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RECRUITING THROUGH RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

Religion-based career service centers are a relatively untapped resource of qualified employees.

By Kathryn Tyler

The separation of church and work is nearly as absolute as that of church and state. For some HR professionals, the very thought of mixing the two gives them knots in their stomachs.

But could our gut feelings about dividing church and work be misplaced? Are there times when employers can align themselves with religious organizations without risking religious discrimination litigation?

Possibly. In response to record-low unemployment levels, some companies are successfully turning to religious-based organizations as potential sources of job applicants.

At the staffing firm Manpower Inc. in Chandler, Ariz., branch manager Barbara Higgins works closely with the St. Timothy's Catholic Church Employment Ministry in Mesa, Ariz. The ministry, under the umbrella of the church, offers career counseling, information on job leads and encouragement to job seekers in the community.

"We have computers available, Internet access," says Kay Jacobs, employment ministry coordinator for St. Timothy's. "We have notebooks full of openings." Jacobs says that those who use the ministry can meet with others to bolster their confidence, "share leads and discuss some facet of employment, such as negotiating salary or panel interviews."

The ministry has been a boon for Manpower. "We've hired many people full time—it's been a tremendous force for us," says Higgins, who has held job-seeking skills seminars at the ministry's weekly networking meetings.

Manpower's success is not unique. Jacobs recalls one case where a young hearing-impaired woman walked in looking for a job. Jacobs wasn't sure she'd be able to help the woman, but just then the phone rang; it was an employer looking for a file clerk. More importantly, the employer knew sign language and was eager to interview the woman.

"She got the job," recalls Jacobs. "Miracles like that are the norm here."

The Benefits

On the surface, churches, mosques and synagogues can be viewed as simply another—relatively untapped—source of job applicants. But they can offer recruiting benefits, such as a first crack at newly transplanted workers. One of the first things many families do when they move to a new area is find a new church. And in newly transplanted families, the chief breadwinner may have a job, but the accompanying spouse may still be looking for work.

In addition, recruiting through religious organizations may also help you increase workforce diversity. Some religious leaders are community leaders, notes Patrick Higgins, who has 25 years of HR management experience and works as HR director for Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium in Sitka. Obtaining the support of these leaders, he says, "can be very beneficial in affirmative action recruitment efforts."

That's certainly been true for Chicago's police department. Officer Paul Chester, a recruiter with the department's Ambassador Program, says the program increased minority recruitment. "We were able to touch a large minority base in a short period of time."

The police department in Hackensack, N.J., achieved similar results with its program.

Another possible advantage is that candidates may have certain characteristics valuable to employers. That's been true for the applicants Chester has found through religious recruiting. "Their spiritual outlet helps keep them balanced," he says. "It makes for an excellent police officer."

Chester notes that police departments aren't the only branches of law enforcement recruiting at churches. He says the federal Drug Enforcement Agency recently visited his church's Bible study program.

Approaching Religious Organizations

A relatively easy and inexpensive way to recruit through religious organizations is to place advertisements in their bulletins, although this approach has limitations. "Not all religious facilities have the resources or capability to provide advertising space in their newsletters or on their bulletin boards," says Holly Hanson-Kollar, human resources manager for OpenWorks, a commercial cleaning franchiser in Phoenix, which recently started recruiting through religious organizations.

A perhaps better method is to establish personal relationships with area religious groups. OpenWorks, which provides cleaning services to a number of large churches and religious organizations in Phoenix, found it natural to contact these customers to recruit new employees.

To establish such relationships, contact the offices of the religious group and arrange a time to speak to the full congregation, or another select group, about your company.

Through its Ambassador Program, the Chicago police department contacts pastors; then recruitment officers arrange an appointment to speak to adults or youths from the congregation on a Saturday or Sunday morning. "We give our presentation about joining the police, the pros and cons, the requirements," says Chester. "It's been beneficial. We have found a large pool of qualified individuals. They met all the education requirements and have no criminal background. It was an excellent recruiting effort. It gave us an opportunity to reach people in a small setting."

Chester says the only potential downside was that the department didn't get the same response at every talk. "Sometimes we had a large crowd, sometimes small. But all were full of qualified candidates who were interested in a career in law enforcement," he says.

When contacting religious organizations, Hanson-Kollar suggests that HR professionals "be respectful of the contact's time and schedules. It might be beneficial to send the contact your company's marketing materials so that they know they're dealing with a reputable, above-board company. If the person doesn't have time to talk to you right away, schedule a time that's more convenient."

Jacobs adds, "Good communication is important. We need complete job descriptions, including a general salary range. Candidates won't go through an interview for a \$23,000 position if they were making \$48,000. Be straightforward." Some candidates go to an interview only to "find out that the position is not exactly what was advertised," she says.

"It also helps to know how soon they want to fill the position," Jacobs says, and any other common procedures, such as posting the position for a week or interviewing at least four candidates.

George Zeller, a senior employment specialist with Jewish Vocational Services in Boston, agrees. He requests that employers provide "a contact person, that they be receptive to our referrals and that they give us good job descriptions—including requirements and salary."

What do churches ask for in return for matching candidates with open positions? Usually nothing. They view their role as part of their service to others and most do not solicit donations, although they are appreciated. "We don't ask for donations; there is a budget, the church funds my salary," says Jacobs. But, she adds, "We have had people gift us individually. We got \$500 once, and we bought a copy machine."

Manpower recognizes their help "with special gifts or recruitment lunches from time to time to thank them for their hard work in promoting our agency," says Barbara Higgins

When offering gifts or donations, avoid the appearance of discrimination by treating every organization equally, cautions Patrick Higgins. "Whatever is provided to one religious organization should be afforded all religious organizations," he says.

Avoid Religious Discrimination Litigation

The major potential pitfall in recruiting through religious organizations is the risk of religious discrimination litigation.

"Someone could say, 'How come you didn't visit my church?' or 'How come you're not putting ads in my church bulletin?'" warns Ron Visconti, author of *Effective Recruiting Strategies: A Practical Guide for Success* (Crisp Publications, 1992) and executive director of the Career Education Center, a non-profit organization in Burlingame, Calif. "That could do the very opposite of what you want. One little goof and it could set off bad PR; it could backfire on you."

Patrick Higgins agrees. "Recruiting in religious organizations targets only a limited segment of the population based on their religious beliefs. It excludes members of non-targeted religious organizations and individuals who are not members of any religious organizations." He adds, "The more successful this type of target recruitment, the more it will discriminate. That may result in a company being perceived as favoring a certain type of religion or discouraging applicants with different religious views. This may also encourage religious discrimination claims by applicants and employees."

To avoid appearing biased, spread your recruiting efforts over a wide variety of religious-based organizations. "You would need to be painstakingly fair," says Visconti. The Chicago police department, for example, split the entire city into five areas, then sent letters to every religious organization in those areas. "We spoke to just about every religion, from Buddhist temples to Baptist churches," says Chester.

Patrick Higgins suggests keeping copies of the letters you send to various religious organizations. "That would provide documentation that the company made a good-faith effort to make job information equally available without favoring one religion over another," he says. "Follow-up contacts could be made based on the response of each religious organization."

If you don't have the time and budget to contact every religious organization in your area, you may want to consider employment ministries instead. Employment ministries or career services are funded by specific religious organizations, but they provide job-seeking assistance to the community at large. "Formal networks, such as Jewish Vocational Services, have social and educational programs that are religious in nature but are usually open to a wider audience," says Visconti.

Jacobs says those being helped by St. Timothy's ministry don't have to be parishioners. "We assist all walks of life, all levels of employment. We've had Muslims, Jewish descendants, all Protestant religions represented."

Thus, recruiting through an employment ministry may reduce the risk of religious discrimination claims because the ministry, although affiliated with a religion, is open to anyone in the community.

Additionally, recruiting through religious groups should be only one component of your overall recruitment strategy, not your only recruitment method.

"It is not prohibited to recruit in this fashion," says attorney Karin Lynn Backstrom, head of the labor and employment department at Hinchy, Witte, Wood, Anderson and Hodges, a full-service law firm in southern California. But she advises that employers "not limit all recruiting to this manner, to avoid an allegation of discrimination. In addition, if applicants come to an employer, they cannot exclude them from consideration just because they are not a member of a church or organization."

Hanson-Kollar agrees that religious recruiting should be merely one more tool in a recruiter's kit. "You can't use only one exclusive recruiting method or you're going to have legal issues," she says. "Recruiting through religious facilities is only one part of our whole program. We use print, Internet, employee referrals, franchise-owner referrals, college resources, welfare-to-work programs, industry affiliations, chamber of commerce memberships and a multitude of other resources to find good employees."

And, Backstrom advises, "Make sure not to ask any interview questions about religious beliefs. Before companies embark on this method of recruiting, they should review their equal employment opportunity policies to make sure they are current with the latest regulations from the EEOC and recent court decisions. They should also make sure the employees in charge of recruiting are well versed in the laws in these areas so no improper questions are asked or statements are made."

A Godsend

Recruiting new employees through religious organizations may not be right for every employer; however, companies should not shy away from this potential reservoir of qualified employees simply out of fear of impropriety. If handled diplomatically, recruiting through religious organizations can be a blessing.

"Don't let the religious [nature] of the organization stop you," says Barbara Higgins. "There are lots of qualified people there who are looking for work."

Adds Hanson-Kollar, "We, as human resources professionals, need to take advantage of every opportunity available. This is an untapped opportunity just waiting for us."

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