

A New Way to Stop Candidates From Changing Their Minds

by Todd Rogers

"What do you mean you changed your mind? I thought you really wanted this position? Why didn't you call me sooner?"

Many of us have heard this or some version of this at some point in our careers. You have a candidate going through a process, and then you get surprised because he or she has suddenly (or maybe not so suddenly) had a change of heart.

This is not uncommon. People making a career change are going through an emotionally-charged experience. In the process, people tend to get defensive and are reluctant to fully communicate their interests or reveal to you that they have other "irons on the fire." This is where up-front operating agreements come in to play.

When properly used, an up-front operating agreement/contract will help a recruiter mitigate the tangles that will inevitably develop throughout the evaluation and hiring processes.

Up-front operating agreements are quite simple and should be used early on in a candidate relationship. The first agreement I put in place is an agreement about agreements. I always ask a candidate if he or she is the type of person who tends to honor agreements when he or she makes them with other people. Everyone says "yes" to this one; who wouldn't?

But something else is happening. The candidate is also giving you permission to ask for commitments at different points, and at the risk of sounding inconsistent or at worst, psychotic, he or she will tend to stick to these commitments. Then, I always follow up with an out clause which puts people at ease.

I ask, "From time to time, I may ask you to commit to something. If you don't feel comfortable with that, it's okay to tell me so. One of my biggest fears is a person who says 'Yes' to something when he or she actually means 'No.' People do this because they are polite and don't want to be confrontational in most cases. Are you able to come forward to me if something doesn't feel right, or if you want to halt or slow down our process?"

And, you reinforce this contract several times through your process, by asking again, "Are you sure you are comfortable with this?"

You've got to let the candidate know that you will not attack him or her if he or she starts to get a funny feeling; you have to explicitly let him or her know that in an emotionally-charged process, he or she will most likely feel uncomfortable, and when this happens, you (the recruiter) are the best person to call. When a candidate gets that funny feeling, wouldn't you prefer to know about it as soon as possible?

You're essentially letting the candidate know that you will not use pressure tactics. You operate in an environment of truth, and you give the candidate an incentive to be truthful. You'll be amazed. The candidate will be relieved that he has finally found someone in which he can confide. It's quite therapeutic for the candidate because all the other recruits will be pushing and shoving him or her to "just go out on an interview and see how it goes."

You, on the other hand, are not only a broker of jobs or a conduit to a new job, but also a confi-

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dant. If you were a candidate, to whom would you be more loyal: someone pushing you through a process, or someone in whom you hold considerable trust because you have facilitated very open lines of communication?

Let's say that one day you're sitting at your desk, posting an advertisement on one of the major job boards, and your phone rings. The person calling you is a candidate who is about to get an offer from your client. The candidate says, "I'm having second thoughts about leaving this job for your client's, and I want to discuss it with you. Have you got a minute?"

You bet you have a minute. You have all the time that candidate needs.

"Remember when you told me if I was not comfortable with something, I should call you to discuss it?"

Now, you can fix the problem, if it is in fact fixable. Or, at the very least, you can prevent yourself from looking inept in the eyes of your client. You want all of the what-ifs out in the open, and when you put in place up-front operating agreements, you create a relationship in which revealing these things is not something that causes discomfort in an already uneasy person.