

Ditching Active & Passive

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To begin with, at least one of the terms is simply inaccurate. A person can be an active job seeker, but a passive job seeker is a contradiction in terms. You can't be passive and a seeker at the same time. You can be a passive prospect, but that kind of candidate may or may not be someone you can recruit. Some prospects are interested in stimulating new opportunities, while others have absolutely no intention of ever doing something different. You have a shot at selling the former, but you're wasting your time with the latter.

Second, we often misuse these terms as surrogates for quality. No one likes to talk about it, of course, but many recruiters and the vast majority of hiring managers believe that passive candidates are of a higher caliber than active job seekers. They assume a passive person is employed, and that circumstance, they are convinced, demonstrates that the prospect is capable of a certain level of performance that someone in transition cannot match. There's no empirical data to support that view, however, and plenty of evidence that it's incorrect.

And, there's the rub. When you gear your recruiting efforts to a single, simplistic division like active or passive, you run the risk of incorrectly designing your recruiting strategy. Not only are many active candidates high caliber performers (especially in today's unsettled economy), but passive prospects, themselves, represent a range of passivity and quality. To put it another way, we pesky humans are difficult to codify. Even worse, codifying candidates incorrectly causes you to look in the wrong places and use the wrong arguments to recruit those you actually want.

So, What's the Solution?

Instead of using a single variable—is a person active or passive—let's use two. And, instead of using that single variable as a crude measure of quality, let's use one of the two variables we select to indicate a person's qualifications for our opening. In other words, I think we should now describe candidates as follows:

- Employed or unemployed
- Qualified or unqualified.

When you array those variables into a matrix of four cells, you get a much more accurate depiction of the candidate population we actually face in today's job market. Every single person is either:

- employed and qualified,
 - unemployed and qualified,
 - employed and unqualified,
- or
- unemployed and unqualified.

And, of course, of those four choices, the only ones that interest you are the first two: those who are qualified, whether they are employed or not.

Why is this differentiation important? The Golden Rule of Recruiting says it all: What you do to recruit qualified talent will also recruit unqualified talent, but the converse is not true. You must, therefore, gear where you advertise and network for talent and the rationale you use to sell them on your employer to the unique perspective and interests of those who are qualified for your opening. You need to figure out where those candidates hang out—online and off—and what motivates them to pick one employer over another. That has absolutely nothing to do with their activity or passivity and everything to do with their potential fit with your opening.

Indeed, there's plenty of evidence that people who are devoted to excellence in their field do the same things and go to the same places, whether they are employed or not. They are, for example, likely to hang out with their peers on the Web-sites of their professional association or society. They will often network in the discussion forums on job boards that have transformed themselves into career advancement portals and in LinkedIn groups devoted to their field. And, they stay in touch with their classmates on the Web-sites hosted by the alumni organizations of both their graduate and undergraduate educational institutions.

So, why bother to differentiate between those qualified candidates who are employed and those who are not? The answer is as simple as it is important: the value proposition you communicate can be similar in some respects for both groups, but must be different in others.

For example, both employed and unemployed candidates are likely to be interested in the opportunity your organization offers for them to advance in their field. The employed person, however, must be convinced to go from the security they currently have to the unknown security your organization may provide. The unemployed person, on the other hand, must be convinced that the security your organization provides will be better than the security available from other potential employers. Both considerations can be conveyed in the same message, but both must be present if you want to influence the pool of qualified prospects.

Certainly, it's easier to use a single variable to describe candidates, especially when you're dealing with inattentive hiring managers. Shaping your sourcing and recruiting strategy to a person's activity or passivity, however, can actually send you off in the wrong direction for and/or cause you to send the wrong message to the right candidates. Sure, it'll take a little practice to get comfortable with two variables instead of one, and for sure, it will be a challenge teaching a new set of terms to hiring managers. The return on that effort, however, will be substantial, for it will improve both the effectiveness and efficiency with which you access high caliber talent for your organization.

Thanks for reading,

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