becomes more professional the flawless recruiter also needs commercial awareness to understand how their business works so they appreciate the importance of profits and margins as well as the number of actual sales.

So how many consultancies feel they already have star quality within their ranks?

Paul Farrer, chief executive of PFJ, likes to think he has a couple of perfect recruiters among his workforce. He believes the very best people learn over time how to gain the confidence of everyone and have a natural ability to persuade candidates and clients to use them time and again.

“There are people here who are good at everything and excel in the core skill of remaining in control and understanding exactly what is going on throughout the recruitment process,” he says. “The recruiters who are at the top of their profession can also adapt to an evolving market, even if they may need extra training from time to time.”

Recruitment-to-recruitment consultancy McCall is always on the hunt for people who will make perfect recruiters. However, joint managing director Julie O’Neill says that as with all people businesses, even after extensive assessment and interviewing, an employer’s gut feeling will still play a crucial role in telling them whether they are appointing someone special.

“Ultimately, we have to judge people on their hunger and desire to succeed and what drives that. What makes a person the perfect recruiter can depend on their age and experience,” she says.