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Engaged candidates make engaged employees

In the summer of 2015, Associated British Foods UK Grocery (ABF) made the strategic decision to partner with Cohesion Recruitment to deliver their Graduate Recruitment Programme.

Michelle McDonald, Client Relationship Manager and **Deborah Edmondson, Talent Director** at **Cohesion** tell of their aim to find the best future talent for the business, whilst providing a market-leading candidate experience.



Michelle McDonald

Associated British Foods is a diversified international food, ingredients & retail group with over 124,000 employees and a presence in 48 countries. The UK Grocery division is made up of a number of food businesses, and across the seven graduate schemes provided, the breadth and variety of candidate requirements is considerable.



Deborah Edmondson

We know that the graduate market is becoming increasingly candidate-led; graduates have more choices and opportunities, and offer reneging is on the increase. Candidate engagement

is also at the top of everyone's agenda. According to the AGR Annual Survey 2016, the time from application to offer is becoming longer and longer (currently sitting at 10 weeks), and companies are finding that their best candidates are dropping off the radar. Cohesion and ABF were therefore aligned so the delivery of a first-class recruitment process from application to offer would not only make the organisation more attractive to candidates, but also engage candidates in the process early on and, in doing so, potentially reduce reneging of offers.

Sustain; maintain

The ABF recruitment process is a testament to the fact that using more modernised, interactive techniques allows recruiters to keep graduates engaged throughout the recruitment process. In many processes, graduates don't actually speak to a member of the recruitment team until the final stages - but it's the early stages where individual and personal engagement can make the difference. Offering the chance for applicants to communicate with members of the team, whether by

telephone, email, text or via social media, helps to build engagement with the employer brand.

Being there to answer any candidate questions or queries makes the recruitment process more 'human'.

Candidates begin their journey by completing a swift, engaging, mobile-enabled application form – the length of which has been reduced, with all unnecessary fields removed to make it as easy as possible for candidates to apply.

We're strong believers that information typically asked for in application forms can be picked up and asked about later in the process – why risk losing high-quality applicants by putting them off at the first hurdle? If diversity is on your agenda – not actually knowing any of the personal details of the candidates, aside from their contact information (for obvious reasons), can do your diversity figures a world of good. Collectively, ABF and Cohesion broke the application form down into its minutia, and agreed on the information that was actually needed to get the candidate through the initial stage of the process.

The candidate journey, at every stage, is supplemented by regular communication between the candidate and the recruitment team. This means that candidates are never kept in the dark about their application, and know where they are in the process at all times. We want them to do well, and will go out of our way to support them at every stage. There are so many different ways to communicate with candidates – consider how you can be creative with this.

For example, partway through the recruitment process a Twitter Q&A was held by the recruitment team, and some of the current graduates at ABF. This allowed candidates to ask questions of those who have experienced the recruitment process and can relate easily. For us, this received an enormous amount of engagement – could it work for you, too?

Guidance videos on how to excel at assessment centres were embedded in emails, and the recruitment team proactively contacted candidates who had started but not completed a stage of the process. All of the above helps to make the journey from application to offer as stress-free for the candidate as possible. They receive the support they need to enable them to give the best account of who they are.

The ABF assessment centre, designed specifically for each scheme, is the final stage of the process. Candidates take part in a number of exercises with assessors from their chosen function, as well as members of the HR team. The exercises are functionally-relevant, and candidates report an appreciation for the insight into the reality of working in specific roles. The assessment centre also reinforces the ABF culture of focusing strongly on people and ensuring there's a 'human touch' throughout. In order to help the candidates to relax and perform at their best, we run a meal and overnight stay beforehand with the assessors and recruitment team.

Of course – preparation is the recruitment teams' buzzword in the run-up to the assessment centre. Every candidate receives a personal preparation call, to brief them on what to prepare for the assessment centre, as well as what they should expect on the day.

To contribute further towards the positive candidate experience, in an attempt to reduce anxiety when waiting for decisions post-assessment centre, we focus on giving each candidate their outcome and full feedback within 24 hours of the assessment centre.

After every stage of the process, regardless of whether or not the candidate is successful – they are given extensive feedback on their performance. This constructive feedback helps them to do better in the next application process that they find themselves in – whether that's with ABF, or not.

Candidates leave our process, regardless of the outcome, with more knowledge about how to do better next time – their feedback tells us they appreciate this hugely.

Considerations

Overall time to offer plays a massive part in how engaged candidates are during the recruitment process. With the pull of the various brand in the ABF family, we receive in excess of 100 applicants per vacancy on average and, therefore, work hard to bring candidates through the process as efficiently as possible.

Of course, we always look to shorten the time candidates are in our pipeline, and good forward-planning and diary management allows us to do this. We also actively challenge each stage of our process to make sure we're as open and accessible as possible for all candidates who want to apply.

Right from the beginning of the process, candidates know that we are open to engaging with them to discover their individual strengths and behaviours – not focusing on their academic results alone. In partnership with Cohesion, ABF are able to build relationships with candidates right from the start – we believe this helps us to keep them more engaged throughout.

Of course – we're not immune to having our graduate offers renege on. However, we can be confident that this isn't due to a lack of candidate engagement throughout the recruitment process.

The ABF recruitment process revolves entirely around people, the ABF culture, and the 'human touch'. Candidates will likely apply for the role because they're attracted to our brands, but we believe that they choose to accept our offer because of the people they have met, and the inclusive, warm culture that permeates throughout the entirety of the recruitment process.

For ABF, engaged candidates translate directly into engaged employees – this is why it's paramount that we get our recruitment process right.