

Outsourcing Graduate Programmes.



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RECRUITING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Graduate programmes are widely recognised as an attractive long-term recruitment strategy to source and develop prospective leaders for the future of business. Career-hungry, driven and moulded in the image of their organisation, those candidates represent a pool of cherry-picked skills and greater long-term return on investment for their employers. For those who can, graduate programmes represent a win-win situation: the results speak for themselves.

However, boundaries of restricted resources, time and experienced personnel limit the ability to implement graduate programmes across the business market as a whole. For many, the challenge of mapping out and realising large-scale recruitment, training and development initiatives is a highly attractive idea in principle, but an impossible process to deliver in practice.

As business organisations become evermore focused and specialised, the ability to continually deliver quality hires in a competitive market is increasingly beyond the remit of internal staff. So in an age where everything from IT operations to our reception services and catering can be contracted out to external experts, could the answer lie in an outside partner?

Is it possible to successfully outsource the graduate programme process?

A RETURN TO FORWARD THINKING

Though historically popular, the recession paved way for extensive scaling back of the conventional graduate programme. While business leaders fought to stay afloat in a state of uncertainty over their ability to even retain existing staff, the sizeable burden of a long-term structured graduate programme quickly became an unrealistic pipedream for many. Figures suggest that many UK organisations reduced graduate places by an average of 60-70% between 2008 – 2010 as budgets were sliced and HR or recruitment professionals were made redundant. For some, long-standing graduate programmes were phased out or abandoned altogether.

The past two years have seen rapid growth and increased demand for entry-level talent as the graduate scheme returns onto the management agenda once more. Forward-thinking organisations are recognising the need to consider new approaches for driving brand traction and managing the recruitment process before simply rebuilding old models. However, the boundaries of restricted resources, time and experienced personnel continue to limit its implementation amongst SME channels, making it a largely inaccessible model for many.

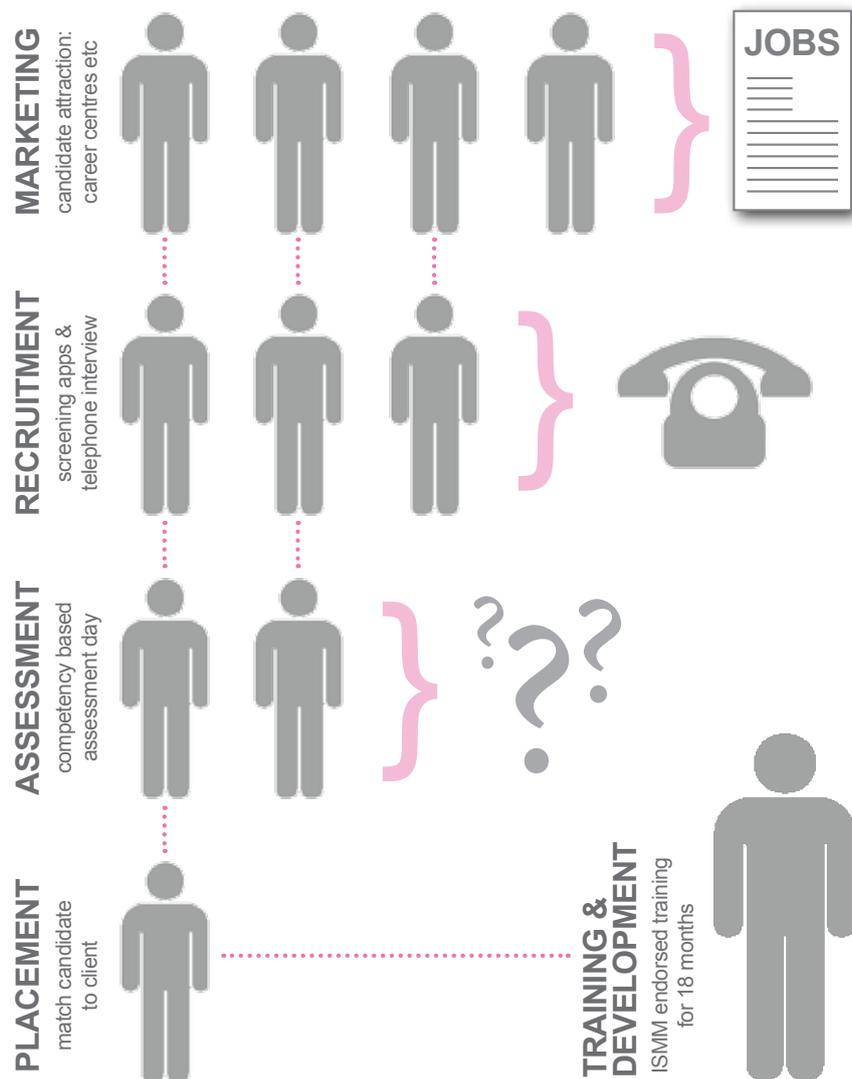
WHY A GRADUATE PROGRAMME?

Graduate programmes are difficult to define, as variations exist across organisations and industry sectors. However, each will characteristically bring in graduates at entry level on an annual or bi-annual basis to undertake a structured period of training and development, designed to equip candidates with the skills and experience necessary to move up into future management positions.

Whilst typically graduate programmes have seen large numbers of candidates entering top-level brands or blue-chip organisations, there is a recent trend towards smaller-scale programmes being undertaken by SMEs. A strategic mapping exercise, these graduate schemes are a powerful tool for safe-guarding the future of an organisation's C-suite. Bringing fresh talent in at base level will create future leaders, nurtured and organically grown in the image of the company.

The attraction of such schemes is well-documented, with intense competition observed amongst the student population. A year-round strategy towards driving candidate engagement and brand traction builds a pipeline of graduates who have proactively researched and applied early on in the process. When followed by multi-staged assessment and interviewing, this rigorous funnel is guaranteed to deliver the highest possible calibre of talent.

In addition, the attraction of training and development brings in candidates seeking defined career paths and progression, promoting long-term retention rather than those simply looking for a short-term job to fill a gap. Graduates will be invested in the future of the business and share the vision and goals of their organisation. Employers also report that the camaraderie and competition promoted by bringing in a group of graduates as part of a structured programme enhances performance and retention for a stronger return on investment.



Given the complexity and demand of the graduate scheme process, recruitment process outsourcing (RPO) can serve as a strategic answer to the limitations many face in implementing this long-term initiative.

FRESH EYES, FRESH IDEAS, FRESH IMAGE

Whether candidates are exposed to all areas of the business through a rotational programme or brought in on a specialised basis, the advantage to be gained from fresh eyes is a key selling point. By having graduates learn a business from the ground up, this 'new blood' is uniquely placed to provide feedback and suggestions on existing processes, challenging the status quo and contributing new ideas on how to integrate, improve and change practices. By the Brailsford law of marginal gains, they can source and advise upon the small things that can be changed to make a significant difference to the wider business.

Investment into candidate attraction is largely limited, with the majority of organisations only periodically setting aside budget for ad-hoc advertising as demand arises. In the instance of a long-standing graduate programme, continual exposure and brand development is paramount for attraction of top-level talent. By bringing the need for marketing from a candidate-focused view to the management agenda, organisations can dramatically improve their brand visibility: not only within the graduate market, but across the business world as a whole.

OUTSOURCING

The practice of outsourcing recruitment solutions is far from novel, yet often regarded as a process for smaller scale initiatives. However, given the complexity and demand of the graduate scheme process, recruitment process outsourcing (RPO) can serve as a strategic answer to the limitations many face in implementing this long-term initiative, providing higher quality hires through a more comprehensive recruitment process.

An external recruitment partner offers a pre-acquired foothold and network within the graduate market, built up over a number of years operating within the sector. Vital links with the likes of universities, job portals and advertising platforms that were previously inaccessible can generate a higher volume and more diverse range of talent, opening up the pool to ensure no stone is left unturned in the pursuit for top-level graduates. In addition, experience within the market can ensure a bespoke approach to process design which specifically matches the skill requirements and culture of the business, with many RPO partners offering a needs analysis process ahead of initiating recruitment.

For those who have never previously implemented a graduate scheme or have limited understanding in delivering projects of this size and volume, RPO offers a tried-and-tested bank of experience, personified through professionals with practice of managing large-scale projects and balancing the demands of a business against the timeframe of the university marketplace. Satisfying the need for continual exposure over the course of the year, these third party experts provide access to strategic input into marketing, event planning and assessment best practice: areas frequently above the reach of all but the largest corporate organisations.

As globalisation continues to personify business growth, the recruitment sector is seeing increased demand for multiple locations or a spectrum of language requirements, with large numbers of organisations venturing beyond home territory into areas in which they have no prior experience in resourcing talent.

An external RPO partner with global infrastructure can provide a linear means of aligning multiple recruitment initiatives: recruiting, for example, graduates from across several countries for an overarching graduate programme. This holistic approach delivers a guaranteed level of quality and delivery across all areas, standardising recruitment best practice. With a single RPO partner owning the client relationship, accountability and transparency come as standard.

The practice of processing and evaluating high volumes of applications is, for many, the largest task involved in any recruitment initiative. On the scale required for a year-round recruitment project, organisations can expect a significant impact upon internal resources and time, which may not necessarily translate into quality candidates on completion. Utilising external resources with a bespoke, tailored process for managing the process can see those candidates pre-screened, qualified, assessed and interviewed before the employer even needs to enter the picture: cutting the demands on senior management significantly. In addition, many RPO providers will have the facility to implement large assessment centres on their own premises, keeping disruption to the clients' business minimal.

WHAT'S INVOLVED?

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WHY

Do we need a graduate programme?

WHAT

Will the Programme look like?

WHO

Will be involved, both internally and externally?

WHEN

Will we be recruiting and implementing the Programme?

HOW

Will we design, deliver and implement the Programme?

WHERE

Will those graduates go within our business on completion?

Recruiting a recruiter who is able to understand the culture and goals of a business will ensure those values translate into the recruitment process: the gains of RPO are only achievable when both parties work together to realise the vision.

WHY

The benefits of a graduate programme are arguably extensive, but should be positioned in line with overall business objectives. The practice of bringing in a group of graduates may appear beneficial in the short-term, but if there is nowhere for those candidates to progress into upon completion, it becomes a financial black hole. Needs analysis undertaken in partnership with an experienced RPO provider will ensure a business case that presents the long-term benefits, skill gaps and potential return.

WHAT

The umbrella term of “graduate scheme” can translate into an ambiguous definition of the proposition: before initiating any recruitment drive, it is essential to clearly determine exactly what that graduate offering should encompass, and how it will differentiate from those of competitors. Employers must consider:

- Which skill requirements or areas of expertise are required for the long-term benefit of the business, including any future expansion or development plans
- The types of opportunities that will be available and which areas of the business these will cover
- The skills and qualifications required for entry
- The length and structure of the programme
- The training and development that will be required to bring those candidates to standard
- How to benchmark achievement of candidates and whether a formal internal or external accreditation
- Remuneration and benefits required to attract the quality of candidates required: market research to benchmark standards against other programmes is essential
- When undertaken in close partnership with an RPO, this provides a foundation for all subsequent activity.

WHO

Long-term investment and commitment at a senior level is vital for continued success, as well as identifying the correct partner to implement the bones of the programme. Recruiting a recruiter who is able to understand the culture and goals of a business will ensure those values translate into the recruitment process: the gains of RPO are only achievable when both parties work together to realise the vision, rather than organisations simply passing on ownership of a problem.

WHEN

A major attraction of the graduate programme process is its year-round attraction, designed to build a pool of candidates even at times of business downturn: and have those candidates ready and waiting in the wings to enter the business when required. However, the length of the assessment / training process and the structure of the academic year will impact upon timescales.

HOW

When targeting within a specialised market or competing against the 'big brands' with sizeable budgets, marketing strategy and delivery of the budget must be tailored to the target audience to ensure quality. Online and offline advertisements, attendance of careers fairs or presentations, campus branding and more: employers must determine who they wish to attract and the best avenues available in order to reach those candidates. In addition, the way in which those candidates are assessed and processed must be structured in order to identify the competencies required.

WHERE

The graduate development programme is, by nature, a long-term strategy for the future of a business. Completion and graduation from the programme should pave the way for progression into the wider business, with set career paths to ensure the retention and on-going development of individuals. The end-goal of growing managerial material is not dependent upon the programme alone: experience and a comprehensive understanding of the business as a whole are paramount.

OUTSOURCING FOR THE FUTURE

The delivery of high-quality candidates in a competitive marketplace where skill shortages are high and resources are strained is an increasingly common business challenge. Whether organisations have experience of delivering graduate programmes or are simply looking for a more cost-effective and efficient means for future-proofing their C-suite, experience shows those who invest in outsourcing graduate recruitment will benefit from:

- Reduced overall cost
- Consistent market presence and brand awareness in the candidate market
- A continued pipeline of candidates during downturns in the business cycle
- Significant increase in quantity of applications from a more diverse pool
- Improved quality of applications
- Reduced time, resource and management input required from the client
- Delivery time of programmes significantly reduced
- Tailored training and support for new recruits

In a recovering market, attentions and resources must be dedicated to the primary purpose of an organisation in order to continue business growth. Each organisation is a specialist in it's own market; adding the burden of an additional service provision as extensive as the graduate recruitment process will see many attempt to do too much with too little. So when it comes to the delivery of a specialised programme, it makes sense to utilise specialised service providers: even if those providers are from outside the company domain.

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