

What to Say—and Do—to Recruit Top Talent for Your Schools

By Elizabeth Heubeck — September 26, 2022

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In today's tight labor market, it's not uncommon for job-seeking educators to have their pick of offers. And while tried-and-true factors like starting salary, commuting distance, and strong mentorships may impact a candidate's final decision, there's more to winning over top talent than concrete perks.

Effective communication throughout the recruitment process can elevate a given employer in the eyes of a job candidate and potentially serve as a deal breaker when it comes to deciding between two or more positions. Beginning with how a district tells its story to prospective job candidates and concluding with strong post-interview follow-up, communication at every step of the recruiting process is crucial to attracting and hiring job seekers.

At Education Week, we caught up with experts who credit strong communication tactics with yielding favorable recruiting results.

Getting the word out

“Gone are the days when you just posted a job,” said Nicholas Glenn, the communications director of North Shore School District 112 in Highland Park, Ill., about 25 miles north of Chicago.

Acting on his district’s desire to stand out to potential job candidates, especially given the ongoing teacher shortage, Glenn worked with the district’s deputy superintendent, Monica Schroeder, and outside communication consultants to execute a \$30,000 campaign to tighten the district’s brand and tell its story digitally about what makes their school system and the broader community an appealing place to work.

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Nicholas Glenn, communications director of North Shore School District 112 in Chicago

They developed a microsite to promote appealing aspects of working at North Shore School District 112, including its proximity to the Chicago Botanical gardens, great parks, and dining. The site also touts the district’s strong mentorship program and efforts to create a positive work environment.

The campaign used social media engagement, email marketing, and digital advertising to reach their target audience, which Glenn describes as teachers from their early 20s to 45 living in Chicago and Milwaukee who were in the teaching field or indicated an interest in a career in education. “Upwards of 80 percent of our teachers were white. We wanted to broaden not only our employees’ age group but also our demographics,” Glenn said. “We wanted to start a conversation that is authentic and long term.”

The campaign reaped strong results. During the 2019–20 school year, prior to the campaign, the district received 1,382 job applicants. The following year, when the campaign ran for three months, the applicant pool reached 1,499. And during a more recent four-month phase of the campaign, the district received 1,700 applications. Additionally, Glenn reported that many candidates who applied during the campaign were people of color.

Even districts without a significant budget or expertise to execute a sophisticated branding and recruitment campaign can use effective communication strategies to reach potential job seekers, say experts.

What’s critical is to meet job candidates where they are, said human-resources specialist Kevin Walton. And, especially for younger job candidates, that means using social media.

Given social media’s growing popularity and near-constant evolution, Walton said it’s imperative to stay current with which social media channels are heavily used among younger, early-career professionals. For now, that means moving away from Facebook and toward more popular social media channels, said Walton, employed by Area Cooperative Educational Services, an agency in North Haven, Conn. “Younger audiences are living their life on TikTok.”

Job postings done right

After capturing job seekers’ attention, the next step is to hook them with the job posting. Keeping it brief is a good start, said recruiting expert Brian White.

“You want to be clear, concise,” said White, the executive director of human resources and operations of Auburn-Washburn USD 437 in Topeka, Kansas. “There’s no need to post a multipage job listing. If there’s more to tell,

provide a link for further information.”

With both job postings and descriptions, word choice is as important as word limit, said White. He cautions recruiters to avoid using words to describe the job that will alienate certain job seekers, such as gender-specific pronouns.

Other word choices can give job seekers pause or turn them away altogether. One example is the use of subjective phrases or those open to interpretation, like this one, cited frequently under the “qualifications” part of a job posting: Must have a sense of humor.

“People process things in different ways,” said Jim Emanuel, a human-resources knowledge adviser with the Society for Human Resource Management, or SHRM. Rather than using wording that may be misinterpreted or potentially turn off job candidates, Emanuel offers this advice: When listing job responsibilities, stick to objective competencies and skills necessary to succeed.

While precision is important in job postings, White suggests that recruiters also make room for language that promotes the job’s benefits and desirability. “Some people are driven by money and bonuses. In our industry, we can’t speak to that,” White said. “We’ve got to speak to the things that match our [industry’s] values.” Making a difference in the lives of students is a top benefit that recruiters should always communicate to applicants, he said.

Acing the interview: Questions count

Job candidates should leave an interview with a clear understanding of the job and its responsibilities, said SHRM’s Emanuel. This sounds obvious, but a meandering or otherwise ineffective interview can leave a candidate unsure of even basic expectations.

While preparing to interview job candidates, Emanuel suggests that recruiters ask themselves the following questions to ensure the meeting includes relevant points and stays on track: Am I painting a picture of exactly what it is I’m seeking in a candidate? Am I prepared to adequately explain not just what the employee will be expected to do but also how to go about doing the work?

That same level of advanced preparation should go into questions for candidates, advises Emanuel. “Develop an objective and consistent set of questions for each candidate,” he said. “Stick to the script, if you will.”

The objective of these questions, Emanuel explained, should be to uncover candidates’ true competencies related to their ability to succeed in the given position.

For revealing responses, Emanuel suggests asking “situational” questions that require job seekers to share how they have (or would) approach a given work-related situation.

Knowing which questions to avoid asking candidates is important, too. Emanuel advises interviewers to stay away from demographic-related inquiries such as those related to age, gender, disability, or veteran status. Depending on how the question is posed, it could open an employer up to a potential lawsuit. Similarly, he said, refrain from asking questions about a candidate’s personal life, such as this especially problematic one: I see that you’re pregnant. When are you due?

Last, but not least: Follow-up

Job candidates spend countless hours on the interview process, and too often, this valuable time is ultimately met with silence. Ghosting, whereby someone in a relationship suddenly stops all forms of communication, recently has spread from personal relationships to employer-based ones—particularly around the interview process, according to SHRM. And while it may be an unintentional oversight on the part of a busy recruiter, it's not just rude; it's bad for recruiting business.

“If it's clear that a person is not a viable candidate, let them know,” Emanuel said. “They just want closure.”

Prompt and courteous follow-up can benefit both parties in the future. “If they're a potential candidate, don't close the door. Say: ‘Please do keep us in mind for future positions,’” Emanuel advised.

Even if a given candidate might not be a good fit for a position now or in the future, how an employer handles that messaging can affect their reputation within the industry. When candidates are left waiting or, worse, if they never hear from the employer after the interview, they're likely to share their negative experience with professional peers.

“It's a competitive job market,” Emanuel said. “Can employers really afford to do that?”