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Selling and Telling: How Your Candidates Can Preview Their Future

After making a good — and much-needed — hire, have you ever been surprised to find that the individual quits within the first few weeks? Many companies have early turnover problems but don't tie them to the fact that applicants are not receiving a complete picture of what a job role entails. Candidates don't discover the negative aspects until it's too late.

Voluntary turnover occurring within the first 90 days is typically a symptom that candidates had unrealistic expectations. Less obvious signs are underperformance or low morale on the part of qualified new hires who were previously enthusiastic.

Churn is expensive. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, replacing an employee can cost anywhere between two and seven times the individual's salary. The good news is that early voluntary turnover can be sharply diminished by using best practices for Realistic Job Previews (RJPs).

The Selling-and-Telling Strategy

Candidate selection is more than recruiting prospects and promoting the positive aspects of the position and the company. Selection involves both selling the positives and telling the candidate what to expect with regard to what could be considered negative. RJPs are ideal for accomplishing this. An RJP is specific information conveyed to candidates that is designed to provide a complete and balanced view of the favorable and potentially unfavorable aspects of the job and the hiring organization.

Every open position requires some kind of RJP. The type of RJP and the extent to which it is used depend on the job and candidate pool. RJPs can take various forms:

- Text descriptions of the role and company culture
- Videos describing and demonstrating a typical day on the job
- Telephonic interactive voice response (IVR) technology implemented to ask prospects about their willingness to do common job tasks
- Online situational judgment questions asking candidates to determine the best approach to typical on-the-job scenarios
- Web-based work simulations
- In-person job tryouts

A Case of Unprepared Candidates

A company that manufactured computer chips in a clean-room environment hired hundreds of associates each year for production work. The entry-level role required working in a full-body jumpsuit

with coverage of hands, head and face for 12-hour shifts where precision was vital. Early turnover was extremely high. New hires weren't ready for the realities of the position.

To better inform prospects about the role, we helped the company implement a multi-phase RJP using low-cost methods at the outset and high-touch methods closer to the hiring decision. Initially, a 1-800 number was used to provide information about the job. Prospects could listen to an interactive recording that included the advantages ("sell") and the most unpleasant aspects ("tell"). The recording allowed candidates to respond to questions investigating their willingness to do certain parts of the job. As you'll see later, there's more to this story.

Best Practices for RJP

The following best practices help you leverage RJP for informed hiring decisions.

#1: Incorporate an RJP Throughout the Selection Process

We recommend using elements of an RJP in every phase of selection, including recruiting, the application, assessments, the interview and the job offer. Repetition is critical. Candidates usually look for the positive aspects of a role, so the more realistic aspects are worth repeating.

To save time and money, place simpler and less expensive RJP early in the process so they're readily accessible. Later you can use more complex RJP, such as simulations and job tryouts.

#2: Provide an Honest and Accurate Preview

It is of utmost importance that RJP are realistic, candid and transparent in describing both desirable and less desirable aspects of the job. People who are happy in their role find characteristics about it to be very appealing. Promote those characteristics up front, and be honest about aspects that might not interest people. Something that is distasteful to one person could sound good to another, so make sure the RJP describes what's actually happening in the role.

#3: Choose a Consistent Delivery Method

Methods that are communicated in the same way for all candidates, such as written information, recordings or videos available 24/7, are better than those requiring a manager or HR person to deliver.

For instance, the IVR recording presented the chip-manufacturing company's RJP in the same way to every caller, politely providing an exit message if a response was unfavorable. There were 400 calls the first day the 1-800 line was activated. How could an HR specialist have talked to each caller and delivered the same message with the same tone and level of consistency?

#4: Let Candidates "Quit" Before They're Hired

It's a common error to worry about scaring away potential applicants. However, those who know about the job and still apply are likely to be a better fit. When applicants quit before they're hired (self-select out), you save valuable interviewing time and decrease the likelihood of early turnover. Every candidate who walks away is saving the company time, money, effort — and pain — in the long run.

At the chip-manufacturing company, some candidates didn't realize they'd dislike the special clothing, masks, air showers and so on enough to quit. We helped implement a second RJP phase where qualified candidates had an onsite tryout for certain parts of the job. Some found the requirements too unpleasant and opted out before a costly hiring decision was made.

#5: Evaluate the RJP's Effectiveness

If early turnover occurs after implementing an RJP, use exit interviews or talk to the individuals' coworkers to investigate the cause. After the chip-manufacturing company implemented the straightforward RJP and a pre-employment assessment, early turnover dropped from 70 percent to 20 percent. However, the problem continued at one site until an investigation revealed that the site's manager wasn't rotating associates like the RJP indicated.

Dramatic Impact

RJPs have a bright future. They can even come to life through gaming and branching technology for simulated customer, supervisor and team-member interactions. However, you might just be getting started with RJPs. Our research has shown that a quality RJP combined with assessments can reduce early turnover by as much as 400 percent. If you're trying to determine what's best for your organization, we're happy to help.

Article written for **Assess Systems** by Corporate Pen, LLC