

Can Western Recruitment Techniques Work in China?

Contributed by Administrator
Wednesday, 01 March 2006
Last Updated Tuesday, 04 March 2008

China may have a population of 1.3 billion people - roughly 22 times that of this country - but there's a war for talent as fierce as in many parts of the Western world. Couple that with geographic and cultural differences and you start to understand the size of the challenge for companies who are expanding into this region.

Walmart and Carrefour have both announced recently that they are opening new stores in China, and Tesco is set to open 15 hypermarkets over the next 12 months. Moving operations there will take more than a good relocation plan - like anywhere, you also have to attract and identify the skills and attitudes you need in your workforce to make your business successful.

"Being asked to design a recruitment programme to double the UK sales force of a leading pharmaceuticals company is one thing, but equipping Chinese managers to do the same is something else".

At Resourcing Matters, we design competency frameworks that describe the behaviours and attitudes required to do the job successfully. We use this to build structured interviews, role-plays, group exercises and candidate presentations. This process is well known in the western world - but how would this be viewed by Chinese candidates & how appropriate would line managers find this process for their culture and environment?

"The more I researched this project, the more I became fascinated by Chinese culture and its ancient traditions; face reading, for example, an involved process which explains a person's personality. I wondered how this would fit with our dictum on "gut-feel" and the importance of not "making decisions in the first four minutes". I chose to embrace this idea and developed our ice-breaker around what our intuition signals to us when we first meet a candidate. It was surprising how accurate our unconscious minds were and I found myself learning something new by looking from an ancient perspective.

From a more traditional vein, (depending on your viewpoint), we went on to structure our training around ways of checking out and finding evidence for our first impressions as well as for the skills and attitudes that we were looking for in our candidates".

Giving feedback, a core value at Resourcing Matters, also took on an interesting perspective. Lindsay continues: "All my research pointed to the fact that losing face and giving face was key when communicating in China. In the skills practice that I planned to do, I wondered how this would work when giving feedback in a group setting. I would need to be sensitive to this issue to avoid stepping on any cultural toes.

With the benefit of hindsight, however, I wonder whether we in the West were any different - giving feedback always requires sensitivity and a pure motive and my experience was that such is the enthusiasm for learning that our participants actively asked for feedback.

As I left Shanghai, my overwhelming thoughts were of admiration for a group of people who had embraced our ideas and made them work in their world. My apprehension about structured interviews and presentations were unfounded. They had undertaken the training in a foreign language, with different concepts, from trainers who had a different cultural background and had emerged at the end of the four days with a much wider skill-set and a process to identify and recruit the right person for their business.

And with all this talk of differences, I began to wonder if our challenge hadn't been the same as it always is - to find ways to embrace our differences and develop ways to leverage them. That way, as in this case, we all learn something.