

The new FACE of RECRUITMENT

One of the biggest changes Covid has forced on the world of work is how we find, assess and onboard new workers, and it looks like change is here to stay

The adoption of technology is relentless, but businesses – and that technology – still need people. Whether it's for management, the shop floor, accounts or deliveries, people make the world go around as much as money.

But the world of recruitment has changed. No longer can organisations hire using the 'warm body' approach, where someone is employed because they happen to be in the right place at the right time. Now, more than ever, firms in a time of heightened competition and a global pandemic, need to be very selective.

A changed landscape

George Thompson, joint managing director at Harrison Scott Associates, a recruiter for the print sector, has seen first-hand how the world of print and recruitment has been altered by the pandemic. In particular, he points to "the closure of shops and postponed events that has resulted in a significant reduction in POS, large-format, and exhibition print". He's keenly aware that many printers have seen turnover drop significantly.

Thankfully there are positive stories to tell. Thompson has seen those with large government contracts or who are linked to the healthcare sector thrive. As he details: "One of our longest-serving clients built a 10,000sqm factory last year to serve government contracts and we recruited a great number of digital printers, finishers and mailing operators... The first round of recruitment coincided with another client having to close a factory which meant we had inside knowledge of various staff members' abilities."

For Thompson it was extremely satisfying to be able to give hope to those who had only the previous week had heard bad news.

On the flipside, he's noticed a rise in direct mail as more people staying at home has played to its effectiveness as a marketing method.

And beyond government and the healthcare sector, Thompson has also seen firms linked to packaging expanding their business. The same applies to web-to-print and on-demand printing.

But when a company fails, possibly because of the pandemic, there are mixed opportunities for re-employment. Salespeople seem to find jobs relatively quickly, but production staff find it more of a challenge. To illustrate, Westdale Press called in administrators in October 2020, and Thompson managed to find homes for two of the sales staff very quickly, "but other job functions have great difficulty finding new roles".

The Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development (CIPD) is, however, seeing encouraging signs in the jobs market according to its latest *Labour Market Outlook* report.

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As Claire McCartney, senior resourcing and inclusion adviser at the CIPD, reports: "56% of the 2,000 employers surveyed said they are looking to recruit in the first quarter of 2021, up from 53% in the previous quarter and 49% six months ago. However, this is down from 66% during the same quarter last year."

And it shouldn't come as a surprise that those sectors indicating strong hiring intentions include healthcare, finance and insurance, education, and information and communications.

Conversely, organisations planning to make redundancies in the first quarter fell from 30% to 20% compared with the last quarter.

As McCartney sees it, employer confidence may be increasing because of "the Brexit free trade agreement", the success of the vaccine rollout, and the extension of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme.

Flexibility is the new norm

If there's one thing that the pandemic has shown, it's that some jobs can be done from home. And with many workers home schooling, employees need some form of flexibility. But can print offer job flexibility and are candidates demanding it? →



The first point to note is that CIPD research, cited by McCartney, shows that many employees that are able to work remotely want hybrid working: a mixture of remote and workplace working. She says that employers need to be mindful of this and should make changes to their policies and workplace culture in order not to miss out on talent.

Further, the CIPD encourages, she says, “employers to go much further given the many benefits flexible working can bring, including improving work-life balance and making work more accessible to those with caring responsibilities”. On top of that the CIPD thinks that while many have jobs which don’t allow remote working there are other forms of flexibility such as job sharing or compressed hours.

The CIPD particularly wants employers to think about supporting the right to request flexible working from day one. At the moment, a flexible working request can only be made after 26 weeks of being in post.

From a recruiter’s perspective, Thompson is seeing movement. He says: “Companies are responding positively and proactively to changes in market conditions and are allowing staff to work from home where possible.” However, he adds that clients do want staff to return to the office when permitted to do so – “although there are benefits to home working, nothing compares to the productivity of a team environment”.

Naturally, and understandably in today’s market, individuals aren’t leaving jobs for greener pastures. Instead, Thompson considers that “redundancy and employer instability are the only two reasons that people are looking for a new role.”

This means, in his view, that companies seeking to hire at this time have to have an offering that truly stands out.

The pandemic has changed the process

With the pandemic making social interaction either awkward, harder or illegal, the recruitment process has had to change somewhat.

For the CIPD, McCartney is firmly of the view that employers should be “ensuring rigour, structure and challenge” is applied to every stage of their recruitment process – “not only because they’ve become more reliant on technology, but because they need to step up their efforts to improve diversity, particularly at a senior level.”

Her advice to employers is to critically evaluate their organisation’s brand and culture to see how attractive it is to diverse candidates – and to be asking what changes they can make to help attract, select, develop and retain more diverse employees. They also need to evaluate their recruitment activities to assess what’s most effective at broadening talent pools.

“Employers,” she says, “need to be asking questions about what is critical to any role they’re recruiting for to ensure they’re not closing the door on anyone; people from different industries or backgrounds will have transferable skills and knowledge. They should also consider developing career returners and mid-career change programmes to help broaden talent pools and people’s skills.”

But for the recruiter, while the role hasn’t altered too much, Thomson says that the most significant difference he’s seen is the inability to travel and meet clients in person. Instead, he’s having to form relationships via Zoom and Teams meetings, and this has been reflected in the arrangement of interviews for clients: “All meetings are being carried out using online platforms rather than face-to-face.”

When it comes to remote interviews, McCartney says it makes sense that the same principles for face-to-face interviews apply. She says that “employers need to use the same interview questions in order to fairly compare responses”.

David Stones, sales director of B&B Press, needed to recruit a new salesperson after one of his team recently retired after being with the company for 37 years. However, as Stones notes, “recruiting last year wasn’t the right time in the middle of the pandemic. We wanted to take our time and revisit the strategy. But once we got into 2021, and the vaccine rollout began, we decided to press ahead.”

Pre-Covid, the firm used to advertise through social channels, job sites and a local recruitment company. “We would get hundreds of applications,” says Stone, “and spend hours sifting through trying to find suitable candidates.” He says that he would have informal phone conversations with candidates, then face-to-face interviews in two or three stages before appointing.

For the latest appointment, Stones decided to use a recruiter. Initial phone calls were replaced with Zoom meetings, and after the informal initial meeting was undertaken, a shortlist of candidates was drawn up and invited back for another and subsequent Zoom meetings. As Stones explains, he made “sure that the chosen candidate had the benefit of meeting the people on the Zoom call that they would be working with as part of the role.”

As for flexibility, some of the candidates Stones interviewed had been made redundant and he thinks that in the back of their mind they didn’t want to ask. But it was offered, and he explained that during Covid the position could be home based. And it offered a benefit: “It gave us a chance to consider people further afield than we would usually look at which was good to see what was on offer outside of Yorkshire.” He adds that “all that could work from home have done so, with only the hands-on production team on site”.

Stones knew it would be extremely difficult recruiting a salesperson during lockdown – “who would want to leave a secure job?” He devised a strategy with his recruiter based on the ethos of the business. The recruiter reassured candidates that the appointment would be based on ability, attitude and values and not turnover that could be brought.

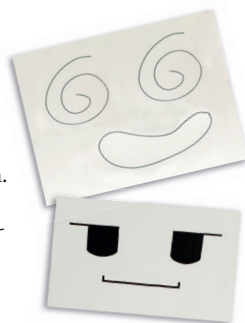
Looking to the future, Stones says for the past two years sales have been using video and social interaction through podcasts and digital marketing. Covid accelerated this – “I guess you could say we had a head start on using all the technology that is now part of peoples’ daily lives”. He sees Zoom and Teams meetings staying, which will mean fewer long road trips.



But for the candidate, it’s a little harder to sell themselves. As Thompson well knows: “Meeting someone face-to-face is completely different to meeting them on a video call. There is not even that first handshake to create an initial impression and some candidates really struggle with this form of communication.” But on a positive note, at least he is still able to arrange interviews. “Throughout lockdown,” he says, “I have managed to place people without them meeting face-to-face. If this pandemic occurred even 20 years ago, you would have been telling a completely different story.”

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Claire McCartney CIPD



It’s logical that there are perhaps 50% more applications than normal and because of this, the most common complaint from candidates is that a lot of recruitment companies don’t acknowledge applications. In recruitment’s defence, Thompson says that “this is a common flaw of more general recruitment companies rather than specialists.” His advice to general recruitment firms is to remember that “it’s a human being with hopes and aspirations, going through one of the most difficult times in their lives, that is applying for a position. Take the time to reply, even if it they are not suitable for the role, as it will be greatly appreciated”.

And McCartney concurs with Thompson’s stance. She says that employers “need to be mindful of how competitive the jobs market currently is and the financial pressure that many people are under. They also need to think about

CASE STUDY: BRAND IQ

the damage to their organisation's reputation if they are not treating applicants fairly and with consideration".

If she were running the process, she'd look at using pre-application assessments to potentially reduce the number of unsuitable candidates for roles. And where candidates don't pass to the interview stage, she would notify them that "they have been unsuccessful and are encouraged to apply for similar roles within the company again; a generic response will suffice for this. Beyond that, any who get through to interview stage or are shortlisted, but don't land the job, should be given tailored feedback if possible". This, she considers, needn't be long and "is always appreciated by candidates".

There is one thing to thank the modern world for: that it has equipped candidates with the skills to handle the new recruitment regime... to an extent.

In Thompson's experience, "candidates are coping surprisingly well. I think it's because they use video platforms in their social life to communicate with friends and family". Interestingly, Harrison Scott keeps candidate coaching to a minimum "so clients can see their true selves rather than an artificial version". He adds: "We do, however, believe that if candidates ask us for advice, this in itself is taking initiative, and we would tell them to ensure they use as quiet an area as possible with no distractions in the background."

A function of video-based recruitment is that it has sped up the process – up to 20% in Thompson's view – because people are working from home and therefore a lot more accessible. And there's another benefit he's found – "the type of conversations we have are of a highly sensitive nature, so to be able to reach people in their home is a lot better than when they are sitting next to a colleague".

Looking at the short to medium term, the next year or two, Thompson sees things continuing as how they are currently. "But once the vaccine has been rolled out and is as successful as we hope, we believe things will go back to how they were pre-pandemic."

The CIPD, on the other hand, thinks it's hard to predict what will happen. "Our latest research in this space – carried out at the start of the first lockdown – shows that whilst more organisations are turning to technology to attract candidates and facilitate the recruitment process, the extent to which they use different technologies varies – as does the results."

Consequently, McCartney believes that employers need to make sure that technology is implemented carefully, complements an organisation's brand and values, and is optimised with the end-user in mind. She adds that firms also "need to ensure that any technology adopted is properly tested so that it isn't introducing bias or disadvantage into the process and is easily accessible for all candidates".

Pay issues

As noted earlier, it's a buyer's market for some job functions and a seller's for others such as sales. Even so, Thompson advises clients to offer as much employment security as possible and to "be genuine in their dedication to giving candidates as much time as possible to settle in, looking at it from a medium-to-long-term perspective rather than expecting quick results."

Nevertheless, common sense should suggest that, as Thompson says, "even the most talented sales staff with very high turnovers will admit that they can't guarantee anything. Nevertheless, 'the guide to future behaviour is past performance' so if someone has produced strong sales results for 15 years, they are likely to continue to do so."

But there is a harsh reality tied to job functions. Some, reckons Thompson, are seeing salaries that are lower than

Jamie Booth, director at Brand iQ, a brand management solution for print and branding agencies, says business was affected by Covid.

He says that "it's been a mixed process for us since March last year and it has given us time to reflect on our business, look at what we are good at and where we should be improving."

That said, he's seen growth in the past year and has signed on more print companies to become resellers of the Brand iQ solution. As a result, Booth says that since the start of the year, he's recruited two new members of staff.

Brand iQ's recruitment process has not changed entirely, says Booth: "As we are a software company serving the print sector, we mostly work with technology... so have not been impacted in that sense."

He continues: "We conducted telephone interviews to learn more about the candidate and then progressed to a video call to get to know them more before offering them the role." Additionally, when the guidelines were lifted slightly, one-to-one office interviews were held with Covid precautions in place. The idea was to get the candidates introduced to the office for when they can come back once things have calmed down. Apart from the

masks, Booth says that that's mostly been the usual practice.

On flexibility, Booth says that the company was ready to supply equipment, including mobile phones for those who needed them for their job, to encourage working from home. Overall, though, he says that "at Brand iQ we are flexible with working schedules as we understand that some employees may also be teaching from home currently. We can be flexible with their hours, allowing them to balance both responsibilities during this challenging time".

Like others, Booth too knows that good people are always hard to find. Still, as he says: "We knew we wanted to expand our team and so made the conscious effort to take time to find the right people to join the team."

Long term, with resellers all over the world, Booth considers technology such as Teams or Zoom as "second nature to us when we have had to call meetings with our international resellers and clients". However, Brand iQ is craving face-to-face interaction with team members and clients. "Moving forward," he says, "we will hopefully be able to create a happy medium with the two, depending on which option is more efficient and productive."

they were two years ago – "this is especially apparent with job functions where there are more candidates than opportunities available." As result, he advises candidates to remember that some clients' turnover is significantly down and so therefore, they don't have the same money to pay salaries they once could. And he expresses surprise when some believe that companies are taking advantage of there being more candidates than vacancies. However, he advises them that's not the case – it is just a reflection of market conditions.

And this is partly borne out by data in the CIPD's latest *Reward Management* report. As McCartney cites: "There



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have not been significant changes to pay and benefits since the pandemic started... only a quarter of employers have revised how much they have spent on employee pay (both fixed and variable) by March 2021. Of these, half will reduce pay and a quarter will increase it."

She is encouraged, however, to see that "30% of employers say the pandemic and the economic crisis has prompted them to consider how fair their pay and benefits are – and we'd encourage all employers to do more in this area".

And finally...

The pandemic has much to answer for and print will adapt and survive. The question is how the landscape changes in the medium to long term. And to know that requires a highly polished crystal ball. 