

Improving the Candidate Experience: Can You Put Yourself in Their Shoes?

by Matt Kaiser, Vice President & Talent Strategist
NAS Recruitment Communications

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever compared your job postings or recruitment ads to those of your competitors? Have you ever navigated your career site to find, or apply for, a job? Have you ever looked at your organization...through the eyes of a candidate? How was your experience?

This is the concept we need to examine in the recruitment arena today – the concept of the *candidate experience*. The idea is to look at recruiting from the candidate's perspective. And, to understand the candidate experience, you have to put yourself in the candidate's shoes.

Sounds like a pretty simple idea, right? So, why is it so difficult? Often, we seem to end up saying, "I want to see it like this," or, "This is how the hiring manager wants it to read," or, "Marketing wants it to look like this." Instead, we should be asking ourselves "What would the candidate want to see? What is it candidates want to know about our organization?"

Although recruiting has slowed for many organizations, creating a positive candidate experience is more important now than ever. Many organizations are inundated with candidates looking for career opportunities – and many of these candidates are neglected in the process. The result? Candidates start developing negative perceptions of the organizations that are neglecting them.

This is not good – because when this economy does turn around, the companies in question are going to need those candidates. Not only that, but there also has never been a better time to spread a message, good or bad – through blogs, viral marketing and social networks. That is why you want to do your best to provide a positive experience for all candidates interested in your organization.

As you look at your organization from the candidate's perspective, you want to make sure you are able to answer certain questions:

- Why would I want to work here?
- What is different about your organization versus what I'm doing now?
- What is the culture like and how is it unique?
- What are the benefits?
- What is the commitment to work/life balance, diversity and the community?
- Who works here?
- What will my day look like at work?

You also want to address their specific questions about applying:

- What's the application process like? Is it long? Is it tedious?
- What is the follow-up from you if I apply? What's your communication process?

The overall candidate experience consists of a series of touch points that represent each time a candidate comes in contact with your organization. We're going to focus on five main touch points in the recruiting process – and we're going to look at each of them from the candidate's perspective. Your goal should be to ensure the candidate has a positive experience at each touch point in the recruiting process.

First Impression: External Touch Points

This is the first time a candidate comes in contact with your organization, or their "first impression." Some of these touch points include ads, postings, social networking sites, job fairs, conferences, local or regional events, even baseball games or restaurants. What does that candidate see and who do they meet from your organization? What is their "first impression" of your organization?



Employment Brand

Let's focus for a minute on Nike and the power of their brand. I read an article in *Forbes* magazine in 2008 that stuck with me. The article was entitled, "Going For Gold: Nike's Race to Become the Most Valuable Brand in the World." That is Nike's goal, and right now, they arguably are one of the most valuable brands in the world. Why? They have people talking about, promoting and endorsing their products – Tiger Woods, LeBron James and Michael Jordan, to name a few. I found a very interesting quote in this article:

"Anybody can sell a \$30 pair of sneakers. To get \$120, you have to forget about selling shoes and think about sports."
– *Forbes* on Nike

Young athletes, even though they can't dunk a ball like Michael Jordan or hit a golf ball like Tiger Woods, are still willing to invest \$120 in a pair of Nike basketball or golf shoes. The reason? Nike sells "the experience" – the experience of wearing their shoes and being like Mike.

This is the concept we want to bring over into the employment arena. As employers, the question you have to ask yourself is, are you selling jobs or are you selling *the experience*? Any organization can "sell jobs." But to attract the best talent to your organization, you have to forget about selling jobs and think about the experience. The experience...of working at your organization. How will it impact the candidate's life? How will it impact the people around them and the world they live in? How is that experience different from that offered by your competition, and what makes that experience unique?

This is your true employment brand. It's the feeling you get when you think about working at an organization. It's the perception of the employment experience and it's designed as a long-term strategy to target the right candidates – the candidates that most closely match up with the culture at your organization.

Now, you already have an employment brand, like it or not, and candidates may already have a perception of your organization – good or bad. So, you have to realize they may have an opinion of your organization before you ever even engage them in the recruiting process. This is the first part of the candidate experience – the perception of your company when they first touch it, or even before. Your goal should be to make sure that opinion is positive, so that each candidate experience starts on a positive note.

The best way to ensure a positive initial candidate impression, and to build and communicate your employment brand, is through your employees. Your employees can have the single greatest impact on the candidate experience. This is especially true with the new generation. I found an interesting quote on this topic:

"NetGeners place more emphasis on personal recommendations than on brand names when deciding which products and services to buy." – Economist Intelligence Unit, 2009

I believe this statement also holds true for recruiting. Fortunately, this is how you build your employment brand – through recommendations, positive comments and feedback about your organization and the employment experience.

Every employee is a recruiter when they meet a potential candidate. If you can get your top athletes (employees) talking about your organization – how they feel, what inspires them and why they love working there – it will not only help build a powerful employment brand, but will also create a positive experience for candidates talking with your employees.

Social Networking Sites

Social Networking sites like Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn are external touch points. What are people, and in particular employees, saying about your organization? What are candidates hearing or seeing? Many organizations shy away from these sites, when in fact they should be leveraging the power and positive effect these sites can have on an employment brand and initial candidate perceptions.

Consider encouraging your employees to use social networking sites to inspire "word-of-mouth" and peer-to-peer dialogue about your company's culture and what a great place it is to work. Social networking sites are excellent vehicles to plant ideas without "in your face" recruitment messaging.

External Ads and Job Postings

Being an unbiased reader of a publication, would you apply to your ad...or your competitor's ad? Advertising offers a key initial touch point. Make sure your external offline ads give that candidate a positive initial experience. Create something different, unique and compelling. Consider developing an ad with one line in it – a URL that drives candidates back to a customized landing page on the Internet, with specific content to sell that position and your organization, along with a link to apply. Minimize copy in



your ad and make your goal to drive viewers back to an online site (career site or landing page) where they can read more about your organization and the career opportunities available. Remember, this is their first impression. **Sell the experience.**

How about your job postings? If you were a candidate and you saw your job posting online, would you apply? The key to a successful Internet job posting is **differentiating** your organization – making your organization memorable in the eyes of a candidate. With so much competition vying for the same talent, make sure your job postings are unique and compelling, not just a job description thrown out on a job board. Your goal: appeal to “top candidates.”

Here’s an idea – see if your job posting appeals to your top employees. Let them read it and see if they would apply. If not, ask them for some ideas to enhance it and make it more appealing to top candidates. Make it easy and appealing for the candidate to learn about your organization. Give them a better online experience.

“Second” First Impression: Your Career Site

A recent study showed that in general, over 90% of candidates who reach a career site do not apply (*Dr. John Sullivan & Associates*). This is a pretty staggering statistic. Companies are investing a tremendous amount of time, energy and resources to attract talent to their sites. However, many of them are neglecting to implement tools to capture and engage those candidates and provide a more positive experience.

Your career site is the number one external touch point in the overall candidate experience. Why? After the initial touch points we just discussed, every candidate will undoubtedly visit your career site. Even if they had a positive initial experience at a job fair, a conference or in a conversation with a recruiter, if they get back to your career site and there is a disconnect between what they learned earlier and what is on your site, you stand a good chance of losing them. This is why I refer to it as your “second” first impression.

Your career site must be central to your strategy. When you look at your site and how it affects the candidate experience, there are really two things you need to ask yourself:

1. Is it a communications vehicle?

Does it communicate what the candidate wants to see? Put yourself in the candidate’s shoes and ask, “Would it engage me?” A few things to consider communicating on your site include:

- Your true Employment Value Proposition (EVP) and employment brand messaging
- Awards; community initiatives; commitment to diversity and inclusion
- Who they will be working with and what a day in their life will look like at your organization

There are a number of tools to help communicate this information and engage the candidate:

- **Videos and testimonials** – a great way to convey your employment and job brands
- **Podcasts** – provide tips for job seekers and help build your image as a valuable resource in the marketplace
- **Employee Blogs** – allow them to learn about your organization from the employee’s perspective
- **Recruitment Newsletters** – allow them to subscribe via RSS feed to a monthly recruitment newsletter
- **Live Chat** – give them a chance to communicate with your top employees and tailor the experience by job family (e.g., nurses talking with nurses)
- **Recruiter Response** – allow candidates to ask recruiters specific questions

All of these ideas are designed to capture and engage top candidates and help improve their overall experience on your site.

2. Is it functional?

In other words, make sure your career site is easy to find and easy to navigate. A “Careers” link on your company’s home page is essential. It should be prominently displayed on the home page, not hidden under “Company Information” or “About Us.” From the home page, it shouldn’t take more than three clicks to reach a job posting. A **.JOBS domain name** is one way to streamline this process. This custom URL will send candidates directly to your career site, minimizing the number of clicks and, in turn, frustration levels.

You should also consider creating a dedicated career microsite. A microsite allows candidates to focus only on information relating to their career. This type of site is less distracting and provides easy navigation and a pleasant experience for the candidate.



Online landing pages or talent hubs can also provide a streamlined approach to enhancing the candidate experience. These pages focus on particular positions, career events or locations. Engineers want to see engineering opportunities, so send them to a page about engineering at your organization. This not only minimizes frustration, but enhances their experience by allowing them to learn more about their specific area of interest. These pages can be customized for each position by adding testimonials, videos, informational podcasts, employee blogs and live chats with engineers.

I encourage you to take a long look at your career site. Navigate it like a job seeker to get a true picture of how the candidate experience can be enhanced.

Application Process & Alternatives

"This should only take about 10 minutes..." How many candidates think like this when they arrive at your online application, only to find out it takes 20, 30, maybe even 40 minutes or longer to complete? Ultimately, this time difference will create frustration for the candidate, and will result in a negative experience. Many times, these candidates may drop out of the process entirely and never return. Worse, they tell others about it.

It's important to look at this process from the candidate's perspective. When candidates are ready to apply, it's important to let them know three things:

1. How long the application process will take and what type of information they'll need to complete it
2. Your communication process and the follow-up they should expect to receive after they apply
3. If there's an opportunity to leave their e-mail address and receive updates

Set clear expectations up front. It's very important, especially if you have a long application process, to make sure candidates know what they're getting into. Consider adding language that says something like: *"This application is going to take you approximately 30 minutes to complete. You'll need a copy of your resume and three references."*

This way, you've prepped the candidate so they know they can't just quickly apply for a job in 10 minutes. This step will help you create a better experience for the candidate and receive fewer incomplete applications from candidates who may start the process, but drop out because it takes too much time or they didn't know they needed a certain piece of information (like a reference).

Alternatives

Let's take a look back at the 90% of candidates who may reach your career site, but do not apply. There are a number of factors that may contribute to this figure: nothing to engage them; frustrating navigation; too much information; or not the "right" information. However, most of the time, the candidate isn't ready to apply OR you don't have a position available. Here's where you have a choice. You can either lose that candidate, and you may not get them back – or you can build a **talent network**.

A talent network can be integrated into your career site or landing page and provide a candidate an alternative to the application process. It's an online tool used to capture basic information from a candidate and set up ongoing communication that may include: job alerts; newsletters; new openings at your facility; awards you recently won; and invitations to upcoming career events. It's easy for you to maintain contact with the candidate and for them to maintain contact with you, which helps build a better candidate experience, creates a strong internal pipeline of talent and allows you to capture a portion of the 90% of candidates that would have normally left the site.

Internal Social Network

The recruiting process and the candidate experience are still about building relationships. The difference today is that many of these relationships are built online first. One way to build candidate relationships is to create your own social network. There are a number of companies that can develop this platform. One of the most well known platforms is **Ning.com**.

Ning allows you to create your own personal social network, or a social network for your organization. If I'm a rock climber in San Diego, I can create a San Diego Rock Climber's social network on Ning and invite other climbers to join. We can post comments, pictures and events. You can do the same for your organization, and invite candidates to join. This is a great way to engage them and allow them to see your culture and what's happening internally at your organization. It also allows candidates to communicate with your recruiters, hiring managers and top employees.



Pro Flowers and Adidas are both using Ning successfully, requesting candidates to join and become part of their network. Once they join, the company can blast updates, information about career events and even specials on flowers and shoes. The idea is to try to make your recruiting process less about “Apply Now” and more about building relationships.

Interviewing and Hiring Process: Recruiting is Sales

At this stage, it's important to remember that **recruiting is sales**. If top candidates are interviewing with your organization, it's likely they are interviewing with your competitors. It's your job to enhance their experience during the interviewing process and sell them on your organization.

However, it's important to understand that it is not just you or the recruitment team that will sell the candidate. Everyone at your organization must realize the impact they can have on the candidate experience and how they can positively (or negatively) affect that candidate's decision to join your organization. Hiring managers, fellow employees and even executives – every employee is a sales person for the organization. Employees are the brand and voice of the company, and candidates make decisions based on what they see during the interviewing process.

Encourage your employees to take a role in impacting the candidate's experience during their interview process. Let each employee know how important it is to the success of your recruiting efforts. Internally, consider implementing a couple of strategies:

- Hold a training session with all employees and/or each division/unit and educate them on the meaning of the candidate experience and how they can help positively impact it
- Create a checklist for hiring managers during the interviewing process that shows them how they can help create a more positive candidate experience.

For the candidate, the key to a positive experience during the recruiting process is communication. You must make sure there is continuous communication to let the candidate know where they are in the process. Consider developing a formal recruiter communication program with candidate touch points at various intervals throughout the recruiting process – from the time they apply all the way through the onboarding process. Develop an interviewing tool kit, with customized thank you cards, e-cards and letters, branded to your organization, that you can personalize for ongoing communication at specific points throughout the interviewing process. This puts a process in place, ensuring every recruiter is sending out consistent communication at consistent times. Phone calls are also important at certain times for a personal touch. This type of communication, in this economy, will separate you from the competition and get candidates talking about your organization.

Communication is especially important once the offer is made and accepted. Many people call this the “dead zone” – the time between when candidates receive an offer and when they actually come on board – because they never hear from anyone! I like to refer to the term “buyer's remorse” in this situation (when you purchase a big ticket item and then regret it). The same thing goes through a candidate's head when they make a decision to switch companies or join your organization.

The key: make them feel like they made the right choice. Send a new-hire package after the offer is accepted and include a tool kit to help the candidate prepare for day one. Don't forget to include a card signed by their fellow employees welcoming the candidate to their team (a great way to make a first impression). You can also include a gift certificate for lunch or dinner at a local restaurant.

A new-hire onboarding site is also helpful in the transition. This site provides new hires all the information they need to be ready for the first day of work. It can be designed to generate excitement and awareness about your organization and give new hires a more in-depth look at the culture within. To reduce potential anxiety, provide links to all the documents and tools they will need to be prepared for their first day on the job. You can also include videos, games and communication tools to make it fun and exciting. *Your goal: to engage these new employees before they ever step through the door.*

Onboarding: The Final Step

Now that the candidate is on board, you have them where you want them, right? Not so fast. New employees decide whether they feel at home or not in the first three weeks – and 22% of staff turnover occurs in the first 45 days of employment (*The Wynhurst Group*).

It's important to remember that onboarding is still part of the candidate experience. If you haven't done so already, I strongly encourage setting up a **formal** onboarding program for your organization. Here's a powerful statistic:



"New employees who went through a structured onboarding program were 58% more likely to be with the organization after three years." – The Wynhurst Group

As you build your onboarding program, you want to first get the hiring manager involved. Doing so is imperative for a smooth candidate transition to your organization. Develop a checklist for the hiring manager, outlining a program to follow during the onboarding cycle. This step will help ensure a smooth transition for both the candidate and the hiring manager.

Next, set up a formal program for the new employee, with touch points throughout the first year of employment. Your goal is to make new hires comfortable with their position and with the organization. Some touch points might include:

- **First day:** Welcome card from the hiring manager, fellow employees and the CEO. Assign a mentor for 60-90 days.
- **One week:** Send an e-card and survey requesting feedback on their *candidate experience*. This action lets them know you value their opinion and provides useful insight to help you improve your recruitment process.
- **One month:** Send an e-card and survey requesting feedback about their *employee experience* thus far, to see if it matches up with what they were promised during the recruitment process.
- Additional touch points, candidate reviews and assessments should be conducted at 3 months, 6 months and 9 months, with a celebration concluding their 1-year anniversary.

Continual communication and recognition during the first 12 months of employment is a key to retention. The best recruiting strategy is a quality retention strategy.

Measuring the Experience

So how can you measure the candidate experience to make sure you are creating a positive one? Here are some ideas to consider:

- **External surveys:** Consider sending out an electronic survey to candidates who went through your recruitment process and candidates who declined offers. Inquire about their experiences, why they declined the offer and how you can improve the recruitment process.
- **Internal surveys and focus groups:** Conduct surveys or focus groups with new hires to help gauge their experience and understand how to improve the overall recruitment process.
- **Career site:** Solicit feedback from candidates on your career site. Include an email response tool that asks the question "How can we improve our site?" or "How can we improve your experience?" This is an excellent way to engage the candidate and learn about areas you can improve. There are also products and companies that can help you measure and track the effectiveness of your site, including how many people visit your site, how long they stay, what pages they view and where they drop off.

CONCLUSION

If you build a positive candidate experience, talent will come to you. Candidates will talk about your organization and tell others about the positive experience they had during your recruitment process. Although you may not have openings in this economic environment, top talent will ultimately want to work for your organization when a position does become available. The true test of a positive candidate experience is when a candidate can go through your recruiting process and say: *"You know, I didn't get that job...but I would really love to work there."*