

The Science of Marketing: National Nuclear Security Administration

While almost every organization sees itself as unique, the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) is truly one of a kind. Where else can you harness nuclear energy for security and scientific advancement, and save the world from nuclear proliferation and terrorism? Established in March 2000, NNSA merged the efforts of several federal programs responsible for nuclear security: defense nuclear weapons, nuclear non-proliferation, the naval nuclear propulsion program and other supporting efforts.

Just as NNSA's mission is highly specialized, so are the skills and talents that it needs in its federal workforce. Given the critical shortages in scientific and technical talent in America and a rapidly changing security environment, recruiting needed talent presents a major challenge for NNSA. How can this new organization attract the very best scientific, engineering and business talent in the country? How do NNSA leaders win the "War for Talent" when the new employees they hope to attract are also in such high demand in the private sector? How will they replace the 33% of their workforce eligible for retirement in 2006?

For national security reasons, NNSA did not maintain a highly visible public posture. Potential candidates for employment were not aware of NNSA's exciting and challenging programs. Compounding the difficulty of hiring the right talent is the challenge of finding people to work in remote locations. NNSA directs and oversees operations at three national laboratories and various production facilities in locations that are understandably remote. Given the nature of the work, hazardous research, development, testing and production operations cannot be carried out in metropolitan centers. NNSA site office locations therefore include rural areas in Texas, South Carolina and New Mexico, in addition to its Washington, DC headquarters and Albuquerque Service Center. To overcome these challenges, NNSA needs world-class recruiting capabilities. Agency leaders recognized that old methods would not allow them to compete effectively for their highly sought-after talent.

CHALLENGES

NNSA leaders had already begun to take a close look at their hiring process when the Extreme Hiring Makeover (EHM) team arrived. The HR team, located at DC headquarters and at the agency's Albuquerque Service Center, was seeking to make the best possible use of automated HR systems and had several other initiatives underway to enhance their services to managers. If they could just get a good slate of candidates, they were prepared to work with managers to select and hire the best. However, NNSA was having difficulty attracting a sufficient number of qualified candidates to apply for its highly specialized – and vitally important – jobs.

Scientists and engineers are not trained to be marketing experts. They are trained to provide facts and information – which when translated into the hiring environment can be more information than an applicant cares to absorb. So, even a highly qualified applicant could be left wondering "what did they just say?", "how does this relate to me?" and, "why should I be interested?" That was exactly the way that job applicants might feel in reading a multiple page job announcement for some NNSA jobs. The announcements did not capture the power of the critical mission that NNSA serves, did provide an overly extensive list of job duties that obscured the major features and selling points of the job, and did not highlight the most important skills and experience that the candidate needed to bring to the organization.

As a result, some of NNSA's critical positions went unfilled. In launching the Extreme Hiring Makeover effort, Mike Kane, the Associate Administrator for Management and Administration, used the example of a non-productive effort for a senior scientific position as a proxy for their larger issues. After looking for months, using the current, longstanding, job announcement formats, they had only 3 candidates and none fit the bill. How could the Makeover turn that situation around?

SOLUTIONS

Extreme Makeover Team members rose to the challenge. After reviewing the prior vacancy announcement for the senior scientific position and meeting with the hiring manager and HR team, the root of the problem became clear: NNSA was not selling or marketing its unique employment opportunities. When asked about the vacancy, the hiring manager could describe the position at length in technical terms but had not considered how to convey the job in such a way as to excite a potential applicant. So, the Extreme team led him through a series of questions to elicit what the position really entailed, why a candidate would want to work there, and what competencies and credentials were most important for the job.

NNSA GETS A FACE LIFT

Following the manager interview, the team worked with NNSA to produce a marketing pitch and targeting strategy. Monster Government Solutions helped to create a new look and language for their position announcement that conveyed the importance and excitement of the position. Not only did the new announcement start with a description of why NNSA is a great place to work, but it utilized a user-friendly, five tab vacancy announcement format developed for the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM's) USAJobs website. The announcement was also written in plain English – no government jargon. The web-based posting also included photos of the unique work environment at NNSA that would appeal to the scientists and engineers it sought to attract.

To further improve NNSA's odds of attracting highly qualified applicants, AIRS helped to implement an Internet-based targeted recruiting strategy. They searched various job boards and other internet sources for experienced candidates who met the highly skilled NNSA criteria. A senior NNSA official then called the most desirable candidates that came out of this targeted search to encourage them to apply. The new look for the announcement and the proactive outreach approach produced a slate of 28 qualified candidates.

Emboldened by this success, NNSA leaders took up their own sales and marketing efforts. They developed an advertisement that ran in Government Executive magazine featuring the new face of NNSA - "Where Engineering, Science and National Security Intersect in a Challenging Career."

**WHERE ENGINEERING, SCIENCE AND
NATIONAL SECURITY
INTERSECT IN A
CHALLENGING CAREER**

Come help the National Nuclear Security Administration manage highly visible programs involving nuclear weapons and controlling nuclear threats, both here and abroad. We offer careers where you are compensated for your performance. We also oversee national laboratories that help maintain U.S. leadership in science and technology. NNSA is an agency of the U.S. Department of Energy.



For more information, visit us on the web at: www.nnsa.doe.gov
Specific job opportunities can be found at: jobsonline.doe.gov



ENGAGNG THE NEXT GENERATION

To build a pipeline of future leaders, NNSA also launched an emerging leaders program that took the recruiting message to a new level. NNSA recruiters targeted fifteen universities, many in the South and West, with an emphasis on diversity. Building on some of the lessons from the EHM, professional recruitment materials, including a state-of-the art flash presentation, were prepared for use in on-campus recruiting efforts. NNSA developed a core intern training program built around three separate functional curricula tracks in facility oversight, business functions, and information technology.

Each intern will be assigned a sponsor within NNSA who will provide mentoring and assure meaningful assignments and challenging work.

To compete successfully with private sector organizations, NNSA now aggressively employs a wide range of recruiting flexibilities and benefits. They tackle the money issues head-on by offering candidates the possibility of student loan repayment, signing bonuses and relocation assistance. NNSA's senior leadership is committed to institutionalizing this program, and they have protected funding for the effort even in the face of other mission-related needs.

PARTNERING WITH MANAGERS EFFECTIVELY

The NNSA HR team is constantly looking for ways to enhance their service to managers and forge a collaborative working partnership. Over the last several months, they have worked with managers to reexamine their hiring process to reduce the time and effort required to bring someone on board while improving the quality of candidates delivered by the process. Extreme Makeover sponsor CPS assisted NNSA in mapping their existing process and identifying areas for improvement. Of paramount importance was investing greater attention to the front end of the process. Managers and HR representatives agreed that engaging in a comprehensive strategic conversation at the outset would speed the process, eliminate redundancies and guarantee improved quality of outcomes.

PROVIDING GREAT RECRUITING RESOURCES

Also in the course of the diagnostic phase, NNSA determined that they needed to enhance their human resources staff, and the HR Director took action. As part of their targeted approach to address that issue, a new position was created to lead HR operations. Additionally, the HR team embarked on renewed workforce planning to identify current and future skills gaps; provide training where needed; improve its use of automated HR systems and tools, including a new, consolidated approach to performance management and recognition.

RESULTS

Science and marketing do mix to create a potent force.

- The pilot project to fill a senior scientific position yielded an eight-fold increase in the number of applicants.
- Selecting officials have chosen the first class of about 30 interns, and their feedback indicates that the candidate pool was of a very high quality. Having heard about the success of this program, leaders recruiting candidates in other functional areas have asked for a custom program of their own.

Perhaps the best example of success comes from the HR Director himself. Having participated in the first pilot effort to recruit the senior scientist, Ray Greenberg decided to set an example by revamping his own approach to hiring. He needed an HR operating executive who was ready to embrace a challenge and help make change happen in this new organization. Ray spent time upfront in developing a clear position description and an effective marketing pitch, job announcement and recruiting strategy. It worked. His final candidates were so good that he faced an entirely new kind of challenge: how to select the best from a range of outstanding candidates.

LESSONS LEARNED

TOP LEADERSHIP COMMITMENT IS CRITICAL

As with the other participating agencies, NNSA witnessed how the commitment of top leadership within their organization could advance the goals of the project. NNSA Administrator Linton Brooks continues to be a strong champion of the project and has lent his muscle as required.

EVERYTHING FLOWS FROM STRATEGY

The HR staff saw the benefits of having a deeper knowledge of the business of NNSA, including the type of talent they need to attract, where to look for ideal candidates, and what top talent would find attractive about working at NNSA. This foundational understanding of the organization helps the HR team enhance its partnership and collaboration with management. By building their own organization, they help build NNSA in its entirety.

NEW IDEAS FUEL INNOVATION

Openness to external assistance and seeking outside expertise is extremely valuable when tackling major change initiatives. Many agencies don't have the resources to hire outside consultants or expand their operational practices. In this project, NNSA had access to both the pro-bono assistance provided by the EHM partners as well as to further outside assistance to produce recruitment materials for the intern program. This openness to outside assistance helped to improve its internal practices.

A PICTURE SPEAKS A THOUSAND WORDS

Mapping the hiring process provided a shared understanding of current activities across the HR and management teams. Many times during the process mapping exercise, participants were surprised to see the steps they currently require, particularly in the upfront part of the hiring process, the hand-offs that occur and the cumulative effort needed to make a single hire. The visual of the process facilitated efforts to develop a shared vision for improvement, and enabled NNSA to smartly target areas for training and development – for both HR staff and hiring managers – as they seek to make improvements in the recruitment process.

RECRUITING FLEXIBILITIES MAKE A DIFFERENCE

NNSA offers many exciting jobs and a compelling mission, but in the War for Talent an organization can never have too many weapons in its arsenal. As NNSA works to advance the marketing of their career opportunities, it has also committed to optimizing its use of available flexibilities. In each component of this project, where applicable, NNSA has interwoven the application of student loan repayments, recruitment bonuses and relocation payments along with special hiring authorities. This both heightens NNSA's appeal to potential applicants and brings the agency toward its goal of recruiting and retaining top talent.

WHAT'S NEXT?

As with many federal agencies, NNSA has seen that successful transformational efforts require follow-up and follow-through. To achieve the goals outlined in this effort, and to encourage enduring change, the team is prepared to make a long-term commitment to improvement. In the next few months, NNSA will map a plan to institutionalize the changes made this past year, folding them into their standard hiring process and spreading their knowledge throughout the agency by communicating more broadly with agency staff.

Inspired by their own progress in this effort, NNSA has launched an “Employer of Choice” initiative, demonstrating its commitment to recruiting and retaining top talent. The agency will begin with a survey of all employees, using the Partnership for Public Service’s Best Places to Work in the Federal Government analysis of employee satisfaction data as one benchmark. From those results, the team will assess its strengths and weaknesses and craft corresponding efforts to address key issues.

Building on the foundational elements of the Extreme Hiring Makeover project, the NNSA team also plans to expand and address efforts central to human capital issues, including a major workforce planning effort. This will help identify the skills and competencies needed in the workforce, identify skills gaps, and fine-tune future workforce planning. On a parallel track, the team is developing a “one-NNSA” approach to HR systems that emphasizes linkages between HR initiatives and the organization’s strategic goals. This will include implementation of a single performance management system to replace eight different legacy systems. To deepen collaboration with managers, the HR team will also begin to use additional automated tools.

NNSA may be unique in many ways, but its experiences in the Extreme Hiring Makeover and its additional efforts to improve its practices offer lessons that are applicable to any agency across government.