



## Extreme Recruiting Approaches Emerge as the Battle for Top Talent Increases

By Dr. John Sullivan, San Francisco State University

One of my specialties is identifying what I call “bleeding edge” practices in recruiting and talent management. It’s relatively easy for me to find them because I live in the Silicon Valley, the hotbed of aggressive new approaches to talent management. So many aggressive recruiting approaches emanate here because the economy in the Silicon Valley is extremely robust and there is an extremely high demand for hard-to-find technologists. It is also true because startups must literally fight for attention in the land of Google, Apple, Twitter, and Facebook, which are leading the way in introducing some amazingly aggressive and extreme recruiting approaches. My research has revealed a wide array of new recruiting practices. If you’re not using them, it may indicate that your firm is falling behind the competition.

**Uber: Clever Captive Recruiting** – This San Francisco-based firm is in a battle for top drivers who now drive for competitor Lyft. Like Uber, Lyft is a transportation network company (TNC) that uses an online-enabled platform to connect passengers with drivers using their personal, non-commercial vehicles. Uber has

figured out that if you “lock up the good drivers then you lock up the market.” They gain that recruiting dominance primarily by booking rides with their competitors and because the driver can’t get away, it’s easy for them to provide their polished recruiting sales pitch. Because many drivers are male, they have learned to use attractive female recruiting ambassadors to help sway drivers. They utilize an ultra-smart referral program which provides \$250 for a referral, but that amount doubles if the referral is from a targeted competitor (a Lyft driver). The bonus doubles again if the hired individual is a driver trainer at a competitor. They also went so far as to tow a huge mobile billboard around San Francisco that the drivers at competitors simply can’t miss. The billboard says “Shave the Stache” in reference to the large pink mustache that Lyft drivers place on their car grill.

**Captive Recruiting at the Google Bus Stop** – Google is well known for providing luxury buses for its employees from San Francisco to its headquarters in Mountain View. With heavy traffic, it’s not uncommon for Googlers to have to wait a good while for the next bus. The Tumblr arm of Yahoo figured out that this line of employees would be a great place to recruit, so they placed a free coffee stand there and used it as a recruiting station. Not to be outdone, startup Bigcommerce also joined the raid on the line with coffee, invitations to a lavish party and “poached egg sandwiches” (obviously not so subtly referring to the recruiting term poaching). Another firm Roku also recruited at the Google bus stop where they gave away “Roku boxes” filled with Roku gadgets worth between \$45 and \$100.

**“I love my job” TV Advertising** – Everyone knows that TV reaches a wide range of individuals so it’s not surprising that the recruiting function has begun to utilize it more. What is particularly bold is an approach that shares product advertising with “I love my job” recruiting advertising. Walmart started the approach, but Sam Adams beer and Coors Third Street brand have also utilized it. The Coors commercial includes attention grabbing phrases like: “I love my job.” “A story about loving what you do.”

“When you love your job, you never work a day in your life.” And, “When beer is your calling, you never clock out.” It’s hard to miss the premise that if you love your job, you will produce a quality product.

**“Forget the Campus Visit” College Recruiting** – There are few areas in recruiting that are more conservative than college recruiting so it was a major

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breakthrough when Nestlé Purina used “quality of hire data” to determine that the best college hires often didn’t come from schools that the company visited. Obviously campus visits are time-consuming, expensive, and problematic because many students now seldom visit their campus during the day. The firm shifted to a 100 percent remote college recruiting model. Nestlé Purina now relies on a wide range of social media to identify and sell college prospects. This model allows them to expand their recruiting reach to recruit the very best from remote schools that few other firms bother to visit. The best identified prospects are still invited to their campus for the person-to-person contact. And as a result, the quality of applicants, the quality of hire, manager satisfaction, and hiring costs have all moved in a positive direction.

**Insulting Recruiting Video** – Competitive recruiting has moved to a new level of competitiveness since game creator Kixeye put together an outrageous recruiting video that insults and pokes direct fun at their product and talent competitors. The video literally mocks the age of EA’s approach to gaming by including the logo “EAARP Games” (a reference to the AARP senior group) and an aging executive with an oxygen breathing tank and heart monitor. They also mock another competitor, Zynga by transforming their famous dog logo into an inappropriate image. Kixeye’s CEO narrates the video himself and he uses expletives (something that endears him to gamers) in the video. To most, this mocking would definitely be in bad taste, but to candidates in the gaming industry, it may be considered cool and bold. Videos have also been used in lieu of résumés for applications. For example, Snapchat only accepted applications by way of a Snapchat picture or video; they received an amazing 2,000 Snapchats in three days.

**Transforming Employee Referrals** – Referrals have been around a long time and they are popular because they produce the highest volume and the highest quality of hire. But recently startup firms have taken referrals to a new level because they have found that offering outrageously high referral awards yields a great deal of media and social network buzz. Hubspot gave a \$30,000 reward and numerous other firms have given between \$10,000 and \$20,000. In addition to the money, other innovations include allowing non-employees to refer and adding equally as large sign-on bonuses to encourage the preferred individual to accept. Thumbtack’s referral program has awarded the employee who referred an all-expense-paid trip around the world. Non-employees who successfully referred received a four-night all-expense paid trip to Hawaii with a stay at the Four Seasons. Other firms have learned to “assign

a referral” using software in order to identify which of their employees is most likely to know a prospect that they want to target. Accolo’s referral community is a shining example because they have averaged an amazing eight referrals for every job.

**Debunking Traditional Hiring Criteria** – Many hiring managers and recruiters simply assume that they know the best criteria to use for selecting their new hires. Well, as the world of recruiting shifts to a data-based decision model, much of what we thought we knew has proven to be untrue. For example, Google, the world’s only metric-driven HR function, has conducted internal research to find that GPAs, test scores, and brainteaser interview questions are simply worthless in predicting on-the-job success. This is especially interesting because Google, for years, required astronomical grades and test scores of its applicants. They found that many of their best hires not only did not have a college degree, but they had no college classes at all. Their internal research has also shown that even though “many managers, recruiters, and HR staffers think they have a special ability to sniff out talent, they’re wrong.” Google found that most unstructured interviews are “a complete random mess: We found a zero relationship (between interview scores and on-the-job performance).” And even though Google was famous for requiring as many as a dozen interviews for each candidate, they found that no value was added “after four interviews.” They also found the time-to-fill was essential in landing top college candidates. At least at Google, what they found in addition to technical capability was surprising for some, “learning ability.”

**The Mobile Phone is becoming Dominant in Recruiting Communications** – It’s no secret that most techies and innovators love their smart phones since they carry it with them 24/7. Because the mobile phone often has the highest response rate and response speed to a message, it’s becoming the dominant recruiting communications channel. Smart recruiters have learned to take advantage of the power of the mobile platform by tailoring their recruiting approach to take advantage of its features to include games, recruiting videos, and texting. The best firms like McDonald’s and Sodexo have also learned that you must develop an application process that allows prospects to apply from their phone directly to a mobile website. Firms like Starbucks and Carl Jr.’s are also placing phone card dispensers near their registers. These credit card sized cards contain a QR code that allows mobile phone users to instantly access job-related information about the firm.

**Big Data Usage is Finally Impacting Recruiting** – Although it’s still only for advanced users, many

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recruiting leaders have learned that if you can mine big data you can find and learn about almost every professional around the world. Using a combination of consumer data and social media profiles in complex Boolean Internet searches finding talent has moved from being difficult to the point that you can build or buy profiles of almost everyone you might want to recruit. In addition to finding prospects, sophisticated algorithms can now help you identify the right day and time periods that a fully employed prospect may consider entering job search mode. This capability allows you to find the right time when a prospect is unhappy or when their firm may be in trouble, even though this individual may have said no to interviewing even months before.

**Prospect and Candidate Research is Finally Impacting Recruiting** – As recruiting becomes more data-driven, firms learn to use market research techniques to improve recruiting. This type of survey, focus group, and interview research allows you to identify specifically where top performers might see a recruiting message and what must be in that message in order to garner their attention. Prospect/candidate research can also reveal who should make the initial call and what they should say in order to avoid an immediate hang-up. This research can also identify the job acceptance criteria and the “knockout factors” that an individual is likely to use in determining which new job they will accept. This research can also reveal who will influence their decision, so that recruiters can also reach out to these influencers. Finally, this type of market research allows you to understand and map the actual job search process of a targeted group of prospects including top performers, innovators, and diverse individuals.

**Virtual Job Previews are Emerging** – Recruiting has been slow to adopt simulations for attracting and assessing top talent. However, some firms like Starbucks and Marriott have begun to utilize online interactive exercises, which excite prospects because it allows them to get a virtual job preview of the work they will be asked to do. These exercises can also serve as an assessment tool. KPMG has also utilized a form of simulation in order to assess prospects.

**Video Job Descriptions Turn Out to be a Powerful Selling Tool** – We all know that the younger generation loves videos and hates reading dry material, so it shouldn't be a surprise that de-emphasizing narrative job descriptions and providing an alternative video job description is an emerging recruiting approach. Because the actual hiring manager and the team appear in the video, it allows outsiders to feel the excitement at your firm. Video job descriptions or VJDs are a 3-for-1 opportunity for measurably improving your recruiting

results. First of all, they are an opportunity because they provide the job seeker with an authentic human view of the job from the team's perspective that makes it easy for the prospect to see, hear and feel their excitement for the job and the passion that they have for filling it with the right person. VJDs are also an opportunity because by using video in this new way, applicants will see that your firm is bold, and that it is willing to use innovative approaches (even in recruiting) that include technology, video, and that utilize social media. And finally, video job descriptions provide you with an opportunity to re-examine the painfully dull 100 percent text job descriptions that most organizations currently use and to improve them so that they now provide a competitive advantage over the less compelling job descriptions of the same job at competitor firms. Vans, a retail store, created a VJD for all possible retail positions. The videos created by the VP of store operations walks you through “the life of a Vans employee” in that role while highlighting the company culture, the job requirements, job duties, and at the very end, adds a personal message of “I look forward to meeting you soon.” This not only captures the entire job description, but makes job seekers see, hear, and feel aspects of the company that are not emulated through plain text.

**Boomerangs/Rehiring Previous Employees** – Because so many quality employees have been laid off or departed during the last few years, now that the economy is improving, it makes sense to consider rehiring some of the best that “got away.” The best way to ensure a high-quality hire with a clear record of performance is to re-recruit performers that previously worked at your firm (i.e., boomerang rehires). Many of these individuals might now regret their decision to leave, but they may be hesitant to reapply. A simple note as they are leaving your firm or a phone call from a recruiter or an employee in their former department reassuring them that they would be welcomed back might be all it will take to re-land proven talent. Firms like DaVita have made this approach a mainstay, because as many as 16 percent of their hires have been boomerangs.

**“Silver Medalists” are Worth another Shot** – Because times have been lean, firms have rejected a high percentage of their candidates. But now that the job market is tightened, it's also time to revisit previous high-quality candidates using a program known as “Silver Medalists.” The term comes from the Olympics where the silver medal winner may have just been a fraction away from winning. A “Silver Medalist” in recruiting may be someone who simply had the bad luck of applying for the same job that was eventually given to a superstar candidate. If they would have applied any other time, they would've gotten the job. One way

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to save recruiting resources is to simply revisit the star candidates that “got away.” Reach out to candidates who voluntarily dropped out of the hiring process, turned down an offer, or who were finalists in a slate where a super candidate ended up getting the job. Not only are these candidates valuable because they have already been assessed and they have shown an interest in your firm but because they also now have even more experience.

**Live Video Interviewing is becoming Main-stream** – Managers have been in love with face-to-face interviews for centuries, but it is now becoming a standard practice to conduct many interviews live over the Internet. Obviously they save travel costs but another advantage is that people who are currently working have great difficulty scheduling and attending multiple interviews without placing their existing job in jeopardy. Make interviews easier to attend by using live Internet video interviews that can even be conducted over a mobile phone. Using them will show candidates that you understand the value of technology, but it will also increase the numbers which are willing to participate in an interview.

**The Powerful “Exploding Offer” has Returned** – One of the most powerful tools in recruiting is the exploding offer, which can effectively close candidates who are likely to get multiple offers closed very quickly. They are a form of sign-on bonus, but they work because they are offered contingent upon accepting your offer immediately. If the offer is not accepted right away, the bonus continually decreases over the next few days or it goes away completely. This bold approach can provide a powerful incentive for reluctant candidates to accept or make a quick decision.

## Final Thoughts

It’s only been recently that the recruiting world has snapped out of its years of being in the doldrums, but things are now moving as fast as they did during the last “war for talent” in 1999. Whether you work in the Silicon Valley or not, the steamroller of these aggressive changes is headed in your direction. So the time has come where you will be forced to raise your aggressiveness level...be prepared.

## About the Author



Dr. John Sullivan is an internationally known HR thought leader from the Silicon Valley who specializes in providing bold and high business impact; strategic talent management to large corporations. He is a prolific author with over 900 articles and 10 business books covering all areas of talent management. He has written more than a dozen white papers, conducted more than 50 webinars, dozens of workshops, and he has been featured in more than 35 videos. As a speaker, he has addressed more than 300 corporations and organizations in 30 countries on all six continents. His ideas have appeared in every major business source including *The Wall Street Journal*, *Fortune*, *Fast Company*, and *The New York Times*. He has been interviewed on CNN, and the CBS and ABC nightly news. He served as the chief talent office of Agilent Technologies, the HP spinoff with 43,000 employees. He is currently a professor of management at San Francisco State University. He can be reached at [johns@sfsu.edu](mailto:johns@sfsu.edu).