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Finding Talent? Think Innovative!

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ABSTRACT

Innovation can originate from anywhere, and the area of discovering and developing talent is no exception to this. In the Life Science industry, finding quality professionals, particularly Clinical SAS Programmers and Biostatisticians is a great challenge. While companies face challenges in finding and retaining talent, for many highly motivated young talented people the industry's doors remain closed. In this paper, I will elaborate how to discover and develop talent based on Rosemind Consulting's concept of combining "passion for people" with "consultative recruiting". Furthermore, I will share a few examples illustrating how one can identify and develop talent by being unconventional and innovative.

INTRODUCTION

Before founding Rosemind Consulting, I was managing a group of SAS Programmers in a top pharmaceutical company. Part of my job responsibilities included hiring SAS Programmers for projects on a contractual basis. Similar to other hiring managers, I struggled to find experienced SAS Programmers. While it became increasingly difficult to find good candidates, I began to try the idea of developing my own young talents. Within a year, my two young hires, one right out of the college and the other with some SAS experience who just arrived in Europe became the best SAS Programmers in the team. They were my closest lieutenants who contributed tremendously to all the projects. Together with them and other team members, we turned our SAS Programming team into one of the strongest 'can-do' teams in the company. However, in early 2016, facing a new CDISC project and having to fill in 5 contractual SAS Programmer positions urgently, I had to again turn to agencies for candidates. During that period, several of my team members told me that they were getting calls from agencies for the same open positions in my team. This was a clear sign that SAS Programming resources were drying up. I had enjoyed the feeling of achievement during developing and working with young SAS Programmers. Thus, my idea of starting a company to focus on developing SAS programmers and adding valuable new resources to the industry started to take shape.

At the time of writing this paper, Rosemind Consulting celebrated its first anniversary. In the course of this first year, I have developed and placed 5 quality SAS Programmers who are now highly appreciated by our partners. While behind each hiring there is an interesting story, the common theme behind its success was an additional step in the process, i.e. developing candidates!

To illustrate this unconventional hiring step, I would like to tell a story about Lily. Lily is one of our SAS Programmers currently working on our client's site. Back then I developed her from being an Epidemiologist to a Clinical SAS Programmer. Lily graduated from the top 1 university in China with major in Medicine. Right after graduation, she began her Master and Ph.D. studies at one of the most prestigious universities in the Netherlands and was honored with Master in Health Science and Ph.D. in Public Health within three and half years. By the time I got to know her, she had already worked for more than two years as a Researcher and an Epidemiologist. Lily contacted us via our website with a well-written letter to ask for our help with her job searching. She commented that our concept of "Passion for People", especially for young professionals had deeply touched her. She traveled 2.5 hours to my office for an intake conversation. She shared her unsuccessful story of trying to find a Statistical Programming or a Biostatistician position in the Life Science Industry. When I asked why she wanted to pursue her SAS Programming career, she said that in her six years of quantitative and qualitative health research, she was fascinated by the power of SAS applications. To be able to perform real clinical data analysis, she made the decision to stop working as an epidemiologist and be a SAS Programmer or Biostatistician. She had extensive experience in R, SPSS, and STATA and was excellent in medical writing. She even self-studied SAS programming and got both SAS Base and Advanced Programming certified during her maternity leave. In those several months of job searching, she had been turned down a dozen times by hiring managers from different companies for the reason of lacking industrial experience as a SAS Programmer or Biostatistician.

The conversation went very well, at the end of the intake, I already made up my mind to help her to achieve her goal. My thought was rather simple. If I am not able or not willing to help with this type of candidate, whom else I can? She met all my 5 key selection criteria as a good candidate. In the coming month, we worked together for the purpose of coaching, developing and preparing her as a SAS Programmer or a Biostatistician. After 4 weeks, she was hired as a SAS programmer for a CDISC project in our partner's site.

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FIVE KEY SELECTION CRITERIA

Now let me explain the 5 key selection criteria which I use for assessing candidates:

1. HIGHLY MOTIVATED AND COMMITTED TO THE JOB

Whether a candidate is passionate about your company and mission is often more important than whether he/she can write certain sophisticated SAS code or has experience in CDISC standard. Skills can be taught, attitude can't. Being passionate about the work is the driver behind the success. The passion will lead to set goals, embrace challenges, enjoy solving problems along the way and be creative and committed to reach the goals. During the meeting, Lily asked me whether I could negotiate with our client to let her work on the job without any pay for 2 months. This was for the purpose of demonstrating her learning capability and attitude. What great motivation from her!

2. EAGER TO LEARN AND EXCEL IN SELF-LEARNING

The industry standards, the technology, and the way of working are changing at a speed which people have never imagined before. My previous SAS Programmer management experience has proven to me that only those who are responsive to change will survive in the team. Thus, **being eager to learn and knowing how to learn is more important than what the candidate has learned.** Lily got her SAS Base and Advanced Programming Certification just by self-learning in a short period of time. I was impressed by her learning capability and this was one of the key reasons that I committed to help her. I once asked one of the two young SAS Programmers whom I mentioned above why he became so skillful with SAS programming in a short period, his answer was that he had his own self-learning agenda. He committed about 10 hours per week of his own time to improve his programming skill.

3. EXCEL IN LOGICAL THINKING AND PROBLEM SOLVING

Excellence in logical thinking and problem solving are the key requirements for being a good SAS Programmer. I consider this more important than SAS programming experience by itself. If the candidate is proficient in another programming language, for example, R programming, learning SAS programming wouldn't be difficult because it requires a similar level of logical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Moreover, having the right level of capability for the job is also essential. This is measured by the basic knowledge that the candidate has acquired by education or working experience. Back then, I had a SAS Programmer position which requires both SAS Programming skill as well as sound documentation capability. I was very aware of the fact that finding a good SAS Programmer, who is also good at technical documentation is awfully difficult. When Lily told me that she was good at and loved technical writing, I was thrilled that I found her. With her passion for programming and technical writing as well as her background in medical research, I was convinced that she would excel in that job.

4. THE RIGHT PERSON FOR THE TEAM, HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF LOYALTY

A good team player should share the same beliefs and goals as other team members, brings positive energy to the team and is inspirational. Poor team members can cause dysfunction and strife. From the first time I met Lily, we already clicked. We shared the same vision and we believed in hard working to exceed goals. I once asked her about her weakness, she replied that she didn't know how to say no when people solicited her help. This had caused more work than she could handle. I didn't see this as a weakness, to the contrary I saw this as an advantage because being helpful is essential working in a team. Coaching a person to say "no" to excessive work will be much easier than managing a team member who doesn't want to help others.

Onboarding a candidate indisputably costs time, money and effort, therefore, we all look for team members who have a strong sense of loyalty. By focusing on people and helping them to reach their goals, we are more likely rewarded with their loyalty. Because of my effort, Lily has now committed to stay with our client's project team for at least three years.

5. A GOOD COMMUNICATOR

While clinical research relies heavily on team work on a global scale, good communication within and outside the project team is vital. A good communicator establishes a personal connection with others, represents facts and is specific (e.g. using clear and concise examples). This person is an active listener, makes every effort to understand others and gives appreciative response by asking questions and clarifications. A person's good body language and eye contact deliver positive energy and bring people closer. I indeed saw all these qualities in Lily.

THE ENHANCED HIRING PROCESS

Now that we know what we are looking for from a candidate, let's go to the next step – the hiring process.

In many companies, the hiring process is reactive process i.e. it is triggered when the need arises to fill a job position. Usually, this need is identified by the department manager who initiates the hiring process with the Human Resource

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Department. While in principle both share the process, it is the Human Resource Department, usually the owner of this process, who takes then the necessary steps to fulfill the position. Discovering a good SAS Programmer or Biostatistician is a challenging job, what I have found is that by altering the conventional way of recruiting, utilizing my own experience and knowledge in the Life Science field, finding talents could become easier and rewarding. Let me share the 5 techniques which I have been using during my recruiting:

1. FOCUS ON PEOPLE, ADVOCATE CONSULTATIVE RECRUITING APPROACH

Quite often, we receive only a simple notification from our clients that they need to hire a SAS Programming or Biostatistician Consultant. There is no clear job title or job description. To be able to set up proper searching criteria and create an appropriate job description, I have to understand our client's business and the role and responsibilities of the open position well. Normally, upon having identified a potential candidate, I initialize the first interview. I prefer to keep this interview informal so that the candidate can be authentic, relaxed and more at ease to share most if not all his thoughts. Often the interview turns into a consultative session, for example, if the candidate doesn't qualify, I explain clearly why he is not selected right at the end of the interview. I also make suggestions for his/her future improvement. Giving these suggestions doesn't cost me much time, however, it can help the candidate to avoid repeating the same mistakes in future interviews. In Lily's case, my consultative interview approach lead to a better mutual understanding and allowed us to decide together which open position suited her the best. We also worked out a much more relevant and attractive CV and an interview preparation plan.

Many good candidates from outside EU have shown their frustration of being turned down by HR recruiters right at the first interview because of the working permit requirement. In Rosemind Consulting, however, we first qualify the candidate, which is in our opinion more important, thereafter we try to solve his/her working permit issue. Furthermore, if we go through the tedious working permit application process together with the candidate, he/she will reward us with more loyalty, which is essential for the long term working relationship.

2. UTILIZE THE WORD OF MOUTH REFERRAL

On top of using social or job posting networks like LinkedIn and Indeed to find candidates, obtaining referrals from our ex-colleagues, employees and even candidates who we have interviewed are one of our quickest, easiest and most effective ways to get qualified candidates. What is worth mentioning is that because of our consultative way of interviewing and helping candidates, we have built a strong name and our candidates pay us trust and respect. As the result, they have introduced us to several strong candidates out of their own networks.

3. VIDEO INTERVIEWS

At the start of the interview, it is important to take some time to build a relationship. This can be best achieved by meeting face to face. I believe that body language and eye expression reveal more than just words only. When a physical face to face meeting is not convenient, I use Skype Video as an alternative solution and the results have been excellent so far. I use Skype also for other two reasons: 1). testing the candidate's commitment to the job application. This is because agreeing on a Skype call requires certain efforts from the candidate, e.g. setting up Skype in PC, searching interviewer's Skype ID, agreeing on a meeting time, trouble shooting in the first 5-10 minutes in the case that Skype doesn't give sound voice/video quality. Performing this small exercise seems quite minor, however, besides that it gives me a sense of the prospective candidate's seriousness about the job application, it also gives me a feeling about the candidate's problem-solving skill and working style, and 2). sharing documents: quite often, to further help the candidate to understand the job characteristics and make sure that the position is a good fit for him/her, I offer some online clinical process related introductions. The Skype document sharing functionality is no doubt an excellent tool for this purpose.

4. PREPARE CANDIDATES

To match our candidates' existing knowledge with the industry requirements and prepare them for job interviews, I have been giving crash training courses and small exercises to candidates. This brings two key advantages to the hiring process: 1). by introducing e.g., the clinical process, the candidate can further assess whether the job position indeed suits his/her career goal. If yes, this increases their self-confidence and minimize anxiety for the coming interviews. This also helps to eliminate the chance of being turned down just because the candidate is not familiar with some industry jargon. 2). during the training, I will be able to further assess the candidate's learning capability and attitude by performing some Q&A exercises.

When preparing a SAS Programmer candidate, I also prefer to give him/her some small exercises to do at home and to hand over to me within an agreed timeline. This includes but is not limited to an assignment such as writing small SAS macros based on functional specifications and/or write a functional specification for a macro. This has indeed helped me to give better judgement about the candidate's SAS programming, technical writing skill as well as working style. All the SAS programmers whom I have hired went through these exercises and it has definitely helped me in making the right hiring decision.

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5. EMPHASIZE ON FAMILY VALUE

Family's support and understanding play an important role in any professional's career decision. Therefore, during the first interview, I always give the candidate the time to talk about his/her family. If the candidate is from abroad, in particular, if his spouse has also a professional job, I will ask him to assess the impact on his family if he decides to relocate. If he demonstrates a good understanding of all the consequences and still likes to go further with the decision, I will appreciate his determination and continue. However, if he hesitates, it might be a good idea to stop right there to avoid wasting everyone's time and effort. Nevertheless, he could still be a good candidate when his family situation changes and he is really ready for the move. This approach is different from the conventional way where the family situation is considered at the end of recruiting process. I have seen cases where the candidate succeeded in multiple interviews and received an offer. Then suddenly the candidate decided not to take the position because his family didn't like him to be away from his family too much. By then two-month time was already gone and the hiring manager had to re-start the process again!

The concept of knowing and caring about both candidates and their families has also lead us to get more candidates. E.g. during an interview for a Data Manager position, the candidate told me that his wife was a Statistical Programmer and would also love to pursue a career in the Netherlands. I consequently interviewed his wife. It turned out she was an excellent candidate for us and also for our client! She is now one of our 5 SAS Programmers and doing great on our client site.

In addition to the best practices illustrated above, we tend to take a proactive approach to our hiring process following 3 major steps: discover proactively potential job openings and talents, train & coach and identify high potential talents even before an open position exists, and finally hire and place the candidate when a job position matching their skills and talent arises. The key factors that contribute significantly to the hiring success are: understanding the candidate's soft and hard skillset, his motivation and learning capability, the responsibilities and qualifications required by the upcoming position, the need to have – as the hiring consultant – the necessary broad and in-depth knowledge of the clinical processes of our client and, last but not least to have a genuine interest in the candidate's and his family well-being.

CONCLUSION

"Passion for People" is the Rosemind Consulting's value proposition. With our innovative consultative recruiting approach, we have successfully discovered and developed several talented SAS programmers and Biostatistician and created a win-win situation for our professionals, our clients as well as Rosemind Consulting as quality partners for all our partners. However, our success also depends on the industry's support and willingness to accept young fresh blood worldwide. We can't do this alone. Looking forward to your support!

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