

Virtual recruitment

Outsourcing recruitment activities allows biotechnology start-ups to focus on growing their businesses.

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How do fast-growing biotechnology companies begin the task of large-scale recruitment to meet their expansion goals, especially as they rarely have the luxury of an established human resources department? Enter the concept of virtual recruitment, which allows companies to outsource the search and selection of suitable high-caliber candidates with specialist skills.

The concept of a “virtual organization,” to which one of a company’s non-core activities is completely outsourced, is not a new one. Over the past few years, the concept of outsourcing has repeatedly fallen in and out of favor with the business world. The information technology (IT) industry in particular has embraced the idea, with many companies cutting their noncore activities in favor of outsourcing them to specialist organizations. Functions typically outsourced in this sector tend to be focused on internal support services, for example, management of servers and desktop computer support.

The pharmaceutical industry has been using contract research organizations (CROs) for many years to carry out large-scale clinical trials on products without having to maintain a complete department that would inevitably be out of use for some of the time. In fact, some CROs now have the capabilities to take a drug candidate from early trials right up to the point of market. Similarly, in the sales environment, pharmaceutical and other industries are becoming increasingly reliant on the concept. In extreme cases, some companies recruit an entire sales force *en masse* to support a new product launch or sell a seasonal product.

Such virtual organizations are now coming into their own by acting as mentoring services for emerging or expanding businesses that have a marketable idea but cannot yet support all the necessary specialist functions—and nowhere more so than in the United Kingdom’s burgeoning biotechnology sector.

Degrees of outsourcing can vary from a simple contractor–employer relationship to business partnership agreements with shared goals. Either way, this concept can offer a

commercially viable alternative to setting up or maintaining departments that may not be in constant use, an option which is of particular relevance to young, fast-growing biotechnology companies. A company’s recruitment function provides just one example of how outsourcing can be successfully used. Recruitment has a tendency to come in waves. Once a recruitment drive brings a company close to its headcount number, a period of inactivity or a freeze often follows, during which the current employment situation is assessed against the strategic plan and business objectives. This lull may then be followed by a subsequent burst of recruitment activity, and so the pattern may continue.

In all industries, the recruitment environment is a roller coaster of reactivity. As promotions occur, new projects unfold, and employees move on, there is a need to remain responsive in a competitive employment market. This presents a challenge to the drug giants, but can seem an insurmountable hurdle to a young biotech company, which may need to recruit entire departments. Certainly the last thing investors want to see is any holdup in a company’s development. In these times of frequent change, it is of paramount importance that the recruitment process is not seen as a rate-limiting process or a business inhibitor. Without a fully staffed, dedicated HR function, going it alone in a mass recruitment drive is nearly impossible for such biotech companies.

Biotech biting the bullet

Coupled with the widespread rationalization of R&D facilities and a growing spirit of entrepreneurialism among the academic community, a healthy growth environment for start-up biotech companies has been cultivated in the UK. Once they have had their cash injection from investors, the main priority for these businesses is to hit the ground running. Even with the best ideas in the world, it is an impossible task to run a whole recruitment function single-handedly while simultaneously developing the core activities of a business. This is where virtual recruitment can be crucial.

As recruitment is only one, albeit critical, function of a human resources department, a decision to continue to outsource the recruitment function after the initial start-up phase could well be absolutely necessary, as the

urgency of and volume of work generated by the size of a recruitment drive presents a continuing challenge for a growing company. It is essential to work closely in partnership with the consultancy selected. Such an organization will be able to identify and understand the company’s needs in order to seek out and select the most eligible candidates, helping to off-load the administrative burden that large-scale recruitment can place on a small or new department.

From candidate sourcing, advertisement placement, and database searching to full psychometric analysis, prescreening, and progress reports, the extent to which a recruitment consultancy becomes involved in the selection process is entirely determined by the client. A good example is outsourcing the primary candidate selection and the first round of screening interviews to the consultancy, which would then compile a report and pass details of the most suitable candidates to the company for the second round of interviews.

There are benefits to opting for the virtual recruitment route. Neil Methold, managing director of Science Recruitment Group (SRG), states: “A suitable recruitment consultancy will have access to a database of skilled candidates and will be able to present a suitable shortlist in an agreed time frame. It should be considered as an extension of a company’s own management resources and should be able to provide a tailored but flexible solution to a client’s precise needs. Recruitment organizations are available to help companies through periods of transition and to allow them more time to concentrate on the core business activities that will enable them to grow their businesses.”

Conclusions

The virtual recruitment option is becoming an increasingly preferred way of working, particularly in the biotechnology environment where companies constantly change and grow. The advice is clear: select an organization that is well versed in your industry sector and establish a close working relationship with a mutually beneficial contract. Whether for a young start-up company in the throes of expansion, or an established company with a well-staffed human resources department, a specialist recruitment consultancy is a good way to alleviate the administrative burden of sourcing and screening candidates with the right skills.

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