

# Solving the Recruiting-Candidate Disconnect

## How to Help Your Organization Stand Out in the Crowded Job Market

By Chris Baudler

**A**t any given time, there are 22,000 accounting jobs posted on LinkedIn and another 55,000 posted on Indeed.<sup>1</sup> The accounting profession is experiencing what some partners and recruiters are calling a talent drought, and the repercussions are hitting hard. Many firms in Texas are having such trouble finding additional talent that they are being forced to turn away new clients, rely on expensive staffing agencies and, in the worst cases, require senior staff to work exhausting schedules well beyond tax season.

Over the last few years, firms have been trying to find new ways to attract experienced and collegiate-level talent, but in the end most are resorting to offering higher and higher salaries or providing more extravagant perks. There is no question that these practices will quickly become unsustainable, but many partners feel they have no choice.

Recently, we spoke with a managing partner who even went so far as to say his firm no longer tried to recruit experienced or collegiate-level talent. In his mind, these candidates were non-existent. His mid-sized firm instead focused their energy exclusively on recruiting interns from the local high schools. He knew it was a big bet, but he believed his firm does not have any other choice.

During our conversation with him, he proudly showed us his firm's Best of the Best® award and for the first time that day, his face lit up with a smile. They had won the award a few years back and it was one of the best days of his life. However, he also knew dozens of other firms in Texas that had won similar awards and they were struggling to find talent just like him. After a brief pause for reflection, his smile quickly faded. His firm's plan to grow this year by 7 percent was looking more and more unlikely, and it was little solace for him to know they were not alone.



### The Profession's Disconnect

Recruiting in the accounting profession is experiencing its most challenging period in recent memory and firms across the nation are bracing for a tough road ahead. At the same time, according to a recent LinkedIn survey, an overwhelming 90 percent of employed professionals said they are open to hearing about new job opportunities. Therein lies a massive disconnect that firms are desperate to solve.

Over the last two years, we have surveyed and interviewed almost 100 partners, recruiters, candidates and staff members to better understand the factors contributing to this disconnect. The findings have been very surprising. One theme that stood out above all others: candidates and staff view most firms' job opportunities as generic or indistinct from competitors. In other words, in the eyes of candidates and staff, firms lack unique messaging and experiences to stand out from other firms. This finding has been very concerning for partners and recruiters trying to attract the best talent.

The following article will help you better understand why there is a disconnect between firms and candidates, and steps you can take to stand out from competitors.

### Recruiting Best Practices are No Longer Sufficient

During recruiting, firms often emphasize the following aspects:

- A family-like culture;
- Strong customer focus;
- Top-notch training;
- Above average salaries;
- Competitive benefits and perks;
- Involvement in community outreach;
- Personalized career paths;
- Flexible work schedules;
- Mentoring programs;
- CPE reimbursement;
- Work/life balance;
- Signing bonuses.

Unfortunately, almost every firm communicates these aspects and as a result, candidates now see them as "par for the course." In fact, in a recent comparison of 340 accounting firms across Texas and the U.S., we found 95 percent of them tried to entice potential job candidates with all or some of these perks and benefits.

Many forward-thinking firms are once again reevaluating how they approach recruiting, how they differentiate their firm

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### Employer Branding

According to *Harvard Business Review*, employer branding is “an organization’s reputation as an employer, as opposed to its more general corporate brand reputation ... defined by the key benefits, or value propositions, offered by the company as an employer.” (“CEOs Need to Pay Attention to Employer Branding,” HBR, 2015.)

from competitors and most importantly, for a way out of the vicious cycle of “one-upping” competitors’ pay and perks. For some, the future of their firm depends on it.

### Looking for Answers Outside of the Accounting Profession

If there is one glimmer of hope for firms it is that the accounting profession is not the first to experience recruiting challenges. The technology, financial services, engineering and medical industries have been struggling with similar problems for decades, and the lessons they have learned along the way are priceless.

The main lessons are:

- Perks and benefits are not the solution. Yes, it is nice to offer perks that will make employees’ careers more enjoyable, but a flexible work policy or a ping-pong table are not effective ways to demonstrate to candidates how a company provides meaningful work or an engaging long-term career choice.
- Paying top dollar for talent attracts the wrong talent. Without a strong mission-driven and attractive employer brand, employees will quickly jump ship when more lucrative job offers arise.
- A company’s reputation on Glassdoor.com impacts recruiting more than an award for Great Places to Work®. In today’s day and age, candidates are quick to fact check an employer’s reputation. According to LinkedIn, 80 percent of candidates look at online peer-reviewed sites before applying for a job.
- Attracting top talent takes rethinking the whole recruiting experience. A plain Jane job posting or standard interview process will not create a memorable experience that WOWs candidates, gets them excited about working for your company and ultimately, inspires them to accept a job offer.

These lessons have driven employers to take a more proactive and sustainable approach to attracting and recruiting top talent by relying less on pay, perks and awards, and focusing more on developing a strong, unique employer brand.

### What is an Employer Brand?

An employer brand (a business to employee strategy, or B2E if you will) is a comprehensive, marketing-infused HR strategy that communicates a clear, unique and attractive message to job candidates. When employer brands are developed properly, job candidates have

### How an employer brand works:

1. The unique, firm-specific value propositions help your firm stand out from the crowd.
2. Internal recruiters and employees understand which topics to emphasize when talking with prospects.
3. Candidates understand what it’s like to work in your firm.
4. Candidates are excited about working for you and they spread the good news to their network.

a clear understanding of the firm’s culture, how the firm provides a unique, meaningful and exciting employment experience, and how the firm’s culture and job opportunities stand out from competitors. Coincidentally, these points are where most firms currently struggle.

### How to Develop Your Employer Brand

The following five steps will allow your firm to attract higher quality candidates in less time, with less hassle and with a lot less money.

1. **Interview and survey current employees, recent hires and former job candidates to better understand what influenced them to join your firm or a competitor.** This information, along with information from online review sites, will help you have a clear idea about what is attractive (and not so attractive) about your firm. Also, review materials from competitors’ websites and Glassdoor.com to learn how they are “marketing” their job opportunities and how your employment experience compares.
2. **Create unique, firm-specific statements that resonate with your job candidates and employees.** Develop three to five brand statements based on cultural values and experiences unique to your firm, and meet job candidates’ needs, values and desires. Keep the statements simple, aspirational and attractive to candidates, yet grounded in the reality of working for your firm.
3. **Integrate brand statements into all candidate-facing communications to create consistent brand messaging.** The best firms realize top talent may not even make it to their career page if their job postings and brochures do not provide messaging that is unique, meaningful, consistent, engaging and most importantly, memorable.
4. **Champion your current staff members to write and share complimentary, “real-life” messaging.** This step is critical for the successful implementation of an employer brand. Your staff members’ perspectives will resonate with job candidates in a way no recruiter, HR employee or partner can. Your staff knows what it is like to work for your firm and can tell stories that will bring your employer brand to life. Advocate

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for them to write white papers, case studies and day-in-the-life articles to share with their network and the community. This staff-driven content allows your firm to demonstrate their intent as employers, staff expertise and the value your firm delivers to staff. These resources will also garner free marketing and publicity to current and potential clients.

5. **Create an interview process that is also memorable and highlights how important top talent is to your firm.** Candidates want more than just the same old one-on-one or panel-based interviews. They want an opportunity to demonstrate what they can do for clients and how they will contribute to your firm's success. For example, one firm developed an interview experience that allowed candidates to informally work on client tax returns and sit in on client meetings (you can stage them if necessary). Create an experience that WOWs interviewees and watch how quickly your openings get filled.

### Impacting Bottom-Line Growth

Employer branding also came with an added benefit no firm expected, significant business growth. Through the staff-driven communications, clients became more aware of firms' products, services and benefits, and were more likely to trust staffs' expertise and judgment.

### Stand Out

As many firms continue struggling to attract top talent, some firms are standing out from competitors by developing stronger employer brands. These brands communicate how their job opportunities are unique, meaningful, attractive and ultimately, worthy of a candidate's consideration. This approach has immediate and lasting effects on both recruitment and enhanced bottom line growth – all without compromising on the quality of new hires or offering outlandish salaries or extravagant perks. ■

### Footnotes

1. In Texas alone, there are 17,000 accounting-related jobs posted on LinkedIn and 13,900 on Indeed.

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