

Two Keys to Succeeding in the New War for Talent on Campus
Re-defining your Ideal Candidate and Connecting Students with Your People are Critical Factors

By Graham Donald, Brainstorm Consulting

The 2006 edition of Brainstorm Consulting and D-Code's *From Learning to Work – Canada's Campus Recruitment Report™* will be published soon and the preliminary results indicate that some of the trends identified in the 2004 report are becoming even more prominent. This article focuses on two key findings: increasing student confidence in this competitive market and the importance of great colleagues in the workplace.

Student attitudes and career aspirations are always changing. And although these changes may be gradual, the lack of current Canadian research and information can make it quite difficult to keep up to speed. If your understanding of today's students and new graduates is more than a couple of years old, then you are probably out of date. If you think of students as disloyal, unrealistic, or overly focused on high pay then your recruitment efforts are going to be off-target.

The Competitive Hiring Market

To begin, student confidence regarding their career prospects is on the rise – which should not be surprising given the increasing hiring competition on campus. This helps to explain why many career centres and employers felt that there were fewer students at career fairs last year: as student confidence rises, the need to research a job during September or October of one's graduating year becomes less important. Keep in mind that the fall On Campus Recruiting process is a construct designed to meet the needs of large employers who often have lengthy hiring processes and want their recruiting completed months before spring graduation. Although many students with top GPAs may get hired at this time, the vast majority of graduating students do not find work before the New Year. It's hard to fault students for wanting to focus on their studies in the fall; these are the students who are still available for hire in the winter term.

With more employers pursuing fewer "top students" in the fall, a lot of employers won't be able to meet their "quotas" as planned. Therefore, your recruiting strategy needs to encompass the whole year. The work you do in the fall should help form a basis for the work you do in the winter and spring.

The increased competition also provides you with an opportunity to look carefully at how you define your "top students". For too many companies this is based on GPA and "the schools we hired at last year". Take advantage of this chance to better define your ideal candidate based on many other criteria that will indicate a great fit with your organization. This requires understanding how past hires have performed in your organization and what characteristics they have in common. Sure you may have made more hires from a particular school, but were they better hires? Who are the "stars" among those you hired a couple years ago and what was different about them when you hired them? Look for ways to change your sourcing, screening and selection process to find more of those candidates. This may mean measuring summer and part-time work experience, extra-curricular and volunteer experience, and other aptitudes and interests.

People, People, People

Perhaps the most critical learning from recent research is the importance to students of working with and for great people. This is significantly more important than such things as corporate social responsibility and even salary and benefits. The opportunity to join and work within a community of people that will challenge, interest, and inspire new hires is very attractive. It is also very difficult to portray in the traditional campus recruiting process. This is not the kind of

thing that can be conveyed solely through a brochure or website. Stating that “people are our number 1 resource” will do little to convey the feeling of working among those people.

Of course, the most effective way to help students learn about the people in your organization is to have your people interact with them. The more people you can bring to campus with you – and especially your recent hires from that school – the better. But don’t just focus on your information session. Create other opportunities for students to interact, in person and virtually, with your people. Make sure they are interviewed by people they will work for (and with) and get your people out on campus to participate on panels and provide workshops that help students with their career exploration.

Another very effective way to convey what it is like to work in your organization (and among your people) is through stories. Ideally these stories will include the person telling them and be memorable for the students hearing them so that they will repeat the story to others. Depending on the people you may be trying to attract, you will want your story to appeal to students’ emotional, intellectual, or rational interests. For instance, a story about how your colleagues rallied to help out a fellow employee in a dire situation will have emotional impact; a story relating to the creative development of a solution to a business problem may have intellectual impact; and a story relating to financial support received for a health issue may have rational impact.

Everyone who comes in touch with students should be prepared to share true stories which align with the interests of your target audience. This includes your summer and co-op students who are returning to campus. Take time at the end of their work term to discuss their experiences and have them share the highlights of their experiences in an open forum with others. Having shared these stories with you, they will be far more likely to repeat them among their friends – many of whom may be great potential hires. Over time, these stories will become part of the “lore” of your company on campus.

Graham Donald is the President of Brainstorm Consulting (www.brainstorm.ca), an organization dedicated to helping employers improve their campus recruitment effectiveness. He produces the annual Campus Recruiting Forum (www.CampusRecruiting.ca) in cities across North America and is also co-author of From Learning to Work 2006: Canada’s Campus Recruitment Report™, a comprehensive survey of student attitudes and opinions regarding employers and careers.