
OPINION

Educating HQ

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Having left one of the world's top companies to join a new entry into Japan from the United States the 43 year old general manager was at the end of his rope. The company was now 18 months old and he had successfully hired 5 employees through his own network and secured several significant contracts. He now had the work to justify several new hires. Head quarters have given their approval, however, they also wanted a very hands-on approach to recruiting.

Each resume needed to be submitted to HR in NY. The screening process was based on a North American model.

The primary frustration for the GM was communicating with Head Quarters. The New York company was aggressive and forthright and felt as though they new what was 'right' for Japan.

Having met several candidates for the project manager position the Japanese GM was ready to make an offer. However, the visiting VP of Sales had different ideas. On reviewing the resumes he felt that academically they were not qualified but agreed to meet with the candidates the next time he was in Japan. His mind was made up with the interviews lasting only a short time and the hiring process was sent back to the drawing board.

The VP felt that the candidates did not really, 'sell themselves' and 'did not appear serious about changing jobs'. He said, 'our company needs real 'go-getters', we're a start up'.

This culminated in a very heated discussion between the GM and the VP of sales. The country manager felt his efforts were undermined and his knowledge of Japan undervalued.

The two months he had invested into hiring had not resulted in a hire. The 18 months of business development was now in jeopardy since he does not have the team to execute the projects.

We suggested that he try to share with HQ some of the unique features of the Japan market for bilingual executives in Japan. We suggested the following points.

* All foreign based clients are looking for bilingual Japanese staff. However, Japanese English skills are

some of the lowest in the non English speaking world and it is incredibly difficult to find highly qualified bilingual staff in Japan which you don't have to do in the US.

* Provide HQ with a list of Tokyo's top schools and institutions.

* Provide HQ with a detailed summary of the candidate's strengths and weaknesses.

* Base the hiring process on objectives which are quantifiable and time bound. The greatest predictor of future performance is past results (for more detailed information see, 'Hire with your head', Lou Adler)

* Explain that traditionally, Japanese have worked under a lifetime employment system. As a result, it is extremely difficult to get them to change jobs and they are very loyal. We consider a 40-year old who has held 3 positions a "job-hopper"

* Japanese professionals are much more risk-averse than their western counterparts.

* Rarely do qualified candidates market themselves to their competitors or apply directly to any opportunities but rely on an introduction through a friend or a headhunter. It is almost impossible to find the candidates you are looking for through job board or through the newspaper like in the other developed markets.

* Japan is a unique market in that companies come to Japan because it is the second largest market in the world but unlike in the US where companies and industries are spread throughout the country, in Japan, you have every major company from all industries in one or two cities, Tokyo & Osaka, all competing for the same hard to find highly qualified bilingual Japanese candidates who are extremely risk-averse especially when considering to change their jobs.

* The competition for talent here is intense.

To the VP's credit he did listen to the GM and when he was in Europe he followed up with one of the candidates by doing some informal reference checking with some of his old colleagues. The comments were positive; the candidate did in fact have a strong list of accomplishment. The VP has organized another meeting when he is next in Tokyo.