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Getting the right system on board

If you're still using spreadsheets and files to manage your recruitment process, now might be just the right time to start investigating the benefits of software. **Sue Weekes** discovers that in these cash-strapped times, the right software product could help your organisation cut its non-essential costs

Given the current economic backdrop, it may not seem like the best time to convince the finance director to upgrade the recruitment software or indeed implement a recruitment system for the first time. However, the rise of web-based hosted and subscription-based software as a service (SaaS) systems and pricing models has removed the high cost of entry into the market. Web-based approaches also mean you can get up and running and realise the benefits of recruitment software far more quickly than previously.

Systems capable of automating the recruitment process from start to finish have been around for years but many resourcing departments still rely heavily on spreadsheet software and paper when it comes to managing the process in-house. In a survey of 100 HR directors conducted earlier this year by Webster Buchanan Research, and in association with HR software and services specialist **Computers in Personnel**, only 14% said they use software to manage their internal recruitment activities but almost a quarter planned to do so in the next 12 months. So if you're one of these, what should your approach be to choosing the right software?

What do you want from the software?

There are a stack of tools and features available within the field of recruitment and talent management software, and it is easy to feel overwhelmed. Clearly you'll want some form of applicant tracking system (ATS) but remember that these tools can vary in their sophistication. An ATS will enable you to monitor and manage a campaign (they are

especially good for high-volume campaigns such as graduate recruitment) and will relieve the administrative burden by pre-screening candidates, scheduling interviews, notifying candidates and ensuring they are kept informed throughout the process.

To maximise the software's benefit, it should be integrated with your careers site or portal, but you should also consider what other integration would be useful, for example import facilities from external channels such as job boards or social networks. Also ask yourself how sophisticated you want the screening and matching technology within the software to be — some employers build in psychometric testing tools, for instance.

Bring the resourcing team together and thrash out what you want the software to do. The most important thing is to be totally clear on the software's purpose, says Sean Thomas, UK head of HR at Habitat, which recently implemented Bond International's Bond Talent software. "We put together a scoping document which asked 'if we want it to do this, what would the system look like'. It needed to be simple to use and provide a maximum level of management information for the end user."

Do your homework

If you don't have up-to-date market knowledge, be prepared to do your homework. The web is a mine of information on software suppliers and their customers, and you should find case studies to download which provide insight. Trade shows can be a shortcut to learning about the market. Roger Parks, HR and training manager at the book store Foyles, went to the HR Soft-



Illustration: Jonathan Riches

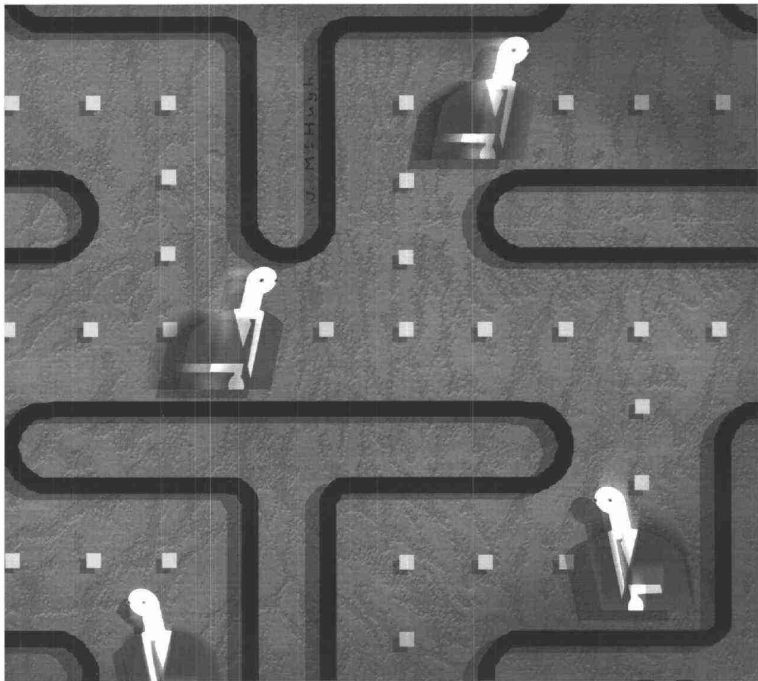
ware show and asked for demonstrations from several suppliers before deciding employ best met its criteria of ease of use. He says that resourcers shouldn't be dazzled by future plans for products and keep their feet on the ground. "We kept being told by other companies about developments that 'were going to' happen but could see that employ did what we wanted now — the screens were clear and we found it the easiest to use."

Off-the-shelf or bespoke?

Off-the-shelf software will do what it says on the packet but if this isn't sufficient for your needs, you may need to look at customisation. This will be largely determined by budget as bespoke software naturally costs more. Don't be confused by configuration and customisation. Configuring is where the software is made to fit into your workflow and refers to settings and preferences within the software, while customisation means actually altering the software — what Tim Richards, managing director of Bond International Software, refers to as working or programming "under the hood".

While customisation will deliver a product entirely suited to your needs, Chris Bogh, tech-

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nical director of recruitment software company employ, warns that a high-level of customisation can make it more difficult to take advantage of the product's natural upgrade path. "There can be a pay-off between 100% customisation and having a system that isn't compatible for upgrades." This is a key area to quiz suppliers on and you may find that if the software has been developed with lots of different settings and fields built into it, it can be configured to suit your needs without customisation.

Advantages of web-based approaches

Many employers these days take a web-based and hosted approach for a number of reasons. The software resides on the supplier's computers and the client accesses it via a browser. This means you should be able to get up and running much faster and also you don't need to worry about installing the software on your system or any upgrades. It also means that as long as your PCs aren't out of the ark, they should be able to run the system. In theory, this is a low maintenance way to both get started and run recruitment software. Parks says that the web-based approach meant he

didn't have to heavily involve the IT department, which would have slowed things down.

This isn't to say you shouldn't consult with IT but Christopher Berry, managing director of **Computers in Personnel**, says that companies tend to fall into two groups — "those that quickly put together a shortlist; and those that treat it like a mammoth project." While he isn't underplaying the importance of research and planning, he stresses: "Everyday that goes by without a system, you are missing out on an area where you could gain benefits relatively quickly."

What to expect from suppliers

Once you've drawn up a shortlist, invite suppliers to pitch. As mentioned previously, make sure you understand the cost of any customisation and the impact on upgrades, as well as any potential hidden costs such as integration with job boards, HR or other systems. Integration can be an issue, especially with legacy systems, but is not the black art it once was, so quiz them if you think these costs are high. In short, make sure the supplier spells out the pricing model, any costs upfront and any subsequent costs likely to be incurred. In addi-

tion, make a specific list of questions, which should include the following: Do they have experience of your sector? What is their pedigree (after all, you want them to be around in a year's time, especially if you are accessing the software under a software as a service model)? Can you trial the system in situ? What training is required and offered? How long will implementation take — will there be any downtime of your existing system? Can you visit a customer? Good suppliers will be happy to put you in touch with other customers as reference sites and talking to your peers is one of the best ways to find out about a software's capabilities.

As well as tangibles like the above, it is also important to know that you'll be able to work with the supplier as a third-party partner. As well as software capabilities, one of the reasons Habitat chose Bond was because it felt it was a "good fit" for their brand, says Thomas (Bond has a number of customers in the retail sector).

Bear in mind that suppliers can also help you demonstrate the value of the system to the board. Bogh says that eploy can provide data and information to help resourcers put together a business case.

Don't miss an opportunity

While it is important to be focused on your needs today, always keep an eye on the future and make sure you are extracting maximum value from the system. If you haven't already, take a look at tools that let you build a pool of potential future talent — candidates who may not suit a vacancy at the moment but may further down the line. As Berry comments, at a time when there is pressure on recruiting budgets, those working in resourcing are likely to feel the burden of recruitment even more. "So it is more about managing the quality of applications rather than volume," he says. Talent pools can help to relieve this burden and he claims in year one to have the potential to save 10% on agency and recruitment costs, rising to more than 40% once the talent pool is built.

Linked to this, is the organisation's career portal, which will be attracting much of this talent, so it is vital that integration with any recruitment software and the portal is seamless for the candidate. Habitat's Thomas says his team worked closely with its marketing department and Bond on this as brand is so important to the organisation (Habitat is sent around 10-15 CVs on spec every day). As Tim Richards stresses: "The careers website is your shop window on the world — and employers are now realising this."