

Building Your Brand On Talented People

An interview with Douglas B. Rath, President and
Kimberly K. Rath, Managing Director, Talent Plus, Lincoln, Nebraska



Douglas B. Rath Kimberly K. Rath

EDITOR'S NOTE

"Everyone in the world has talent" asserts President Doug Rath. One has only to "cast that talent in the right position" to "make a big difference in a person's career." And that, in essence, is his business's modus operandi, for Talent Plus works with companies to help them create a talent-based organization. After more than 30 years of research, he and his team have shown that this hiring approach "results in better, happier workers, which means lower turnover, greater productivity, and healthier bottom line".

COMPANY BRIEF

Founded in 1989 by Douglas B. Rath and Dr. William E. Hall, Talent Plus is a Lincoln, Nebraska-based human resource consulting firm that advises, recruits, hires and trains personnel for international corporations, including Ann Taylor, Pepperidge Farm, Godiva Chocolatier, Gensler, The McGraw-Hill Companies, Nordstrom, the Mayo Clinic, Sony Development and The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company. The company maintains offices in five cities across the United States plus the United Kingdom.

"It takes years to ensure that we cast everybody in the right roles," explains Managing Director Kimberly Rath, discussing their long-term involvements with major corporations, but "because we enhance job satisfaction, job-retention rates go up". Further, their focus is on strength management, which she describes in this way: "Many organizations focus on trying to strengthen their weakest links. Our philosophy is to strengthen your best and help them become even better performers". All told then, "we really are able to find the right use for the talents people are given," the president summarizes, and we help our clients see that their intellectual capital - their people - is their only sustainable competitive advantage. This is their brand of the future."

With an M.A. in educational psychology, Doug Rath has served on several boards of directors and is currently on the board of the Cancer Treatment Centers of America. His wife, Kimberly, has been a member of the Nebraska Human Resources Research Foundation and presently serves on the executive advisory board of the Nebraska Center for Entrepreneurship. Both are University of Nebraska alumni.

What was your reason for creating Talent Plus? What in the marketplace made you think it would work?

Doug: Dr. William E. Hall, a professor at the University of Nebraska we both spent time with, taught us that everyone in the world has talent. If you can cast that talent in the right position, it can make a big difference in a person's career. His vision was to change the paradigm from four out of five people going to a job where they're not really happy, to four out of five going to an environment where they're inspired and can use their talents.

Our work was ignited by his, and today we work for companies to help them create a talent-based organization. Talent is best described as a person's capacity to achieve near-perfect performance. Our research shows that hiring based on talent results in better, happier workers, which means lower turnover, greater productivity, and a healthier bottom line.

Is the focus on corporations, as opposed to individuals?

Kimberly: It's mostly on the global corporate market because so many companies have grown and taken us internationally. Our interviews today are conducted in over 20 languages. And what we find is that talent transfers from culture to culture and industry to industry.

Do you concentrate on organizations of a specific size, or will you work with anybody?

Kimberly: We work with very large companies all the way down to those with only 15 employees. Size doesn't drive us; we simply need to see a commitment to selecting the most talented individuals.

Have you been happy with the Talent Plus brand? Do you plan to continue building awareness?

Doug: Brand awareness is forever: you're always building it, creating it. In fact, we help our clients see that their intellectual capital - their people - is their only sustainable competitive advantage. This is their brand of the future, beyond whatever their core product or service might be.

We plan to continue to find companies that want to be talent driven. Now, it may seem that every company would want to operate in this way, but that's not really true. A lot of organizations are fairly lackadaisical in their approach, versus others that are relentless in their pursuit of the best and brightest. But once organizations formulate the vision of a talent-driven culture, we have the opportunity to partner with them in something that unfolds over time. It's not a quick fix, though. It's a concept that must be pursued over a number of years.

So most of your relationships with companies are long term?

Kimberly: Right. A client with 12,000 people can't turn over its whole staff overnight. By using our Quality Selection Process, we can bring those people in one by one, but it takes years to ensure that we cast everybody in the right roles. For instance, have we promoted the people who have the talents and capabilities to be

managers, rather than just those who are the very best salespeople. Very often, the top salespeople are promoted to management when, in fact, their talent lies in selling, not managing.

What is the Quality Selection Process?

Kimberly: The Quality Selection Process is the structured interview process developed by Dr. Hall. After more than 30 years of research, it has been established that the top performers in any profession answer certain questions very differently than those who are less effective in their work. By studying a company's top performers through the use of our structured interview, we are able to develop a profile of the talent necessary to achieve excellence in that profession.

Talent Plus has many different interviews, but all are designed to highlight what we call "life themes," or consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, which our research has shown to be essential to successful job performance. A life theme is not something you turn on when you get to work and off at night. It's that you're optimistic, or that you see solutions instead of problems. We also measure responses against our Talent BenchmarkSM for an organization, which is developed by studying its best performers. So, for example, when we look for salespeople, we've already interviewed some of that company's very best, and we know what the ideal responses should be.

Do you normally need to bring in new people, or do companies already have good people but in the wrong jobs?

Doug: Both, and we rescue talent when it's poorly cast. At one financial institution we interviewed a salesperson who always was late with her paperwork. This was because she was extremely client driven, but management didn't recognize her talent. The average salesperson in this organization sold \$1 million. This young woman was selling \$7 million when we met her. Today she's selling \$40 million because we helped her managers to recognize her talent. So she's gone from being a top performer to the Michael Jordan of her profession.

We also help our clients very proactively to develop their own talent bank, which includes candidates they are genuinely interested in hiring when the right opportunity presents itself. The people they need may very well exist already, in a job someplace else, so when an opening arises, we don't have to conduct a search. We go to their talent bank. The results are much better than with a crisis hiring. When one of our clients says, "The game's going to start; we need a pitcher on the mound," Talent Plus is ready.

Some senior executives might say that in-house managers could handle what you provide. Is it easy to make them understand your service or do their backs go up?

Doug: Both, but the more talent they have, the more receptive they generally are. They see us as a competitive advantage in that we can help them leverage more quickly some of the things they need to do. In addition, we train their managers in our interview technique so they become a partner to the process.

Business executives very often cite their biggest challenge as not only finding good people, but also retraining them - especially today, with people moving from company to company all the time. Are you able to improve job retention? And how big a role does the CEO play in this?

Kimberly: Our process definitely enhances retention. When we cast people in jobs they're good at and succeed in, they're less likely to leave. So because we enhance job satisfaction, job-retention rates go up.

As for today's CEOs, they need to understand the people who report directly to them. They need to know these people's strengths and weaknesses, what motivates and inspires them. If they spend their time focusing on those individuals and developing them as leaders, the effect will begin to ripple down through the organization. So the CEO plays a very critical role in building success from the top. Many organizations focus on trying to strengthen their weakest links. Our philosophy is to strengthen your best and help them become even better performers.

Can you work with a company in which you might not see that vision in the CEO, or do you need to relate to the executive team?

Doug: In the past we have decided not to work with certain companies because the executive team didn't share our sense of purpose. We couldn't see an alignment that was going to work.

We've also occasionally encountered CEOs who want to exploit talent. One very successful person said he saw employees as sponges. "I wring out what I want," he said, "and then I cast them aside." We were not able to help that person.

With all the success you've had, are you seeing increased competition, or is there still a clear distinction between Talent Plus and its competitors?

Doug: There is increased competition now because people are paying more attention to human resources all over the world. However, we have a distinct enough process differential to distinguish ourselves. Our proprietary interview technology has been nearly 35 years in the making, it is not published, and we partner with clients in ways to ensure that we give them a competitive advantage.

Kimberly: Another difference between the competitors and us is that two people could analyze the same Talent Plus interview independently and reach the same conclusion. In other words, there are defi-

nite parameters to what we're going to accept as a response. With other interviewing processes, the interviewer's subjectivity can prevent an objective decision. Our technology allows organizations to assess a person's talents without becoming involved in issues like age, race, and sex, and so the organization becomes far more diverse.

As your business becomes more global, will you need to open offices in additional countries, and will you need to bring in people from a greater diversity of cultures?

Kimberly: Well, we operate around the clock already. Our interviewing center works 24 hours a day, seven days a week, because we interview internationally all the time. Through a collaborative arrangement with the University of Nebraska's foreign-language departments, if we need to do an interview in a language other than English, French, or Spanish but don't need someone who can speak that language on staff full-time, we can subcontract those services for as long as necessary. That's worked very nicely for us.

Can leadership be taught?

Doug: That's been one of the more debated questions in the 34 years I've been in this business. We say that training refines talent; it doesn't create it. If you want leadership talent, you need to go after someone who has natural leadership abilities. You can't teach them or build them. Even Harvard's M.B.A. program doesn't create leadership in someone who doesn't have the talent. We do a lot of assessments of high school and college people, and I can tell which of them will be CEOs 25 years from now because they exhibit leadership talent already.

If some of your top consultants were asked to describe your management style, what do you think they would say?

Doug: That we're team driven. This is not a hierarchy.

Kimberly: That we're passionate and very client focused. If a company calls and says it needs an interview done right away, as long as there's a person in the building, that interview can be done. We look for client solutions.

Are there one or more areas of the business on which you look back and find the most pride?

Doug: For me it comes down to the specific people whose careers we've helped catapult. We really are able to find the right use for the talents people are given, and finding the right platform can happen at any time. It can happen to very seasoned people, as well as to very junior people just starting their careers. So Talent Plus is the success story of lots of individuals. I'm proud that we've maximized so many people's potential.