

Putting people first

Your career in the coatings industry – part two: Inside the hiring process

In this issue, Nicola James, Managing Partner, Thomas Brooke International, looks, in depth, inside the actual hiring process

In more than 20 years of recruiting in the coatings industry, I have seen many people rule themselves out right at the beginning of the hiring process without realising it, simply because they don't know how the system works. These were totally avoidable rejections. I can't say if the person would or would not ultimately have landed the job; but understanding how companies really hire – the internal processes and tools, the stages and gates in the process – can help you be more effective in your approach to job search or career change. This is a big deal!

So let's look together at the process. We'll start by understanding the differences between hiring processes at different sized companies.

Small companies

Small companies typically have a short chain of command, so you are more likely to be dealing with a stakeholder early in the process. Craft your approach accordingly. Also, smaller companies usually have shorter processes, dependent on the efficiency (or inefficiency!) and individual personalities of the people involved, rather than a consistent internal process. That can cut either way. I once sent a candidate to interview with the President of a small company on a Friday afternoon; the President liked him, hired him right there and then and he started work on Monday; at the other end of the scale I worked with another company whose previous 'trusted advisor' took three months to get round to reviewing the application that ultimately led to the hiring of the new CEO!

Small companies also tend to place higher value on a recommendation by a highly-regarded internal source; although be aware that there's no guarantee your source will be considered a good authority on who to hire!

Mid-sized companies

Mid-sized companies sometimes push direct hiring managers to manage their own early-stage recruitment activities, especially in sales; but dedicated HR involvement in some form is

common. Most mid-sized companies have some type of automated system for tracking applications and candidates, because the volume of hiring necessitates it. There is more likely to be an overall hiring system in place that has some level of consistency – but not always. As the size of the company grows, so does the complexity and you start to find multiple stakeholders and decisionmakers in the hiring process. Perhaps the peers to the position have some real input in the decision or there's a key internal customer who is looking for a certain type of person. This may not be indicated in any way in the job description, because whoever wrote it may not actually be aware of these issues.

Large companies

Large companies tend to be the most process-driven and can afford the biggest and most powerful systems and resources. Hiring volume is high and usually supported by substantial automation of their initial screening process. This often leads to large companies being the most disconnected when it comes to who is actually looking at your information at the beginning of the process. Depending on how centralised they are, they can assign a junior level HR gatekeeper as the first pair of eyeballs looking at CVs/resumes and that person may or may not have any idea of the real qualifiers for the job.

Large companies also have the most complex decision making process, with significant bureaucracy that can really slow things down. Politics will absolutely be a factor. That's not necessarily bad; but it does mean that the decision is rarely just about who is the most qualified for the position on paper.

WHO'S WHO IN THE PROCESS

Gatekeepers, Stakeholders and Decisionmakers

There are several different types of player in the hiring decision process and it's important to understand the role and function of each one so you can prepare your approach accordingly. Not anticipating a gatekeeper; not recognising a decisionmaker; not recognising that you haven't actually reached a decisionmaker; not realising that other stakeholders have specific interests... all these can derail your candidacy even if you have the right skills for the job. And sometimes, people

mistake one type of person for the other – I have been mistaken for a gatekeeper more than once and treated dismissively, when in reality I was a decisionmaker. Don't make these avoidable mistakes!



• Gatekeepers

Depending on the company type and size, the gatekeeper might be the Office Manager, HR clerk, HR Manager, Assistant to the hiring manager or other function.

People often think of gatekeepers as having no real decisionmaking power; but nothing could be further from the truth. In fact they have the ultimate veto power. One click and your info is in the 'rejected' pile! Gatekeepers are usually not specialists in the job requirements. That means you MUST give them a clear reason to move you forward to the next step. Don't make them have to figure out if you fit or not. They will default to 'no' probably 90% of the time. And you only have a short time to get their attention – exact numbers vary but studies suggest that the average HR Manager spends less than a minute on initial review of a CV.

• Stakeholders

Stakeholders are not the final decisionmakers but wield significant influence. They may include internal and external customers, peers, reports, boss's boss – anyone who will be significantly affected by the decision.

Similar to gatekeepers, stakeholders don't usually have the power of 'Yes' but they do have the power of 'No'. The challenge is that they are not always explicitly known to you or even to others in the process. For example, on a recent search for an upstream R&D Manager for a global coatings manufacturer, the main internal customer (VP Coatings Technology) was convinced that the group

doing the hiring was insufficiently concerned about his needs. He only had one dimension of interest.

By contrast, the actual hiring group had many considerations, including salary budget, relative seniority of existing team members, succession planning, makeup of the team this individual would be managing, salary compression issues if they tried to hire at a higher level... all valid concerns that played into the final decision about who was really the 'best' candidate all round. Yet the VP took his case to the President and we ultimately had to do an entire talent market study in order to prove the chosen candidate was really the best. This delayed the process several weeks.

You may not know who all the significant stakeholders are but it is important to recognise that there are usually a number of influences on the hiring decision, especially at senior level. When you interview, try to find out what each person's highest priorities are. They may or may not actually tell you; but few people ever ask, yet this simple question can yield high value insights.

• **Decisionmakers**

Decisionmakers are the people you most want deal with – they have the power of the final hiring decision. That sounds obvious but many times people fail to correctly identify the true decisionmaker(s) in the hiring process and lose out because they don't know or address the decisionmaker's priorities.

In most cases, the decisionmaker is the hiring manager; but it may be the hiring manager's boss, or the President or the infamous 'rubber stamp' interviewer. Identify the decisionmaker(s) as best you can by research and direct questions; and prioritise understanding their needs and addressing them.

In large, complex or matrixed organisations, you may find that there are many stakeholders but no clear single decisionmaker. In these cases you will be wise to take more of a consensus-building approach that clearly shows you recognise the presence of multiple inputs in the decision and are comfortable with it (since this would also be the environment you would be operating in if you are hired).

ATSs and applicant/candidate tracking methods

There are many systems, of varying effectiveness and complexity, both custom and off the shelf. As with all automated systems, much depends on the human interaction with the system and the level of skill and experience: a junior or inexperienced person will not see the same things that an experienced person does. You can't control that. But you can optimise your chances – use keywords that are in the job description since that is probably what they will be looking for. If you truly don't have the key skills or experience, don't waste time on the application in an automated system. If you do, spend some time customising your approach to fit.

'You can gain an advantage simply by thinking about your search from the perspective of the hiring manager and the company, and considering how to make it easiest for them to choose you'

Inside the interview process

The first interview might be by phone, video conference or in-person. It may be with a gatekeeper or the direct hiring manager. Don't underestimate it! The top candidate in the first round always has an advantage going into the second round. Simple things count – this is your first impression so how you answer the phone and present yourself are not trivial details. Many people pay no attention to this and answer the phone unprofessionally or with no energy or have not tested their webcam before a video interview. What a waste of an opportunity to make a positive impression!

Phone interview formats vary widely; but for the most part they are focused on the main qualifiers. This can clue you in to priorities so it is important to listen actively, as well as talk. Stay focused and don't wander, as time is usually very limited.

The second round is usually in-person meetings. This is the centre of the process. Most companies want to limit the number of on-site interviews, for practical reasons; so by this stage you are usually in a relatively small group that has qualified (although some places do just churn until they get who they want; but these are not usually the best employers). This is a multi-dimensional assessment. The company will want to see not just how much you know about the subject matter they may be hiring for but also what sort of person you are and whether you fit with the company culture. For senior positions, there are often further rounds of interviewing with corporate leadership, generally to assure 'fit' more than technical qualifications.

Some companies also use personality assessments or profiles. They vary widely in accuracy; and the importance they have in the hiring process also varies. There is really nothing you can do to control this and it is one of the unknowns in the process. References and background checks are usually restricted to either the expected successful candidate or a small list of finalists (rarely more than two).

If you have in-person interviews with multiple people, there is some point at which all interviewers' input is discussed. There is often a deafening silence from the hiring company at this point as they are making their minds up. There is little you can do to influence a group who is already fairly clear in their decision; but brief, personal and timely follow up (if culturally appropriate) can be valuable in

reinforcing perceptions and confirming your active interest. Too much follow up is generally regarded as a negative – at this stage the people involved mostly want space and time to navigate the inevitable internal politics and make the decision. But a short individual note indicating that you have heard their highest priorities and can address them will generally be well received.

In theory, candidates are hired based on fit with stated specs. However, there are usually significant unwritten requirements: perceived fit with other team members, input from stakeholders, succession planning needs, whether the manager feels threatened by a strong candidate or any other of a myriad of possible influences. Many of these factors are unknowable to you but can be quite powerful.

I recently presented a candidate for a senior position with a coatings application company. All the senior team including the President thought he was great for the job. But the direct hiring manager (a VP) kept saying that he didn't believe the individual had enough experience in their markets. Since the candidate worked for a direct competitor, that was obviously nonsense; but this hiring manager is very insecure, and the key problem was that the candidate might present a threat or show him up by better performance. There was no way of changing his mind. The only solution was for me to look for a more junior person who presented less of a threat. Sometimes that is the way it is – accept and move on. In this example, it is probably for the best that the candidate did not get the job as the VP might well have sabotaged him in some way. So, recognise the presence of many other forces besides your actual qualifications. Sometimes a rejection is the best possible outcome!

SUMMARY AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Identify the players as best you can and approach accordingly.
- Listen for priorities.
- Recognise what you can influence or control and what you cannot.
- Treat every interaction with every person in the process as important.

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