

Cognitive Dissonance – a recruiting theory in practice?

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Tell me if you've seen or heard this line before: "People are our greatest asset". I have.

- "At Warburg Pincus, we believe that people are our greatest asset." - Warburg Pincus LLC (www.warburgpincus.com/people/)
- "Our people are our greatest asset!" – Arrow Road Construction Company (www.arrowroad.com/ourpeople.htm)
- "HEI views our associates as our greatest resource, and we hire and develop the best." – HEI Hotels & Resorts (http://www.heihotels.com/our_people/)
- "Our people are our greatest asset." - Clarke American Inc. (http://home.clarkeamerican.com/www/baldrige/great_asset.html)

We read these statements all the time and from a staggering collection of different firms within different industries. For the sake of full disclosure, I have no affiliation, affinity or bias respecting the firms noted above – they simply popped up in a web search on the phrase, "People Are Our Greatest Asset". Just one search on that phrase returned 26,200,000 hits. Not surprisingly, there are an abundance of studies, surveys and papers offering varying takes and perspectives of this mantra. In fact, you can't swing a cat, well, ok; you can't click a mouse without hitting a study outlining the criticality of finding and keeping top talent. I won't list those multiple millions of hits here out of respect for your intelligence and time.

This should be music to every recruiter's ears; put a spring in our step; swell our chest with pride; and generally imbue us with a sense of awe and inspiration at the significant role we play in delivering on a company's goals. And yet...

And yet, recruiting is often not *genuinely* operating as a strategic imperative or mission critical function. Look at the way many companies resource and manage their recruiting function: the people, the structure, the tools, and the leadership. There exist massive disconnects. We have cognitive dissonance. There should be no doubt that everyone, from the C suite to the most junior role, indeed the entire organization, is fully committed to the *belief* that top talent is one of the most critical factors for success in business.

This, my friends, is where we have the disconnect - the cognitive dissonance. What is cognitive dissonance? Simply put, Cognitive Dissonance is a psychological term which describes the uncomfortable tension that comes from holding two conflicting thoughts at the same time. This theory was first proposed by social psychologist Leon Festinger in 1957. Cognitive Dissonance theory sets forth that there is a tendency for people to seek consistency or alignment among their beliefs, opinions, etc. (cognitions). When there is an inconsistency between attitudes or behaviors (dissonance), something has to change to get rid of the dissonance. In the case of a divergence between attitudes and behavior, it is most likely that the attitude will change to accommodate the behavior. Dissonance most often occurs in situations where we must choose between two incompatible beliefs or actions.

It is believed that two factors influence the intensity of the dissonance: the number of dissonant beliefs, and the importance attached to each belief. For purposes of this article, there are really two important principles for us to keep in mind in considering how the theory ultimately applies to recruiting:

1. Dissonance results when a person is required to choose between attitudes and behaviors that are contradictory or in somehow conflict; and,
2. Dissonance can be eliminated or mitigated by; a.) reducing the importance of those conflicting beliefs, behaviors and actions; b.) acquiring new beliefs that change the balance, or; c.) removing the conflicting attitude or behavior.

We Don't walk the Talk

Wonderfully esoteric you say? A delightful intellectual exercise? Maybe. However, let's indulge in a little further exploration. In simple terms here is the point of dissonance – as businesses, what we state that we *believe* about recruiting talent is not in alignment with *what we do* around recruiting talent. “How so?” you might be asking yourself.

Why not begin with a quick perusal of job postings? All too often they are not much more than the position descriptions that are created for org-design and compensation leveling purposes. Both of which are quite necessary aspects of Human Capital Planning (workforce analytics, workforce planning, OD, etc.). And in fact, a strong partnership needs to exist between recruiting and Org Design, Compensation & Benefits, Talent Management and other core, discrete functions within HR. We'll address that more in a bit.

An overwhelming number of posted jobs (on Corporate Career Sites, Major Job Boards, Niche Job Boards, Craig's List, even newspapers), are not much more than checklists of skills or day-to-day tasks.

What they don't address is talent – the deliberate and adaptive application of knowledge and competencies to deliver results. And they are often far from compelling, either in terms of attracting people or in presenting the employer's brand or the employee's career value proposition. And this is as much the fault of recruiting as any other function. Why? Because we in recruiting perpetuate it.

We don't consult with our clients to craft something better. What we do most often is go back to our desks shaking our heads in dismay muttering, "They just don't get it". Heck, look at what we use to attract recruiters, or worse, our recruiting leaders. As a prospective candidate I look at those postings and say, "I can do that, but why should I want to do it for them?" And that is the question our job postings need to explore and explain, enticingly, in order to generate interest by and for the people that we are interested in trying to attract. Why not incorporate some of the critical goals and objectives (individual and corporate) to be reached if the person we hire is successful in their role?

Why not discuss the competencies needed to be successful? This would improve our ability to hire people that better match the needs of the organization. This, consequently, highlights the need for recruiting to partner very closely with the talent management function of the firm. If we hire people in alignment with critical business expectations (goals and objectives, maybe even a core deliverable or two) and in alignment with how we expect to manage them we should have a more effective workforce to deploy and lead – Human Capital Management.

Recruiting should also play a role in succession planning, workforce planning and other human capital functions and as a result should be linked with, and embedded into, the overarching talent management philosophy of the company. This can be done by establishing a partnership with the folks doing workforce analytics, the employee relations teams, our HR business partners, our OD teams, and others. If you can't create a formal interaction, you should at the very least be establishing a consultative, influencing relationship. Ask yourself - are you someone that others in the organization seek out when it comes to talent questions?

Back to the hiring bit. Our tools for hiring must become better aligned with the talent management and performance management philosophy and techniques of the firm. Why not look at candidates through a similar lens as, say, the 9 Box method used in talent assessment? For some roles, we need to hire high-performers, for others what we really require are steady performers. Again, what kind of individual are we trying to attract with our job description? Taken to the next step, what kinds of questions are we asking in our front end screening? What about in our actual interview guides? How are we crafting our

candidate selection matrices? These need to be focused on uncovering the depth and breadth of our desired competencies as well as the technical skills that may exist in our target candidates. If they don't, then we have another layer of dissonance to work through – or rationalize away. Our recruiting strategy meetings (a.k.a. intake meetings) with our hiring managers need to focus on talent management, goals and objectives and not simple skill collections as they so often do today. *Those* are the real solutions we are providing by hiring the right talent.

We should also repurpose our Service Level Agreement. It should function more like a project plan by reflecting the statements of work, the scope and scale, budget, timelines, stakeholders and their roles, etc. which are required to land the right talent. Instead, we more often than not view it as a document focused almost exclusively on timetables rather than what it should be - a project performance action plan (emphasis on action). It should include who is to craft the job description, or even better the role profile, and the job posting. It should outline, in realistic terms, the sourcing plan. It should clearly identify the screening attributes and candidate assessment process. And then we as recruiters need to drive this process – we need to manage these projects. And each search really is a project in and of itself, with intertwined dependencies and impacts to other organizational projects, which are all aligned with the strategic plans of the business.

To determine the competencies that they need in their workforce, organizations need to examine their strategic plan and the related operating plans used to execute against the strategic plan and vision. In other words, what goals and objectives does the business have and what are the competencies required to achieve them? The end product of the recruiting function – the hiring of the people needed to make a business successful is, ultimately, on the leading edge of a firm's ability to achieve its goals. So why then is recruiting typically simply the recipient of the finished product of strategic and operational plans? Am I advocating that recruiting play a role in informing these plans? You bet your balanced scorecard I am!

We're Not Consulting

Unfortunately, part of the problem is that when we are asked to participate – we typically don't. We don't consult as subject matter experts; rather, we simply offer up the same suite of metrics and dashboards, DOL data, studies about the coming retirement of the boomers, and other volumes of information so often absent germane assessments and recommendations.

First, our metrics. Time to fill, or even worse, the number of hires per recruiter really doesn't tell our leadership anything in terms of how we impact the needs of the business and its core drivers. Nor does it say anything about the role that recruiting plays in shaping the culture and brand of the organization -

other than our ability to track and report the obvious. Spewing out self-rationalizing data is not the answer and it is certainly not much of a value proposition.

What we need to do is address our own cognitive dissonance in recruiting. Far too often I am seeing recruiting departments be shaped into functions that are more focused on the process than in staying focused on the net result, or outcome – the hiring of the right talent at the right time in the right place.

- There is an unrelenting focus on process above all else. This can, when improperly emphasized, make it hard on candidates, clients and recruiters. We are often simply pushing through the workflow, tracking data, generating metrics, and not paying attention to what those metrics, data points and reports tell us about business impact, and that we, in turn, should be telling our leaders. Have compelling, actionable, business intelligence supported by reliable/relatable data.
- We frequently do not truly understand the businesses we support. I am not saying you need to be a scientist if you work in the Biomedical industry, but you better understand the premise and application of what your company's business model is all about if you intend to help them find the right talent to meet their business objectives. Be business savvy.
- We need to know the business environment that we operate within. What IS the market? What trends are impacting it and why? Who is the competition, why are they our competition, and what are they doing?
- We as recruiters should do more open networking to share best practices. We need more “think tanks” colloquiums, etc.

It seems that of late, with all of the desire to improve efficiencies (frequently read as cost control) that the focus of “process improvement” within recruiting has lost site of the underlying mission of the recruiting function: hiring of the right talent at the right time in the right place.

Something I find troubling is that many corporate recruiting functions are being resourced primarily on the basis of “flow through” models. In other words, someone creates a nice spreadsheet to model how many open job requisitions each recruiter *should* “optimally” manage. This tends to be an algorithmic derivative of how many positions have been filled historically, at what level, and by how many staff through how many applicants and interviews. And while this can be effective in pushing high volume candidate flow through high volume hiring needs, it tends to suffer as roles become more sophisticated. In other words, when *who* you hire is more important than *how many* you hire, the approach must shift from transactional to consultative. Simply put how many should never trump how well.

We've created whole teams of very intelligent, well educated people (PHR's, SPHR's, MBA's, PMP's, etc.), to evaluate, dissect, disassemble, map, flowchart, fishbone, root-cause analyze, survey, parse, focus group and generally identify and label every aspect and influence of the "recruiting process". In a vacuum.

And by that I mean that, despite seeking feedback from candidates, hiring managers, and recruiters, each piece gets examined as, well, each piece. Now let me state very overtly and very emphatically that I believe in the need for doing this kind of work. I believe in seeking to continuously improve and evolve how we do what we do when we do that voodoo that we do so well. After all, that is why I wrote this article in the first place – but again I digress. Compounding the vacuum, or more accurately a part of that vacuum, is that far too many of the people on these teams have never really done recruiting. Now, the upside to this approach is that really good recruiters aren't pulled from the field where they execute their craft to the greatest effect: hiring the best available talent. The downside is that, while being well executed projects, these studies, reviews and analyses can trend towards being too sterile.

To be sure - the intended goal of all this work is spot on: create a process within the overall recruiting function that is better for candidates, clients, key stakeholders and recruiters. But the execution often misses the mark. What have a tendency to emerge are very intellectually elegant concepts. They're well documented, researched, quantified and presented to rave reviews. They're chock full of statistics, charts, flow maps, forms, policies and quick reference guides.

The problem lies in what happens when many of these improvements move from concept to execution. Regrettably, some good ideas fail because those asked to execute them have no buy-in and therefore are not committed to proper execution and feedback. That is a failure of leadership to involve, inform, and manage change. In other situations, the execution reveals the most fatal flaw of any plan – that the test of reality derails the intended outcome. We may *want* to call each and every candidate that applies to the role within 3 business days, and we may likely even *believe* it is the right thing to do for candidates and brand management. But when we ask recruiters to manage say 25, or more, open roles the sheer numbers make it impossible. Some crude math – assume 20 applicants per role, times 25 roles equates to 500 phone calls. If we assume that the recruiter makes 100 calls per day, then it takes a full business week to do nothing other than call all applicants to acknowledge their interest in the role. And we all know that we often receive far more than 20 applicants on a good many of the roles we recruit against. Notice that we haven't even touched on the other tasks that need to be managed in prosecuting a search.

I appreciate the hard work and hours upon hours of keen thinking and sheer brain power that goes into them. I not only *understand* them and *appreciate* their elegance, hell, I *like* them. But I am also

frustrated by these newly crafted “process improvements”. All too often when “real recruiters” and their managers are asked to participate on these project teams we only give it partial attention. We decide that we’re too busy actually recruiting (said dripping with snark), to spend time on the projects and teams created to help improve the processes we deploy. This means we helped create the vacuum. And vacuums suck, right?

Before you shake your head in dismay at my seeming utter disregard for process improvement, efficiencies, measuring ROI, metrics, etc. and simply being “old school” or out of touch, reread my comments. I not only believe in the value of such activities, I engage in them. For example, one difference is in where and how I believe we should place value on what we are measuring and *why it matters to the business*. In other words, I get the value of knowing and understanding cost per hire when meeting with procurement or finance, but it has a different value when meeting with the training team or in discussing organizational design. And that is one of the points to take away – we need to appreciate the context and informative value, not just the content of the information being delivered. We simply *must* own being recruiting subject matter experts within our organizations.

Buried within this esoteric little exercise are what I hope are some key things to consider as a leader within the great profession of recruiting. And they are:

- Share, buy, borrow or build diagnostic tools for evaluating and identifying the critical points or gaps in your current recruiting and hiring function. Be sure to include an examination of how you on-board and integrate new hires as well as the development, retention and succession planning efforts within the firm
- Engage in defining and developing practical recruiting skills focusing on competency based strategic recruiting. Craft tools, programs, policies and procedures that easily align to your organization's core competencies and business strategy.
- Develop an understanding and strength in delivering workforce planning. Evaluate tools that will enable you to improve the accuracy of predicting your company’ s strategic recruiting and human capital requirements. And integrate that information with a deep knowledge of your business and talent environment.
- Be a student of Human Capital Management. Actively evaluate case studies of strategic recruiting *and* overall HR functions that resulted in practical cost control, increased productivity and performance, and higher recruiting engagement with an emphasis on improving quality of hire.

- Be a student of your company and the market(s) within which it operates. Develop a business savvy which allows you to anticipate as well as meet the needs of your company's Human Capital requirements for today and into the future in alignment with the company's strategic plans.
- Track and report your key strategic recruiting performance data which accurately measures and tells the story of the recruiting function's contribution to your organization's bottom line and execution against the firm's strategic plan. Then take it to the next level and offer business impact recommendations built on the business case this data represents.
- Identify World Class HR and strategic recruiting function best practices. Make certain to include those with comprehensive diversity recruiting and retention successes. Then selectively develop and implement critical skills and competencies from those organizations that have relevance and meaning to delivering on your company's goals and objectives. Someone else's best practice may not always be yours.
- Adopt and implement only those practices that improve and hopefully simplify the recruiting and hiring process. All too often we find ourselves making the simple complex. If the process, or a step in the process, does not improve the experience and effectiveness for the stakeholders involved then eliminate that step.
- Work closely and in concert with your other HR partners to develop and implement competency based assessment, performance, training and productivity management tools.
- Be aggressive in finding ways to develop and implement these concepts with a keen focus on balancing the value delivered in meeting your company's business objectives with intelligently controlling costs.
- Be engaged. Develop yourself as a valued internal resource and when called upon, be willing to take part and to take a stand.

If, indeed, people are your organization's greatest asset, is your recruiting function a living representation of that belief or is it out of alignment?

So to tug firmly on the loose thread of this little rant; just how will *you* manage the dissonance within your own firm or department? Will you:

- a.) Reduce the importance of those conflicting beliefs, behaviors and actions;
- b.) Acquire new beliefs that change the balance of the dissonance, or;
- c.) Remove the conflicting attitude or behavior.

I vote for removing the conflicting behavior and retaining and reinforcing the belief that people are, indeed, the greatest asset of any business. We as recruiting professionals genuinely have the opportunity, and I believe the obligation, to influence how and why the companies we represent acquire, retain and improve those assets. And we must.

We must be actively engaged throughout the organization. The onus is on us.

I hope this article spurs dialogue and debate. If you want to engage me in either, I can be reached at tnoebel@mcguirewoods.com

Note: This paper, with some modifications, was originally published in The Journal of Corporate Recruiting Leadership.