

May 15, 2013

Online Hiring Tools Are Changing Recruiting Techniques

By MARK COHEN

It can seem improbable given the still-sluggish monthly unemployment reports, but in some sectors small businesses are desperate to find qualified candidates to fill jobs.

[Opower](#), a 354-person software company that helps utility customers save on energy bills, is one of those businesses. In competition for engineering talent with technology companies small and large, Opower recently had 71 openings advertised on [LinkedIn](#) and the job-listings site [Indeed](#). The company, based in Arlington, Va., plans to add 150 employees by the end of the year. “I just found out today I have another five to fill,” Jennifer Boulanger, Opower’s head recruiter, said recently. “I was, like, oh gosh. It’s never ending.”

That Ms. Boulanger and her nine-person recruiting staff are able to keep up at all is a testament to their use of today’s online hiring technologies. Stored inside the company’s LinkedIn account are folders for various technology companies, each containing links to the profiles of potential candidates that the team is planning to approach through LinkedIn’s internal “InMail” system.

Each week, Ms. Boulanger hosts Talent Tuesday, in which Opower employees bring their laptops and, fueled by free pizza and blaring iTunes, comb through their personal LinkedIn networks for friends and former colleagues matching Opower openings. If a referral ends up being hired, the referring employee receives \$1,000. Of the 165 jobs the company listed last year, only one was filled using an outside recruiting firm — and that was an executive level search.

Companies that are just now getting in the market for talent are also using the new technologies. Steven Uster is chief executive of Eldridge Capital, an asset-backed lender based in Toronto. His company recently introduced an offshoot, [Zillidy](#), that issues small loans to small businesses; the money is backed by personal assets like luxury watches, jewelry and fine art.

To get the venture off the ground, Mr. Uster needed a chief appraiser. He placed advertisements in local media and inquired at area gemology programs but after several weeks had failed to find viable candidates. Then he went on LinkedIn and typed “gemologist or

jewelry appraiser Toronto” into the search bar. Within an hour of reading the profiles that appeared in the search results, he had four candidates, one of whom he hired a week later. “I don’t know why it didn’t occur to me sooner,” he said. “It should have been obvious.”

Here are some tips from companies that have been trying new strategies.

ASSEMBLE THE RIGHT TOOLS LinkedIn, whose membership grew 25 percent last year, now exceeds 200 million members worldwide and has thoroughly insinuated itself into the fabric of professional life. That means employers have one centralized place to find the vast majority of qualified candidates. Most important, through LinkedIn, employers can reach “passive” candidates, or the estimated 80 percent of all candidates who are not actively looking but might be interested in the right opportunity.

Not all LinkedIn membership levels provide the same degree of access to such candidates. Mr. Uster used his free basic account to find the appraiser. Once he spotted the abbreviated listings for a handful of promising candidates, including their current and previous employers, he simply searched for them online to find out more. “I’m a huge fan of LinkedIn for small-business owners,” he said, “and I’ve never paid them a dime.”

Ms. Boulanger, on the other hand, spends more than \$50,000 a year for seven subscriptions to [Recruiter](#), LinkedIn’s high-end product. In addition to providing more search functionality and full access to every LinkedIn profile, it has become a powerful management system for storing and organizing searches — something akin to [Salesforce](#), the cloud-based business software. When Ms. Boulanger is ready to contact candidates, Recruiter can even draft the InMail messages for her, drawing on templates like “Conversation Starter” or “Getting Back in Touch.”

To cast a wider net, Ms. Boulanger lists all openings on Indeed and pays to have them appear in the top half of the first page of search results. She also advertises on [Glassdoor](#), the employee-generated site used by job seekers to research the work culture of potential employers. When candidates log on to find out about the salaries and free snacks at a competitor, Opower’s job listings pop up.

All told, Ms. Boulanger estimated she spends \$165,000 a year on online searches. “It sounds like a lot,” she said, “but if we were still using search firms to fill most of our six-figure openings, we’d be spending millions.”

ESTABLISH YOUR BRAND When candidates come across listings they find interesting, one of the first things they do is click on the company’s Web site to find out more about the company. That is why most online hiring experts recommend that you think about the image

you want to project.

Tech companies competing for engineers do this well. The careers pages on their Web sites are often filled with photos of employees wearing funny hats and videos spoofing MTV Cribs or Star Trek in hopes of conveying the right quirky offbeat sensibility. One new jobs site now in a test phase, [Good.co](#), is organized around helping both job seekers and employers find the right cultural fit.

To attract talent, many companies participate in the industry-specific group discussions that LinkedIn hosts for members. Others try guerilla-like tactics, like using [Work](#) LinkedIn tool that shows your advertisement whenever a candidate matching one of your descriptions views another company's job listing.

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EXPERIMENT WITH KEY WORDS It is impressive to watch an experienced

Recruiter narrow the search results in a hot field — massaging search terms and adding filters for experience level and business schools or engineering programs. Whether you are using Recruiter or one of LinkedIn's less expensive options, try different combinations of key words and filters to see which produce the best results. There is an art to it.

PUT YOUR EMPLOYEES TO WORK Encourage your employees to keep their LinkedIn profiles current and to post your job openings as updates to their personal pages. After all, each update they post of a new title, account landed or project ripples out through their networks and draws attention to your company. When vetting candidates, look for those with connections to your employees and ask their opinions.

COMBINE HIGH TECH WITH HIGH TOUCH As much as LinkedIn and other online tools have automated and centralized the process, some argue that the fundamentals of hiring have not changed. "Once you have your list of 30 or 40 profiles, it still comes down to getting people on the phone and getting a good feel for them," said Jerry Grady, a financial services marketing recruiter with [the Ward Group](#) in Boston, who, like many recruiters, uses LinkedIn to initiate his searches. "What LinkedIn does is put a lot of this at your fingertips, but the process is the same," he added.

When you have a list of candidates you want to approach, think about what else you may be able to do to elicit a response. [Table XI](#), a Chicago-based Web and mobile-app consulting firm, recently created a blog post on LinkedIn about a successful search that landed a coveted app developer. Before approaching the candidate, TableXI's chief operating officer, Mark Rickmeier, reviewed the candidate's personal Web site and saw that it was designed like a Dr. Seuss book, complete with art and rhymes. In crafting his initial InMail to the candidate, Mr. Rickmeier began:

You must forgive

This intro quite strange

You shouldn't think

That I'm odd or deranged ...

The developer is now employed by Table XI — and no doubt popping up regularly in other companies' recruiting searches.