

Building Positive Candidate Experiences

THOUGHT PAPER

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However competitive the environment, in our opinion un-biased relationships should never be sacrificed in the mad rush to the top. How a company treats its candidates and manages engagement with them across all stages of hiring process determines how engaged and motivated their talent will be - in turn they will create exceptional experiences for company customers with direct impact on profitability. But given our experience in the corporate world and helping clients hire the 'best talent', this is one area where we have to do a lot of work in. While the intent is seen across, when it comes to action, it becomes a simple case of – she/ he is just a candidate...and we are the ones giving employment!

Given our experience in handholding CxOs/Founders/HR Leaders on how to go about this missing piece of the jigsaw, here are some key actions that organizations can take to create a great candidate experience.

1. PRE-INTERVIEW STAGE

Treat the candidates as you would treat your customers!

You would want to build not just a long-lasting relationship with the candidate but also a strong loyalty – whether she/ he joins the organization or not. The underlying theme being that candidates want to be treated in the same manner as your customers- with the same thoughtfulness, respect, and dignity. Today's tight talent market is no longer demand driven where companies dole out requirements and candidates toe the line. Candidates too are evaluating companies closely for how they treat their talent pool-this is after all a reflection of their culture and how they treat their employees. Simple steps to take during this phase include:

a) Have a turnaround time and commit that to the candidate as well

Even though candidates know that theirs isn't the only application under consideration, receiving a clear picture about the status of their candidature instead of being left to chase for updates is something they appreciate.

b) Provide full disclosures

To build an un-biased engagement, HR needs to build a bond of trust with applicants based on honest and transparent communication-right from the beginning. Part of being honest is to share critical information about the job responsibilities, the interview process, and agenda right at the stage of initial conversations.

Applicants are likely to overlook the cons of a job profile if they come to trust your judgment and know that HR is upfront with them.

c) Protect them from unpleasant surprises

Back in my days as a HR leader, I would be completely upfront with candidates if they are replacing someone or if they are being hired and their boss is resigning in parallel. In a start-up environment, candid conversations about working style of founders and comfort level of candidates with the same would save them from any unpleasant surprises in the future. Additionally, attention to small details like sharing information about the name and background of the interviewer beforehand allows the candidates to prepare, increasing their chance of succeeding. This is especially important in a virtual environment where candidates welcome any relevant information which can help them feel at ease during the interview.

2. DURING THE INTERVIEW

This stage of the hiring process- involving several rounds of interview and much to and fro, demands a lot of time and energy from the candidates. A little empathy and a lot of compassion at this stage, to ease the physical and mental demands on candidates, can go a long way towards building lasting engagement with them.

a) Respect other's time

Check what works best for the candidate: Check with candidate for options that work best for them. If there are constraints from the organization's end, clearly state them out so that a win-win is created for both. This step helps build a sense of importance in the candidate and is the beginning of a great association.

- **Be on time:** An interviewer not turning up on time is one of the most common mistakes. Respecting someone's time is the least we can do to send a signal that the organization values time and respects each individual.
- **Keep them informed:** If for some reason, you are getting late or will not make it, do let the individual know directly or through the recruiting team, but do let them know much ahead so that they can plan it accordingly.

- **Optimize the schedule:** Help candidates with optimum utilization of their time by planning multiple rounds in a single day. Add a humane touch by keeping small gaps in between so that the candidate gets a breather to recharge. If the interviews are in person/in office, small gestures like arrangements for meals and beverages will not only help them save time but will show them that you care for them as people.

b) Humanize the interview

Remember, at the other end is human, with their own uniqueness, queries, nervousness, energy, etc. The idea of an interview is to connect with the individual, help them feel comfortable and answer all their queries as much as we would like them to answer ours – it's nothing short of getting to know each other much better before committing to the association, which hopefully will be for the long haul!

- **HR round:** Agreed that HR needs to gather some basic details about the candidate – but this is not a discussion to just get all the needed information out of the candidate. A laundry list of questions asked in a rapid-fire manner are more suited for an interrogative officer rather than an HR person trying to build a rapport with candidates. To build a positive engagement, candidates must see HR as friendly human beings.
- **During business / leadership interviews:** The start point of these interviews should be to make the candidate feel at ease. One approach that always worked for us is to start by introducing ourselves (with some humor added in!) and then open the discussion for any queries that the candidate might have – a reverse interview. This helps the candidate ease and get in control of things. The other approach that has always helped is to frame the next questions basis what the candidate is talking about and not just sticking to a script. This gives the candidate a confidence that she is being listened to.

3. AFTER THE INTERVIEW

a) Keep candidates posted about the next steps and give feedback where you can.

It is incredibly frustrating for candidates when they are ghosted or their calls and emails go unanswered after an interview. **If an organization wants to build an objective relation with job seekers they need to respond to calls and mails even if they don't have all the necessary**

information. A simple acknowledgment with an assurance to revert with more information can do wonders for how reliable you come across.

It is a [proven fact](#) that candidates are more likely to increase their relationship with the employer if they are given job-related feedback by the end of the same day or within the time period promised. Despite this, recruiters run the risk of severing their engagement with candidates by failing to provide constructive feedback. When candidates receive candid feedback about specific areas of improvement or specific reasons why another candidate was chosen, they are more likely to re-apply for a more suitable role in the future, continuing the association in the long term.

b) Rejection hurts. Doing it wrong makes it worse.

Rejection is tough for both parties but doing it wrong can only make it worse. It can be tempting to dodge making that rejection phone call and letting an automated mail do the heavy lifting for you. Though the latter is preferred to complete ghosting, **candidates respect recruitment professionals who make the effort to pick up their phones to make that rejection call.** A personal touch can take the sting out of even the worst news.

c) Out of sight does not mean out of mind

In hope of a future alliance, companies pursue all possible means to stay in touch with clients even if a client deal does not fall through. **A similar approach to create top of the mind recall can help HR build a relationship with applicants not hired today.** One simple way to do so is to connect with applicants over LinkedIn or keeping them updated about new openings through text messages or emails. Organizations can strive to maintain constant communication through strategies like a weekly newsletter or lend a personal touch through an informal meeting or a casual phone call.

What candidates want is fairly simple!

Candidates don't want organizations to bend over backward for them. All they want is for them to take cognizance of the fact that there is a person on the other end of that zoom/phone call or email. With candidates investing energy in multiple rounds of interviews, they want their time to matter and to be treated fairly. They want to be made to feel important and not just a number in recruiting spreadsheet.

About the Author



Mainak brings over 24 years of experience spanning business and HR roles across geographies. This has given him a unique understanding of the link between HR and business strategy. He also holds a patent for HR capability development.

Mainak's experience includes human capital strategy, culture, talent development (performance, leadership development, career pathing, competency, learning, engagement, diversity) and talent acquisition (including on-boarding and background check). He has also implemented HRIS platform and HR metrics to improve performance.

Recently he has been helping start-ups set up efficient and effective HR teams and processes. In addition, Mainak is a recognized Executive Coach and Leadership Development expert.

Mainak's previous work experience includes stints/projects with Accenture (Consulting and HR), Hewitt Associates, AbsolutData, Heidrick & Struggles, Evalueserve, Sterlite Technologies and Upstox.

Mainak holds a MBA from the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta, and is a certified executive coach.

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