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WORKPLACE POLICY AND PRACTICE INSIGHTS SINCE 1950

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Applicants ‘Telecommute’ With ‘Virtual Job Tryout’

A woman sits down at her home computer after work, opens an e-mail, and momentarily is hearing and seeing, through a streaming multi-media presentation, what it is like to work at Peculiar Paper Co. in Woodpulp, Wash. She gets a sense of the firm’s informal but hard-working culture and then follows links to work history and style questionnaires. Next the system invites her to test for a sales job through various simulations—among them, handling a variety of customer problems and brainstorming with virtual colleagues.

Going a step beyond permitting just employees to telecommute, Virtual Job Tryout lets job applicants get down to business remotely, “taking jobs for a test drive,” according to Cleveland-based Shaker Consulting Group Inc., which created the Web-based recruitment system. It also provides employers with hard-to-come-by information and saves them recruitment and training dollars, firm co-founder and Vice President Joseph P. Murphy told BNA Jan. 4.

Murphy said the system harnesses the power of the Internet to bring to life on the computer screen a particular company’s business, outlook, and culture. Then, through an interactive process, candidates can present their qualifications and “test drive” available jobs 24-7 from home, actually creating a work

sample in the course of a 20- to 70-minute session. The program is very amenable to the younger generation, whose “life is a video game,” he noted, but draws lots of candidates from other age groups, as well.

Shaker has been fine-tuning Virtual Job Tryout for about a decade. It was first used on personal computers in a proctored environment and has been hosted on the Internet for six years. Murphy said the system cuts “staffing waste”—employees who quit or are terminated 90 to 120 days after hiring, sometimes after receiving expensive training—because screeners and applicants have more vital information.

Murphy told BNA about a large firm with a 77 percent attrition rate for salespeople at the 90-day mark—not coincidentally when they moved from salary to commission-based pay. Part of the problem, Murphy said, was that employees were not being properly prepared for the pay changeover. In designing a system for the firm, Shaker urged the company to emphasize the switch to commission-based pay, which it was reluctant to do. But it was persuaded, and with a Virtual Job Tryout program up and running for several months, the plant’s attrition rate has already declined; the time from hiring to pro-

ductivity has dropped; and sales per territory are up, he said.

Shaker has customized its systems—which can cost from \$30,000 to \$150,000—for companies that include Diebold, which manufactures and services ATM machines for banks; paint manufacturer Sherwin-Williams; and CVS drug stores. An international Starbucks system is on the way.

“We actually ask [applicants] to brainstorm, do data entry, make choices about how they’ll respond to people,” said Murphy. Unlike resumes, which are often “spin documents,” he said, work samples are tough to fake. And even if a candidate attempted to game the system such as by having a friend assist, the truth would come out in an interview. Moreover, he said, candidates who do poorly in the tryout often take themselves out of the running. Simulations are good predictors of future performance, he said, with the validity holding up across many types of jobs and levels of complexity.

“You can get hundreds of data points that are fair, consistent, and reliable,” said Murphy.

Shaker collects supervisor ratings on the job performance of candidates who were hired and compares them with the candidates’ test scores. For production workers, as one example, Shaker found that employees who did well on Virtual Job

Tryout had better safety records and attendance, and were more productive.

Murphy gave the example of a Starbucks recruiter needing to hire several managers. The resume route would be tortuous, Murphy said, given the company's 500-1 candidate-hire ratio. But once Starbucks's new Virtual Job Tryout system is in place—it is currently under development—the computer will do the screening and the recruiter will receive scores for candidates that meet the basic criteria.

A system takes four to six months to design and build, through job analysis, Murphy said, and is tested

by a random sample of current employees. Shaker's client companies never receive the individual scores of these employees who test the system—the information is used only to fine-tune the system. While there are off-the-shelf products for small companies, the Shaker system makes particular sense for companies with large families of jobs.

Murphy said companies ask candidates for feedback on their system, electronically, of course. Close to 100 percent of applicants have said they "felt in a better position to know if a job was right for [them]," Murphy said. In the write-in section, candidates have said things like, "You

have taken the application process to a new level,'" he noted.

Murphy said that especially given the impending baby boomer retirements, many industries are experiencing a drought of candidates despite good salaries and competitive benefits, and training cycles are getting longer and more expensive. He said that streaming multimedia is a great way for a company to demonstrate what it is about, as opposed to a flat mission statement buried under other verbiage on the Web page.

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