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Recruiting in a Downturn

The top 8 things you must do to survive and thrive

By John Vlastelica, Managing Director, Recruiting Toolbox, Inc., ex-corporate recruiting leader with Amazon.com, and top rated recruitment conference speaker.

When economic times get rough, we – as recruiters and HR managers – must adjust our approach. Layoffs, budget cuts, and nervous candidates change our landscape and require us to operate differently if we're to survive and thrive. So what do the best corporate recruiters do when the going gets tough?

1. Demonstrate your value. It's even more critical that we not only do our work well, but show our work, too. We must publish our sourcing goals and successes to show how we're:

- finding and recruiting the best talent
- consulting with the hiring teams to select the best by leading pre-interview prep meetings and post-interview debriefs
- reducing hiring costs and/or improving ROI with our existing budget
- delivering real value to the business

Let's be honest, HR and recruiting teams that can't show their ROI to the business often get cut first in a downturn.

**3:1
ROI**

2. Fight for your budgets. Do your best to protect your recruitment branding and outreach budgets. It can take years to build a good employer brand, but only a few months to kill one.

- Keep your on-campus college presentation and interview sessions
- Make sure your company is still speaking at conferences
- Maintain your calendar of open houses and diversity events

By staying visible in the candidate communities you recruit from – particularly in a down economy – you can send the message that your company sees the big picture and always works to attract top talent.

3. Prioritize. Not all reqs are created equal. The ratio of open reqs to recruiter/HR manager will worsen in a downturn, as your company will likely cut recruiter or support resources. Ensure you meet regularly with VPs to understand priorities among the few growth positions and all of the backfills. It makes us look silly if we're doing great work on jobs that the business doesn't care about. Alignment to business priorities is always key, but it's especially key in a down economy.

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4. Adjust your tech pitch. While layoffs may generate mass applicants, your top talent – especially more passive tech candidates – may become a lot less willing to consider a move in a down market. So, find ways to become more appealing and differentiated from the competition, and speak to their [motivators](#). Most tech people don't want to work in maintenance mode, and often see their current company's big IT projects get cut when the economy gets worse. Demonstrate – through your job postings and interview process - the investments your company is making or has recently made in:

- technology
- new growth in your product line
- challenging work
- how tech candidates can grow their skills and how that improves their future marketability.

5. Fully leverage your existing resources. Make sure you're taking full advantage of the job board posting and database access you've already paid for. Call your job board customer support team to get fully trained on how to take advantage of every possible trick only the most savvy job board users know about. Make sure you're also leveraging your own resume database, [employee referrals](#), and even internal candidates, too.

Have you been fully trained on how to take advantage of every possible trick the most savvy job board users know about?

6. Make every hire count. Keep an eye on quality. Desperate hiring managers – who think their head count may go away if a company hiring freeze is announced - may lower their hiring bar just to get a warm body in the seat quickly. Instead, coach them on hiring the right kind of talent in order to avoid the long-term cost of a hiring mistake. In some cases, you may need to encourage hiring managers to hire good 'generalists' who can adapt to job scope changes and re-orgs. Otherwise, super specialized tech talent, for example, can be the first to get laid off in a downturn.

7. Don't lowball candidates. Don't be tempted to lowball offers for candidates who are unemployed and actively looking for work. Some hiring managers want to take advantage of a downturn to get employees in the door cheaply. Remind them how hard it is to get increases later, and that a year or two from now, when the economy is humming again, underpaid workers will be a big flight risk.

8. Teach hiring managers to fish. Find ways to better leverage your hiring managers. Maybe this downturn will afford you the time and opportunity to:

- design and deliver that interview training you've been wanting to roll out
- attend the new manager orientation training to talk about recruiting
- launch a series of recruiting 'roadshows' where you attend business staff meetings to learn more about the hiring managers' projects, discuss critical hiring priorities, and talk about the employee referral program.

Tough times provide great leadership opportunities for us. I'm hoping you can leverage this document to help you think through the tradeoffs you will and won't make as you face critical budget decisions and prioritization requests.

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