

How welcoming is your recruitment process?

This paper is an attempt to highlight some long-standing recruitment practices widely used within the Catholic Education sector, practices which appear to give less consideration to applicants than is wise in the labour market of the 21st century.

There is no attempt to provide solutions (although I have many suggestions & opinions!); rather I will highlight possible areas for review and encourage you to explore options to better align your recruitment processes with your organisation's values, vision and mission.

Since the choice of *words* sends an important signal about attitude and thinking, let's start with terminology:

- Instead of a '*recruitment & selection*' process let us refer to a '*recruitment & welcoming*' process;
- Words such as '*applicant*' and '*candidate*' have a less than personal feel, so let's use '*people*' instead.

Guidelines

1st Guideline

The first step in any recruitment review is to consider how well your organisation's vision and mission is imbedded within your recruitment & welcome practices.

Personal observation: most organisations in the Catholic Education sector have an articulated vision & mission that incorporates words such as: respect; people are important; dignity; hospitality; reflect/model gospel values; collaboration; partnership; etc etc. When Trak visits & debriefs with people 2 months after a transition from Commerce to an Education setting role, the people inevitably speak of the warm, welcoming environment & use words such as: friendly; supportive; respectful; nurturing, i.e. the reality does reflect the articulated vision and mission. Yet, amazingly for a sector that is so very warm & welcoming, it has the least welcoming of recruitment practices. To shock you into deeper reflection, I'd suggest Catholic Education recruitment processes are often more aligned to selection circa the famous old movie 'Grapes of Wrath' than to 'collaboration' and 'welcome' as articulated in vision and mission.

2nd Guideline

*Give consideration to the needs of people **before** you consider your own.*

Personal observation: the process of most Education organisations tends to be heavily geared to meet the needs of the organisation. While a *recruitment and welcoming* process should equally consider the needs of people and the organisation, this second guideline is suggested to assist in redressing the existing imbalance. How long has it been since you considered how various aspects of your process impact upon people? How long since you engaged them in any such review?

Perhaps we should also introduce a distinction between two categories of people: **mainstream** and **outsiders** (the latter is not an appealing label I know, so let's confine its use to this paper). Within the Education sector the 'mainstream' are those people who complete teaching qualifications and then work through the career

progression typical for education people. The 'outsider' is a person that comes from another sector into Education and could have roles such as in finance & accounting, human resources, facilities, technology and a wide range of other support functions.

Why introduce this distinction?

1. Leaders in Education are typically either mainstream or have spent considerable years in the Education sector. They have "grown up" with some long-standing practices and see them as normal and acceptable, so would not usually have any *trigger* to question the relevance of such practices. But would a more 'welcoming' recruitment process have an impact on attracting mainstream people into your roles?
2. Outsiders, when joining the sector, are often surprised by such traditions which can differ significantly from the typical practice of other sectors. Have you considered how your current practices impact outsiders who are considering a role within Education?

Impact of these guidelines on recruitment practices

If an organisation should:

- (a) Have processes and practices, including recruitment, which reflect the organisation's values and ethos; and
- (b) Consider the needs of people, not just their own;

then let us consider various aspects of a recruitment process commonly used within Catholic Education.

1. Advertisements

While there has been a marked change in the last 5 years, a review of advertisements for Education will show that many focus upon:

- the needs of the organisation ("the successful applicant will have....." followed by a long list of selection criteria); and
- instructions ("Candidates must address the selection criteria specified in the position description, then forward the required documentation, together with referee details, attached to our application form.....")

Has the employer thought about the people they are hoping to attract and what might be important to them? Of course the criteria and instructions are important, but might the ideal people also have needs to be met before deciding whether to apply? Have you considered that the needs for an outsider could be different to a mainstreamer? An outsider, during the period of deciding whether or not to apply, often needs to speak with a person – does your process allow informed discussion to occur? And does such an authoritarian style of advertisement match the values of your organisation?

2. Application forms and submission documents

Why do we ask applicants to complete an application form? Are we *welcoming* when we ask a person to complete onerous forms as well as compelling them to take 3 days leave to complete a 10-page submission that addresses all the selection criteria. (I exaggerate, but not much!) While Education people are conditioned to adhere to this practice, other sectors simply require a resume and a brief 1-page cover letter when applying for a role. Are we trying to 'harden people up' and asking them to demonstrate their commitment to joining us by demanding 30 hours of paperwork preparation, rather than 30 minutes?

3. Referees

Many industries do not complete any reference checking until after the employer has interviewed a person and both parties are keen to proceed. Trak believes it prudent

to complete 1 reference check early in the process. However Education often expects much, much more. It is not unusual for a person to be instructed to provide multiple referees at the outset (with one a recent/current manager) and have those referees alerted to the application. At the stage this is required the person has limited information about the role and certainly has no idea whether they'll even be invited to interview, yet they are instructed to broadcast their interest in your role to other people. How might this impact their decision to proceed? Can we conceive of circumstances that mean the person might prefer to keep an application confidential in the early stages of the process?

4. Interview Panels

Empirical research has shown that a panel of 3 to 5 people, with a structured interview process, provides the best outcome of the various interview methods. We are strong advocates of an interview panel. But, have you engaged with people to understand the limitations of a panel and, if so, how have you addressed these shortfalls?

- Have you considered how much more welcoming it is to meet 3 or 4 people rather than be confronted with a 7-person panel?
- No matter how you try, 99.9% of information is passed from the person to the panel. When do you address issues and questions of importance to people, including matters perhaps more appropriately discussed away from a large forum? Or do you make a decision at the panel interview, with the next step being offer & acceptance? What does an outsider think of this approach?
- Do you wait until a short list is decided before considering your panel composition and then tackling the complexities of agreeing on an interview date? Do you then keep people on tenterhooks for weeks during this logistical nightmare of finding a date? How respectful and welcoming is it to the person when it is finally announced that they should arrive at your office “at 3.00pm on Tuesday 22nd” with all of 5 days notice? When they're an outsider and used to being given multiple options (and able to choose a date/time that suits both the organisation and their own schedule) are we sending the message we intend?

5. 'Insider advantage'

Best practice suggests that panel interview questions and subsequent analysis should be aligned with the selection criteria, which is defined at the outset of the process. A common trap in recruiting outsiders is to ask Education-specific questions when the selection criteria didn't specify an industry specific background as important. There are two aspects to this practice:

- When a person is considering joining Education for the first time, they often enquire whether the lack of industry experience will be a barrier. If the person is encouraged to proceed with an assurance that such experience is not required, it is obviously a surprise to them when faced with a battery of the standard education-specific questions used by many panels.
- Education is not immune to the belief held by many industry sectors that their sector is uniquely complex. Most mainstreamers in most industries hold the view that their industry is uniquely complex. Mainstream education people typically expect to ask interview questions around a person's understanding of the education sector, regardless of the selection criteria that was agreed at the outset of the process.

6. Contract preparation

It is common to find that the employer is encouraging the successful person to resign and commence “as soon as possible” but the process is delayed by the employer's

contract preparation & approval processes. How long do you take to provide a contract to the successful person? Do you take more than 3 to 4 working days? If so, how is this viewed by your people? How long since you have checked?

While each of the above aspects of a recruitment process can be significant in their own right, when a number are combined they have a 'multiplier effect' whereby the impression created on people is significantly greater than the sum of the individual parts. For example, an organisation that requires a lengthy submission document; requires referees to be alerted upfront; chops & changes the timelines of a process; dictates the date and time the person needs to be available for interview; has just one meeting (and allows the person to ask only 1 or 2 questions); then takes 2 weeks to provide a contract while pressing the person to resign so they can commit to a start date; this organisation presents an image to a person, especially an outsider, that is diametrically different to the values they espouse and the reality of the organisation.

What next?

As noted at the outset, the purpose of this document is not to provide answers, but as a *trigger* to prompt you to evaluate recruitment practices that, while having served you well, might no longer be appropriate. I've observed common practice and offer you some questions.

So, what is next? Audit reviews are a fact of life in all organisations, including education employers: audits of financials; school reviews and accreditation processes; contract renewals; IT systems; OH&S; the list goes on and on. How long since you have conducted an audit of your recruitment and welcoming processes, an audit that has also engaged mainstream and outsiders in the review?

Whether you do this yourself or engage Trak to assist you, this investment could be critical to your capacity to cope with the emerging trends in our labour market.

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