

Hiring

Help wanted (regular joes need not apply)

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Special to Globe and Mail Update

Published Friday, May. 06, 2011 5:00AM EDT

When Kolody Inc., a digital advertising agency in Toronto, decided it needed to hire a creative director, partner Colin Turnbull didn't bother to post a career ad or engage a headhunter. "The kind of person we wanted was unlikely to go through traditional channels," he says. "Most times, the one who should be hired just puts out feelers within the industry."

In April, Kolody hired Chad Borlase, a respected agency veteran whose availability Mr. Turnbull discovered while doing a project for Mr. Borlase's former agency. As a smaller shop, Kolody couldn't offer the salary that Mr. Borlase could command at a big agency, but Kolody was still able to offer serious enticements. "He has the opportunity to become a partner in the agency," says Mr. Turnbull. And, more immediately, Mr. Borlase can participate in the employee profit-sharing plan, which distributes 50 per cent of profits among the employees.

But it took more than profit-sharing and a future equity stake to seal the deal.

"We don't throw money at people, we throw an opportunity where people can thrive," says Mr. Turnbull. "At other agencies, your work often is about what you're told to do, not what you're allowed to do." Kolody appealed to Mr. Borlase not only with its existing book of clients but with the potential clients he could go after. "We were giving him an opportunity to flex his creative juices."

Not all jobs require inventive individuals with creative conceptual skills. A hard-working, detail-oriented, customer-pleasing employee may be sufficient for many white-collar positions. But for those employers who seek creative problem-solvers, experts in human resources say that simply posting a job ad, reviewing the resumes and conducting a couple of rounds of perfunctory interviews are no longer enough.

Cissy Pau, principal consultant at Clear HR Consulting Inc. in Vancouver, urges employers to use behavioural-based interviewing to determine whether job candidates would be able to offer creative solutions.

"You don't ask a hypothetical question such as 'How would you handle this situation?' Instead, you ask the candidates to explain how they handled a similar situation in the past. Get them to provide specifics."

For many hiring processes, candidates are now asked to give a practical demonstration of their creativity.

Ms. Pau recalls how one Vancouver-based client, a company seeking a new head of sales and marketing, decided to test not only the candidates' sales and marketing expertise but how they would creatively establish a presence for the company in a new product market.

After Ms. Pau and the company's CEO conducted initial phone interviews with applicants, four of them were asked to prepare PowerPoint presentations on how they would respond to such a challenge. The candidates with the two best presentations were then short-listed for the final round of interviews.

But it's not only the candidates who have to commit the necessary time to the process. Too often, recruiters say, employers are so pressed for time that they show up for candidate interviews without adequate preparation.

"Too often, employers haven't thought about strategic questions to ask in an interview," says Mandy Gilbert, founder and CEO of Creative Niche, a Toronto staffing agency that places marketing communications professionals. "You need to take as much time as necessary to learn what the candidate is about." She urges managers to spend at least 45 minutes preparing for interviews.

Of course, probing questions to discern creativity need not be confined to face-to-face interviews. Increasingly, employers or their recruiters administer psychological tests to measure creativity as well as emotional intelligence of candidates.

Watson Gardner Brown, a Toronto firm that recruits financial services executives, uses a proprietary assessment tool. Each candidate goes online to complete a 90-minute multiple-choice questionnaire. The search firm then adds up the individual's score and writes a report on him or her.

Organizations seeking creative employees should not necessarily focus on applicants who have done the exact kind of job previously or for many years. At the Kolody ad agency, "we look for raw talent rather than experience," says Mr. Turnbull. "We hire strictly based on passion for the craft."

Bill McNamee-Lamb, principal of McNamee-Lamb & Associates of Burlington, Ont., recalls his experience as an HR executive at Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce in the late 1990s when the bank combined with Loblaw Cos. to launch President's Choice Financial.

"This was a new and unique venture in Canada," he says. "We didn't want traditional-thinking bankers, because they were at home in a very structured, rules-based culture. We needed people familiar with a competitive retail environment. We hired people from retail and trained them to be bankers."

All the effort expended on hiring creative employees will be for naught, though, unless organizations offer an environment in which the hires can learn and grow. "Creative people want to develop new skills and work with people they can learn from," says Mr. McNamee-Lamb. "They'll jump to another organization when they don't have that opportunity any longer."

Many managers say they want a creative person, but they have to show it in their leadership style. "Are you willing to mentor or groom that person to take on a more creative role in the organization?" asks Ms. Gilbert. "Are you offering them enough creative freedom?"

Other factors can, at the margins, also affect retention. Having work environments that are more open – spaces where employees can have meetings and even socialize – can contribute to a more satisfying work experience for creative types, say HR consultants.

Flexibility of work hours – being able to come to work later in the morning, go to the gym over the lunch hour and then work into the evening – may be important considerations in keeping creative employees. Even being able to come to work in less formal attire and being surrounded by appealing workplace aesthetics, such as fine art or antique furniture, can help to retain the allegiance of creative employees.