

iProCon Insight

Mini Case Study: David 2 – Goliath 0
The Importance of the Direct Manager in Attraction & Selection of Top Talent

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David: 2
Goliath: 0



Recruiting: The Importance of the Direct Manager in Attraction & Selection and Further Rules for “Recruitment Excellence”

iProCon HCM ...

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The overwhelming importance of the direct superior in people management has been widely acknowledged – at least in theory. In the real corporate world, there still seems to be a strong believe that a great employer brand, sophisticated talent development policies set up by corporate HR, or simply paying higher salaries are enough to attract, develop and retain top talent. The role of the direct superior, these top talent report to on a day-to-day basis, is all too often ignored.

This case study talks about one of the many small battles on the battleground of the famous “War for Talent”. It shows how a Big5 consultancy managed to be beaten twice by the same small IT consultancy, just by ignoring the importance of the direct superior. For the purpose of this paper, we call the two companies Goliath plc. and David ltd.

We also suggest two further cheap ingredients for recruitment success: friendliness and speed.



“Holistic approaches to talent management integrate attraction, selection, engagement and retention”

Attraction and retention of top talent has been high on the agenda of organizations of all sizes and from all industries for years and even in times of economic slowdown, the so called “War for Talent” doesn’t seem to take a break. Top people are always in demand and some organisations exploit the current economic situation to attract talent from those organisations focusing on cost cutting only.

However, it seems few, if any, organisations have mastered the black belt of attraction and retention. At iProCon HCM we believe this is the case, because there is none. People don’t want to be attracted today, ignored tomorrow and retained the day after tomorrow. What is required is a holistic talent management approach, which shows opportunities of personal growth for candidates and employees alike – with attraction and retention as by-products. The HR function may be able to help in this process, but it has to be owned by every single manager.

The Opponents

Goliath plc is one of the 5 largest IT and management consultancies in the world. They have a very strong brand in the labour market and hire thousands of graduates, young professionals and experienced consultants every year. Through high specialisation and integration in large scale projects, they bring new hires up to speed (i.e. billing) quickly and therefore can afford to offer high starting salaries.

David Ltd. is a small niche consultancy with 10 staff. They have a very good reputation in their field, but due to their size are virtually unknown in the broader labour market. Their edge is to provide consultants with a broad knowledge, allowing them to keep project teams small. This makes it difficult for them to compete with the high starting salaries of Goliath plc, because it takes much longer to get new employees to a level where their time can be charged to clients.

1st round: attract

When David Ltd. was recently offered a young professional through a recruitment company, they were not happy to learn that the candidate also had an offer from Goliath plc and sure enough they found they couldn’t compete

on salary. They still tried to convince the candidate on the grounds of a more open culture, opportunities to shape the firm and faster personal growth.

After a few days of consideration, the candidate chose David Ltd. Asked about the reasons he made two points in particular:

1) “During the whole process with Goliath plc I’ve never seen my direct superior. If I join an organisation, it’s not HR or the middle management I’m dealing with on a daily basis – it’s my direct boss. Therefore I found it strange I shouldn’t have an opportunity to meet him.”

2) “While everything was agreed upon quickly, they didn’t manage to send a contract for two weeks. It didn’t feel like they cared very much. They just took it for granted I’d join them anyway.”

2nd round: retain

One of the most senior consultants of David Ltd. was contacted by a recruiter with a very promising offer from Goliath plc. It wasn’t only financially attractive, but also promised even more exciting and challenging projects and career opportunities. David Ltd. wasn’t able to match the offer and the consultant left.



“In the long run,
every manager has
got the employees
he or she deserves”

Reinhard Sprenger

(German Management
and Motivation Guru)

However, it took only a couple of weeks for him to call and arrange to come back. He was utterly disappointed with Goliath plc and would not have stayed with them for love nor money.

“They certainly had overpromised in a few fields, particularly the learning opportunities. Some of this may be owed to the merger they are currently going through. But the single most important issue was my boss. Unfortunately I didn't have the opportunity to talk to him for more than one minute during the recruitment process, so it only dawned on me after I started my new job. I just couldn't figure out, why this person should be my manager. I want to be able to look up to my boss, but there wasn't a single thing I thought I could learn from him. This tipped the balance toward leaving immediately. I couldn't have stayed for another month. It was great I could come back to David Ltd., but even if not, I would have left Goliath plc.”

While David Ltd. arguably must have got a few things wrong to lose this employee in the first place, they were lucky, because Goliath plc got it completely wrong. To make a very nice end to this story: the consultant has done a great job at David plc since his return and therefore got offered a position as a partner starting next year.

The lesson

The lesson couldn't be simpler: make sure you involve line managers in the recruitment process. This doesn't only help to attract candidates as most of them want to know whom they will be working for, it also allows candidates to self-select and avoid expensive surprises later on.

If you feel involving line managers is a bad idea because they have a negative effect on candidates or are not able to help selecting the right people, then you obviously have a much bigger problem, because this indicates you need to change or up-skill all your line managers.

If you want to look a bit deeper into the importance of the direct manager, the book [“First, Break all the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently”](#) from M. Buckingham and Curt Hoffman makes an excellent read.

2 more simple lessons on attraction

To round off this mini-case, I want to throw in two more brief stories. Both are straightforward and cheap to exploit.

Be quick

When I applied for my first job after university (this were the old days, when you sent in paper applications by post), my favourite employer was a fast growing global player in the software industry. I was sure I'd start with them should they offer me a job. The runner up was an also fast growing regional IT consultancy with about 500 employees.

I had my interviews with the global player first and while they made the impression of being less dynamic than they'd like to appear, they still were my favourite choice. That is: until I had my interview with the regional consultancy. They made a very dynamic impression and on two occasions, when I had a particular question, they called someone in on the spot to answer it. When I got home from the interview (which took me about two hours), the phone rang before I had an opportunity to take my tie off. They wanted to discuss their offer and I had it in the post the very next day. I found this very impressive. This was



a company where you could DO things and GO places. I ignored the contract from the blue chip two weeks later and I've never looked back since...

Be friendly

It was a candidate, who taught me an even simpler lesson that stuck with me. Our team hired an experienced HR professional as a consultant and as we knew he had talked to quite a few other organisations, we asked him what made him decide to join our team: "I think my decision was settled before the interview even started. When you came down to reception to pick me up, both of you smiled at me and it felt like a very honest and warm welcome. At all the other consultancies I've been to, faces seemed to be carved in stone."

How difficult can it be? If you invite a candidate, you do so because you assume he could be a valuable colleague. So you

certainly do look forward to meeting him. Why not show it? This doesn't mean you are not allowed to ask tough questions during the interview. Just don't pretend not to be a human being, if you want to hire one...

Summary on "recruitment excellence"

It seems large corporate can learn a few lessons from smaller organisations on how showing respect towards candidates can improve recruitment success. So, allow me to remind you of this simple rule: if you are a line manager, who wants to recruit new staff

Be there!

Be quick!

And smile!

This case study was written by iProCon HCM Senior Partner Sven Ringling. If you would like more information on this subject, you can contact Sven by e-mail at s.ringling@iproconhcm.co.uk