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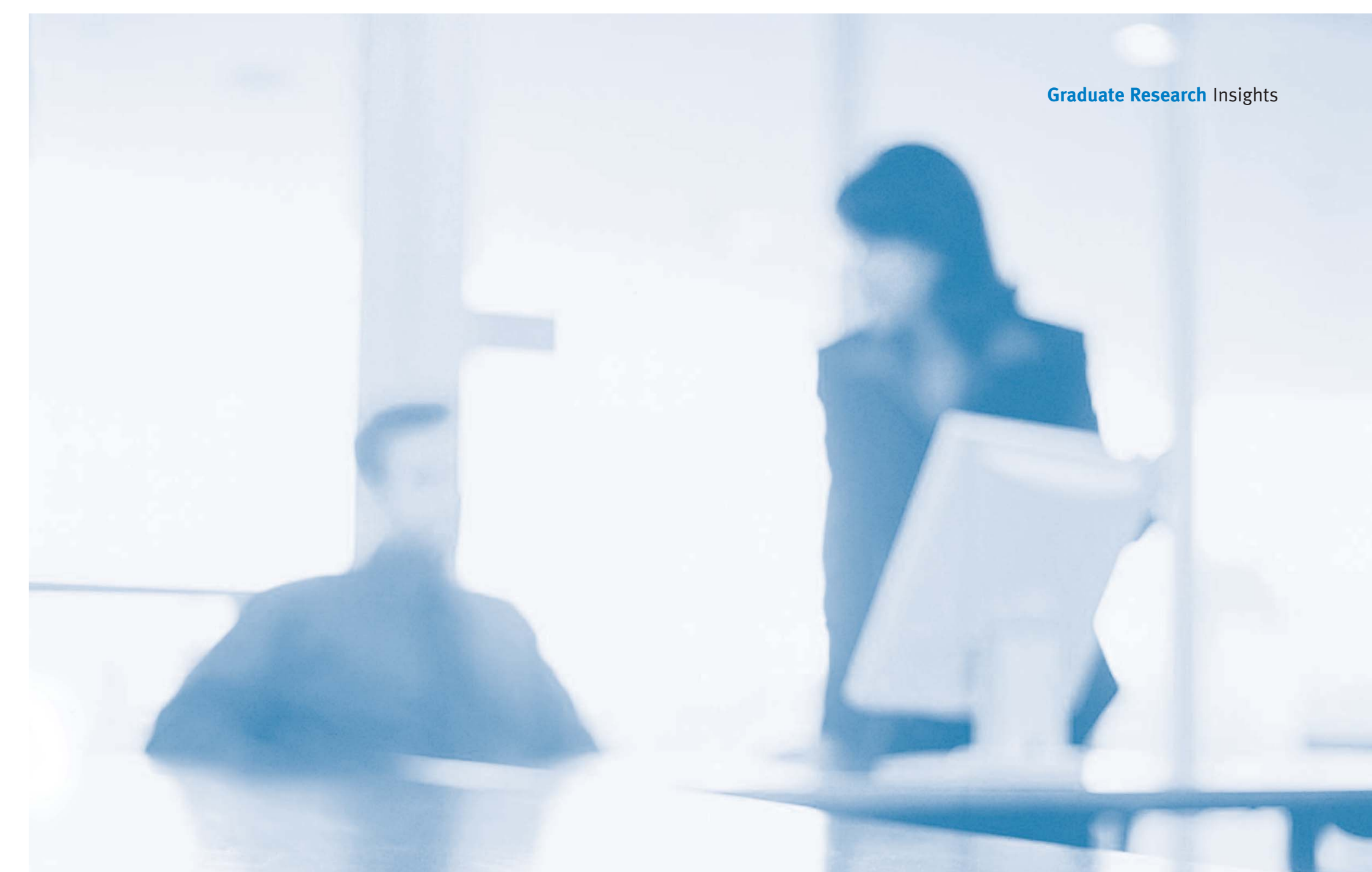
Internet recruitment...
...are companies maximising the potential?

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Today's generation of graduate job seekers is switched on to using the Internet as a potential route to a great career. However, are companies switched on to graduates' needs and are both parties getting the best out of web-based recruitment?

Perceived wisdom has it that Internet-based recruitment processes produce hordes of unsuitable candidates because of the random and universal access that the web offers to job-seekers.

But there is another way of looking at companies' use of their website as part of their recruitment armoury, in today's war for talent.

It is an accepted fact that every graduate in search of a career will now use the Internet as a means to research areas of employment and to find out about specific companies, before they start the job application process.

So what is going on? Candidates have done their research and yet there is still a known 'mismatch' between them and the companies that they approach. Is it that the world is full of cock-eyed optimists who apply for jobs despite their own unsuitability or is it that company websites are failing to give them the information and insight that they need in their search for a career?

This is an increasingly important question when today it is estimated that the cost of recruiting a graduate is in the order of £10,000 and a further £70,000 is spent on them before they begin to contribute to a company's bottom line. Get it wrong and it's costly - as many organisations are beginning to discover.

Research conducted on behalf of HR software company Axiom indicates areas where companies fall down in their use of the Internet to attract graduate staff. It also points to trends among graduates themselves that should assist companies to promote themselves as employers when they create a web-based recruitment system.

Maximising Opportunites

Self-promotion has to be the name of the game when so many companies are in pursuit of reliable graduate staff. Yet the majority of companies do not appear to have cottoned on to the idea that their website is more than a mere posting of facts about themselves with a recruitment page hidden somewhere among the morass of other facts.

It would seem that HR departments have not yet seen two essential things. One is that in the 'war for talent' companies must sell themselves to graduates and the other is that they need to exploit the marketing opportunity that the Internet offers.

For example, most people see speed of communication as the Internet's major asset. Consumers who buy online may take only minutes to purchase and to pay. In return they expect, and usually receive, their goods in a fast turn-around. That's why they do it.

So most graduates who apply online would expect a response within two weeks, and a third of them within one week. Their experience is that only 18 percent of the companies they have approached manage to respond within a week. Nearly half respond within a fortnight and a quarter within three weeks.

Average response time

Pie chart: 4 weeks, 5 weeks, 3 weeks 25%, 4%, 4%, 1 week, 18%, 49%, 2 weeks
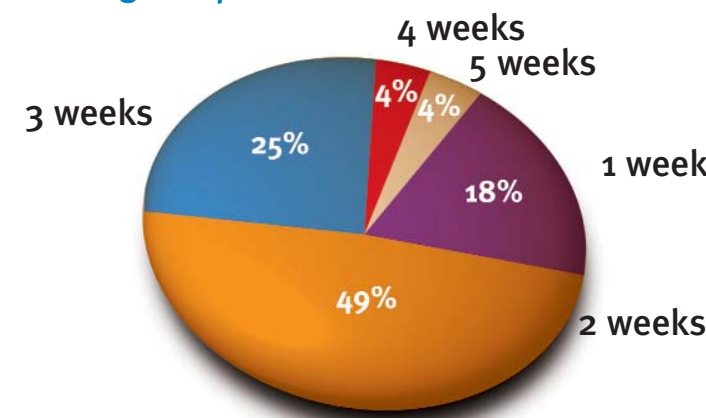
A delay of this order would be unacceptable to the same graduates if they were purchasing goods, as opposed to job hunting, and the majority of them show remarkable forbearance in stating that they would pursue a job application if companies were even slower than this. They may, however, only be keeping their options open while following up other possibilities.

Company Image

Speed is only one aspect of the process; communication is another. And communication is a two way street - companies need to know what graduates are looking for from them and they need to tell graduates what they have to offer in return.

The Axiom research, as with other graduate surveys, shows that tomorrow's young professionals have a good grasp of what they want from their careers and what they want from the companies they work for.

Most graduates would prefer to work with companies that have a conscience - a good ethical record is important to more than three quarters of them. In an era when formal politics says less to people, graduates lead the way in expecting their employers to engage with the community and be conscious of global issues as well.

Is a companies ethics important?

Pie chart: No 22%, Yes 78%
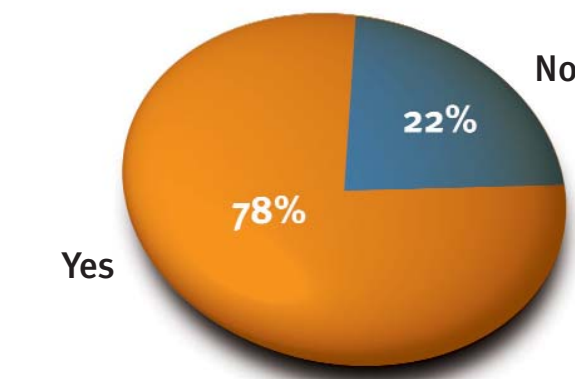
Some business schools already talk of the triple bottom line - profit, society and the environment. Warwick University's Business School introduced a Corporate Citizenship Unit in response to requests from young managers.

People want to work for organisations they can be proud of and can relate to. But are companies sufficiently aware of this and are they getting their ethical record across to potential recruits?

The answer so far seems to be no. Axiom's research showed that graduates judged a company's ethical record through information gleaned from other people and the media.

But companies could make their research simpler for them by installing hyperlinks to media information through their recruitment websites - a direct response to their needs.

Understanding the needs and expectations of potential graduate employees is critical but traditionally employers are more inclined to spell out their own needs when they advertise for new staff.

Graduate Ambitions

The trend among today's graduates is to see their career as a process they will manage for themselves. The psychological contract between employer and employee has changed in the last decade and the Axiom research indicates exactly that. Nearly half of the respondents to the survey said they expected to be made redundant at least once in their working life.

Very few graduates expect to remain with a company from the day they leave university until the day that they retire. They expect and want to make progress by moving from one employer to another. And therefore they see transferable skills as vital - more than half rated training and development as the first factor that would attract them to a job - it is more important to them than their salary. And the chance of being fast tracked ranks third in their list of priorities, ahead of location.

All of this indicates that today's graduates are a savvy lot with a personal career agenda that they will pursue.

This characteristic is even borne out by the fact that nearly two thirds of respondents said that 20 years down the line from graduation they would rather run their own business than manage the board of a FTSE company.

So companies that offer wide business experience, especially those that move graduates through various departments at the training stage, are most likely to keep the bright people that they recruit for a decent length of time.

It's a hard fact for companies but expensively recruited graduates will move on if they think their job is not offering them what they need to fulfil their own ambitions.

So retention is the other part of the recruitment picture in the 'war for talent'. And, yet again, this is a problem solved by good communication - by exploitation of the reach and flexibility offered by the Internet.

Companies, could, for example, set up direct access for graduate job-seekers to talk to their graduate recruits and find out what working for that particular organisation actually means.

It is not impossible, either, for potential recruits to speak directly to senior management by using email. There are many possibilities, of which these are the more glamorous. At the nuts and bolts end, progressive companies are speeding up their sifting process by using online assessments and skills tests ahead of the interview and / or assessment centre stage. A major company which was one of the first to start online recruitment reports that its website has assisted the process of communication so successfully that the flood of applications has been cut by more than half and graduate recruitment has become more efficient and streamlined as a result.

This company's experience has been that job-seekers sift themselves out if websites pass on enough information for them to realise that they may be making the wrong approach to the wrong company. Plainly this saves the company from the costs of carrying the recruitment process further to the interview and assessment centre stage and before both sides discover that they are mismatched.

Choice between FTSE 250 or own business

Pie chart: Own business 59%, FTSE 250 41%
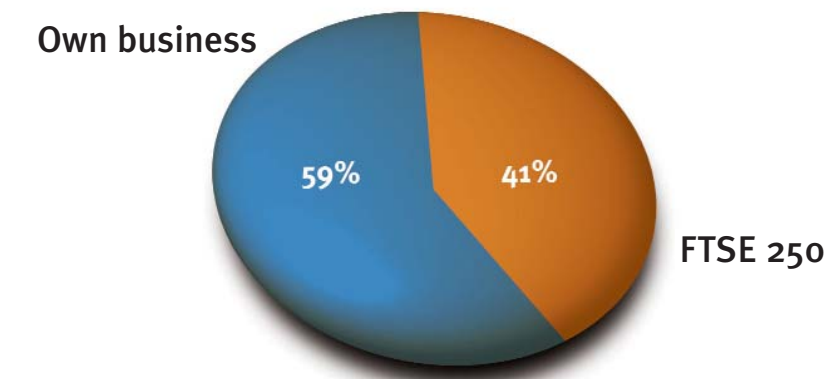
So companies need to see the Internet as the first port of call for graduate job seekers and to use their websites efficiently so that when they reach the later stages of recruitment they have already weeded out the graduates who will not be suitable.

Increasing the Talent Pool

But companies themselves, mistakenly, are restricting the graduate pool that they approach for recruits.

As higher education expands ever more rapidly, a paradox has arisen in that some companies actually limit their recruitment to a certain handful of universities in the belief that these institutions are producing the 'best' graduates. It may be true for some companies that the more cerebral students make the best employees, but it is certainly not true for the majority of graduate recruiters.

Where as in the past, graduates were recruited only into a handful of professions, they are now sought after by a wide variety of organisations whose needs are as diverse as their activities.

It is therefore to their benefit that they have access to a much greater recruitment pool than the milk round or the graduate fairs can offer them. But many companies need to realise that this is an opportunity which must be exploited to a much greater degree than it is now.

These companies would benefit from using their websites to promote themselves to as wide an audience as possible where they have a better chance of finding people with a variety of talents and skills that are applicable to their particular business.

This is particularly true for small to medium enterprises which, by their very nature, do not have the resources to compete with the major players. It is unlikely that they can take part in the milk round or attend job fairs and they are therefore losers in the recruitment process because they cannot make contact with a broad base of talent.

Greater Opportunities for SMEs

SMEs are as graduate hungry as any other employer. Because of their limitations they need to market themselves in the most cost-effective way, so an imaginative and cutting edge website is an obvious solution. It can give an SME a far more sophisticated recruitment system than it would ordinarily be able to afford.

This is particularly important because SMEs make up 99 percent of all UK businesses and are therefore an important sector of the economy and a large employer en masse.

Graduates themselves are largely unaware of the possibilities of employment with SMEs and at the moment it is left to university careers services to inform them of the opportunities that are out there.

Not only that, SMEs are uniquely capable of giving graduates what they are looking for to progress their career. Two thirds of respondents, for example, expected to start picking up transferable skills within a year. SMEs offer the early responsibility and front line business experience that so many of today's graduates want from their employer.

And graduates who would initially never have thought of joining a smaller company, report that they find huge job satisfaction from being closer to the action and seeing the outcome of their work.

Another issue which is important to today's graduate labour market, is the work-life balance and companies that are actively aware of this during the recruitment process are highly regarded because they have shown themselves to be progressive.

Many of these companies pick up the second-time-arounders, the more mature graduates who have worked in one organisation and burned out, taken time off and then returned to the labour market with a more demanding agenda.

Yet the capacities of recruitment websites to target different sectors of the graduate population are, as yet, largely undeveloped.

Studies among graduates on their use of the Internet for job seeking show that they have a positive view of it as a means of recruitment. This offers a challenge to companies to not only meet but exceed their expectations and offer a positive and informative recruitment experience. These benefits can be seen whether recruiting on or off-line.

Transferable skills

Pie chart: 2-5 years, 5 years +, 1-2 years 25%, 5%, 4%, 66% 0-1 year