

## Applicant Bill of Rights

One of the hottest phrases in recruiting these days is "enhancing the candidate experience." Yes, treating applicants better is becoming a hot issue again, just like it was during the last war for talent. An improving economy means that the power begins shifting from the employer to the applicant. So if you want high application and offer acceptance rates, you need to begin to pay attention to your candidate experience.

Applicants are not stupid. If you treat them harshly when they are essentially "guests" at your company, they will automatically assume that you will treat them even worse if they become employees.

### Business Reasons for Improving the Applicant Experience

There are several reasons why recruiting organizations should focus on improving the way that applicants are treated. Some of them include:

- ♦ **Passive candidates demand quality treatment.** They are used to it at their current job and they expect the same level of respect and courtesy at other organizations. Because top performers already have a good job, these so called "passive" applicants won't tolerate indifferent treatment. They will just walk away and keep their current job.
- ♦ **Booming economy.** In periods when unemployment rates are dropping significantly, applicants will rapidly walk away from a job opportunity and move on to the next one if they're not treated properly.
- ♦ **Applicants are customers.** Applicants and potential applicants might be current or future customers, so mistreating them might have impacts on current or future sales.
- ♦ **Hurting your brand.** Treating applicants poorly can hurt both your product and your employment brand, as mistreated applicants virally spread the word about harsh aspects of the recruiting process to their colleagues and friends.

**Increased costs and lower quality.** A harsh, slow, or frustrating recruiting process will negatively impact offer acceptance rates and the quality of your hires as applicants increase their dropout rates and decrease their offer acceptance rates. You are also likely to see longer job vacancy times and increased costs as managers spend more time recruiting and interviewing as a result of your high dropout and reject rate. The net negative impact on the business for treating applicants poorly will likely end up costing the organization an amount in excess of the hire's yearly salary.

### Building a Customer-Focused Orientation in Recruiting

"Don't call us, we'll call you" is a phrase from customer service hell, but unfortunately, it is a response that is actually used on applicants. Even though not every recruiter utters the phrase out loud, it's clear to almost everyone involved that recruiting more than occasionally treats applicants worse than the DMV treats its customers.

This "don't call us" approach to applicants is just one indication of how many employment departments are arrogant in their approach toward applicants. All too often, employment and hiring managers take a "my way or the highway" approach to the hiring process. There is a lesson to be learned: we need to begin to treat all applicants with a higher level of courtesy and respect. HR needs to learn how to duplicate the level of customer service that is usually provided by our sales, customer support, and product service departments.

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### Differentiate Yourself by Exceeding Their Expectations

Part of the reason that staffing is not customer service friendly is because most staffing processes were developed when unemployment rates were high and employers could demand almost anything from desperate applicants. That has all changed now, so it's time to treat our applicants like customers. Because so many recruiting departments treat applicants in a cavalier manner, it is possible, without much effort, to differentiate yourself from your competitors.

The best way to begin the process is to let applicants know upfront what level of treatment they can expect. You can let the applicants know that they have the "right" to be treated with courtesy in many ways.

However, if you are really bold, the best approach — which I recommend — is to promise them a high level of courtesy, respect, and treatment in what is known as an Applicant's "Bill of Rights."

### Compiling an Applicant's Bill of Rights

There's no standard format or magic formula for developing an applicant's Bill of Rights. I recommend that you design your recruiting process so that it reflects the way you would like to be treated if you were applying for a job. That means making a list of your goals for applicant treatment and then developing an individual promise, or "right," to fit each of these customer service goals.

The following section contains a list of rights that you might consider for your own customized Applicant's Bill of Rights. No one firm would utilize them all, so start with a small number and add additional rights only after you have succeeded in meeting each of the ones that you included in the initial selection.

The applicant rights are categorized according to the steps in the recruitment process. Because applicants themselves have responsibilities in addition to their rights, the last section of the list also includes applicant responsibilities that should be included in the mutual understanding.

Essentially what you're doing is developing a service-level agreement between the company and the applicant. It is a proven approach that has worked in dozens of other business areas where there is a significant negative consequence to treating customers poorly.

### An Applicant's Rights

Although I use the term "rights" in this article, they are not technically legal rights but instead should be considered as a series of promises or reasonable expectations that are made in good faith to the applicant when they agree to go through the application and hiring process. Before the lawyers in the audience have a cow, remember that just as you promise customers a great experience without any legal consequences, you can do the same to applicants with few negative, but a large number of positive, consequences.

Applicant promises that you might want to include in your Bill of Rights are listed below. (When it's required, an explanation of the need for the customer promise is included.) Remember, this is an extensive list — so initially, only pick the 5 to 15 rights that you are most likely to be able to meet during the first year.

#### 1. Treat them with respect and dignity.

*We promise, wherever possible...*

- **To treat applicants like customers and to keep them informed on a periodic basis.**

Explanation: Because at many companies applicants are likely to be current or future customers, management must treat this opportunity to interact with them (as applicants) as

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another opportunity to positively build your company's brand. Management must also realize that treating people poorly as applicants will almost certainly negatively impact their buying habits. Keeping in touch is relatively easy if you utilize a customer relationship management (CRM) process and its related software.

- **To treat applicants like they were investors in our company.** You will treat each as a unique individual who deserves your respect because they have honored you with an application for employment.

Explanation: Because applicants actually are investing a significant amount of their time in the application process, and if they get the job, they are investing a significant part of their work life in your company, treating them like investors is a wise approach. Once you start considering them on the level of investors, you'll make every effort to make all applicants feel special.

- **Not to abuse or run roughshod over applicants because of any power advantage we might have.**

Explanation: Because many applicants are desperate for a job (especially the unemployed ones), they will endure almost anything without complaining. Companies need to acknowledge the possibility of abuse upfront and then develop measures to ensure that it doesn't occur either in HR or by line managers.

- **To respect an applicant's time when you request information from them.**

Explanation: It's the right thing to do to consider the burden we place on applicants when we ask them for information. It's also wise to remember that requiring excess information (especially in the early stages) results in higher applicant dropout rates.

- **To answer applicant's questions rapidly and honestly when they are asked** and, wherever possible, to anticipate their questions, so that those who are uncomfortable asking questions won't be at a disadvantage.

Explanation: Because of their lack of power, and frequently their nervousness, recruiters need to anticipate the information needs of applicants and also the fact that applicants might fail to ask some questions they would like answers for.

- **To identify your expectations and to solicit your feedback.**

Explanation: Most hiring processes involved limited or one-way communications. Rather than ignoring their expectations, start the process by asking applicants, "What are your expectations?" You should also periodically ask them how they are doing during the selection process.

### 2. Provide information on the job.

*We promise, wherever possible...*

- **To ensure that job descriptions, want ads, and brochures contain accurate and current information** about the job responsibilities and the required skills so that applicants get a realistic job preview.

Explanation: Inaccurate job descriptions mean high dropout rates when applicants find out during the interview process what the real job entails. It may also lead to higher turnover rate after applicants begin the job. To ensure accuracy, HR needs to conduct accurate job

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analysis and make an effort not to make the required qualifications overly high. It is equally important to put in checks and balances so that managers and recruiters don't make a job seem more exciting than it really is and that we tell applicants clearly what we are looking for in an applicant, so we don't confuse and frustrate them.

- **To ensure that recruiters and managers provide an accurate view of important issues to applicants** like work/life balance, job sharing, working at home, and promotional opportunities.
- **To only post jobs where outside applicants have a realistic chance of getting them.**

Explanation: In order not to deceive the applicant, the company agrees not to post "wired jobs," that is, either jobs that appear on the surface to be open to outside applicants but in reality are already unofficially assigned to a current employee or jobs that a hiring manager really has no intent of filling at the present time. In addition, it's important to rapidly remove postings for recently filled jobs, because these postings unfairly tease applicants as well as waste their time for no real reason.

### 3. Provide information on the selection process.

*We promise, wherever possible...*

- **To notify applicants promptly when their initial application is received, accepted, or rejected**, and not to send misleading or meaningless regret letters that are so general in content that they do not provide the applicant with information on what they did well on and possible areas for improvement.
- **To educate applicants upfront about the entire hiring process**, including time frames, who they will meet, and the finalist selection criteria.

Explanation: Applicants have fewer fears and lower dropout rates if they know in advance what to expect. Rather than keeping applicants in the dark, make them aware of the minimum and maximum timeframe involved, who will be the primary decision makers, and what criteria will be used to select the finalist.

- **To honestly keep applicants informed about how well they are doing** by telling them after they complete each step in the process. Include what they did right and what they need to do more of or less of. In addition, notify applicants promptly when their application is no longer being actively considered.
- **That managers and recruiters will be fully engaged and committed to the hiring process** by measuring and rewarding them for maintaining an equitable and applicant friendly hiring process.

Explanation: When there is little accountability, processes and people often get sloppy. To ensure that everyone involved maintains a laser focus on quality hiring, it's essential that HR, wherever feasible, measures and rewards managers and recruiters for great hiring. This helps ensure that the process is timely and responsive, and produces great results.

### 4. The interview process.

*We promise, wherever possible...*

- **To ensure that every applicant gets to participate in a fair and legal interview process.** We commit to training all participants involved in the process on the legal requirements

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and the "best practices" in interviewing.

- **To limit the number of interviews to a reasonable number**, so that the applicant does not suffer through "death by interview."

Explanation: Research tells us that excessive interviews add little to selection accuracy but do, however slow the hiring process and frustrate applicants, especially those who are currently employed.

- **To respect the applicant's current boss and job-related time constraints** by making a good-faith effort to provide interview times and locations that fit the applicants needs.

Explanation: By providing night and weekend interview times, you show respect for applicants' time and minimize the likelihood that they have to lie to their current boss in order to attend. In addition, by occasionally providing interview locations in the suburbs close to where applicants live, you can further increase the likelihood that top performers will show up for interviews.

- **To make the interview process more of a conversation between equals and less adversarial.** During the interview, respect the applicant's time, ask only job-related questions, and give the applicant your undivided attention.

Explanation: Most interviews seek to find flaws rather than identify the strengths of applicants. Interviews can become more of an information sharing session if you inform the applicant upfront about what will occur during interview process. Letting them know whom they will speak to, what types of questions to expect, and even how to dress can help to alleviate their fears and anxieties.

- **To provide the applicant with a voice in designing the interview process** in order to ensure that they are provided with an opportunity to ask relevant questions, present their work in a fashion that allows them to put their best foot forward, and interview with people that they need to talk to in order to make their final decision.
- **To provide applicants with an independent opportunity to talk to their future co-workers** in order to have an opportunity to evaluate their team and as an additional assurance that managers and recruiters didn't oversell the job.

### 5. The offer process.

*We promise, wherever possible...*

- **To make a fair offer within the range of the applicant's expectations the very first time.** We promise to play no games by initially making lowball offers.
- **To proactively provide information that applicant's are likely to need in order to make an accurate decision on the offer**, including, where feasible, bonus potential, average promotion rates, and information related to job security.
- **To provide the applicant with sufficient time to consider the offer** and to put no undue pressure on them to rush their decision.
- **When feasible, to provide a no-fault opportunity for the applicant to gracefully back out of a job during the first three months** if it appears that the opportunity is not a good fit for both sides.