

'Smart companies' pursue talent during down times

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SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Even in an age inundated with online résumé databases, job boards and business-focused social networks, many companies still rely heavily on the physical — third-party staffing firms to help them secure new hires.

Working with a staffing firm can help ease the burden on a growing company's own hiring resources and tap into deep wells of talent, an especially critical consideration in niches where talent is still relatively scarce, even in a slowing economy.

"There are skill sets for which the unemployment rate is still very low," said Terry O'Leary, a branch manager for Sapphire Technologies, the Woburn-based information technology staffing division of Vedior North America LLC.

Certain technology sectors and some accounting and financing areas still have unemployment rates of less than 2.5 percent, for instance.

"Smart companies don't stop seeking the best talent when things slow down," O'Leary added. "The smart companies know those are the times to grab the best talent off the market."

There are no shortages of staffing firms working in the Boston area. Many offer general recruiting services across a range of job titles, while others target

FAST FACTS

Many local companies offer general recruiting services while others target niche industries.

Is your staffing firm proactive or reactionary when it comes to recruiting talent?

As much as the right skill sets, companies want candidates who fit into their cultures.

industry niches or specific job descriptions. Some firms offer a broader menu of services, such as human resources consulting, and others offer both permanent and temporary staffing.

In some industry specialties, having a recruiter with experience in that specific field or niche is essential, said Ryan Sutton, vice president of the finance and accounting unit at Robert Half International Inc.

"When you're an accountant, you can tell the difference between a good and bad accountant pretty quickly," he said. "Recruiters trying to work in this field without having that background might not be able to tell the difference between a candidate who can spell Sarbanes-Oxley versus one who knows how to actually work with it or someone who can put SEC on their résumé and someone who can actually footnote

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the way the SEC wants to see it done."

In the end, businesses often turn to staffing firms for their expertise in matching clients with positions and their ability to source hard-to-find skill sets that are in high demand.

A good question to ask a staffing firm is how they keep their database of potential candidates stocked with top talent — whether there is ongoing, proactive recruiting or recruiting done in reaction to a job posting only.

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ton, arguing that a more established and international firm such as Robert Half may offer some benefits with its expansive reach, related consulting practices and history of placements.

Whatever type of firm a business chooses to work with, the relationship should consist of more than just phone check-ins, according to recruiters. A good reputable staffing firm will spend significant time getting to know a business and its culture as well as its specific job-description needs up front, said Jason Armata, a senior group manager specializing in finance at Professional Staffing Group Inc. in Boston.

"The skill sets, of course, have to be there, but clients often tell us that it's about culture fit even more than job functions," Armata said. "To get a good handle on that requires getting out and sitting with the client before that active recruiting process gets cranked up."

While good permanent staffing firms can cut down a business' time to fill a vacancy, the process can take weeks.

"Assuming the job requirements and the salary are reasonable, we tell most clients to expect a search to take four to six weeks," Armata said. While that may seem like a reasonable period of time, "when we ask them when they want the position filled, the answer is always 'Yesterday.'"