Bad HR Processes Stymie Efforts To Hire Talented Engineers

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"No company can grow revenues consistently faster than its ability to get enough of the right people to implement that growth and still become a great company. If your growth rate and revenues consistently outpace your growth rate in people, you simply will not, indeed, you cannot, build a great company."

—Packard's Law by David Packard, cofounder of Hewlett-Packard, as quoted in "The HP Way"

Companies often state that their number one business concern is finding, attracting and retaining the right talent in their organizations. Packard's Law presents an explanation—it almost reads like a mathematical thereom—of why this is the case. The same ideas are echoed by the popular sentiment, "people are our number one asset." But as we have so often seen in business, what companies say and what they do are often out of alignment. This concern has become very apparent as many engineers have been talking with me about a proximate issue of getting jobs in the industry at leading companies and I feel I must share this with you.

The technology field, especially power electronics, is a very close knit group where many people in the field know one another. This may be partly attributed to the fact that engineers working in power electronics have a specialized set of skills, so the overall pool of practitioners is not very large.

In fields such as power electronics, where many engineers know their fellow practitioners, it would be perfectly natural for a company to fill new engineering positions through networking. In days gone by, that was in fact, a common approach. If a company was looking for someone, a person within the organization would recommend someone they thought was a good candidate.

Let's say the candidate's name was Fred. The person who recommended Fred would call him and say "Fred, send me your resume." That resume would then be given to human resources (HR) to arrange interviews and to start the process of hiring Fred. This was a common-sense approach supported by HR.

Fast forward to the present and note how times have changed. As a hiring manager, I am told that this old approach is not allowed. For Fred to get hired today, he typically must enter his resume into some talent management system that has been store bought by HR from companies such as Taleo, Ceridian, or one of the other suppliers of such software systems.

These systems all have two things in common—they are seemingly hostile to job candidates and as easy to use as braiding sawdust. Most of these systems require you to answer hundreds of questions, upload your resume, then enter everything that's on your resume all over again, in drop-down boxes and fill-in-the-blanks on their system.

How are job candidates rewarded for their efforts? Most of the time they never hear back from the company. Or if they do, it's a robot-generated Dear John letter about how they will keep your resume on file for 6 months. One individual I know received a "we will keep your resume on file in case" letter from a company that had already hired her. What's more, when the letter arrived, she had been working at that company for a couple of years!

As a hiring manager for an unnamed semiconductor company, I was once told we could hire some new engineers for product definition and applications work. I asked HR if we could use an external recruiter. The answer was no. I then asked if someone in HR could go into our external resume web system (where we make everyone enter their resume) and look for candidates who had the geographic and skill set matches we were looking for. The answer again was no—HR did not have enough resources (people) to do that for me. So I asked if I could log into the system so I could do it myself. Yet again, the answer was no. As HR explained, when the company bought the system, they only purchased X number of seats and could not buy more. This situation was so absurdly funny that I wrote to Dilbert about it.

But sadly, HR did not see the irony in this situation. Nor did they acknowledge that there was anything wrong with the way the hiring system was set up. They maintained I had to follow the system even though the system was not working and could not possibly work. We likely had high-performing candidates in the database we could have had for "free," only the system would not allow us to get to them.

Most likely, HR departments and many in corporate management believe that the current economic situation makes it necessary to put together systems that shield them from too many applicants. But in seeking to prevent a deluge of applications, is it really desirable to force individuals with at least two advanced degrees to do online clerical work and fight through the online shields to get an interview at a company that really needs them?

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) has issued grim news that nonfarm employment dropped in July 2010. According to the BLS, 6.6 million people have been jobless for 27 weeks or more and 8.5 million are working part time. We need 125,000 new jobs per month just to keep up with the growth of job seekers. So what does this mean to employers? Many companies act as if the only thing job candidates have to do is file online applications and that they have endless hours to do so.

An engineer once said to me "engineering is the only solution to the challenges we face—these challenges can only be solved by engineers. "We need engineers to solve problems in energy, safety, efficiency, innovation—there's simply no shortage of issues for engineers to solve. These issues will be solved by engineers not by HR, operations, finance, legal or other departments that may have a role in choosing or implementing these inane systems and processes that impede progress in hiring engineers.

> *"Those who build great companies understand that the ultimate throttle on growth for any great company is not market, or technology, or competition, or products. It is one thing above all others…the ability to get and keep enough of the right people."*
> *— from "Good to Great" by Jim Collins.*

Do organizations really say what they mean about attracting and retaining people? If so, wouldn't they be concerned that the most talented job applicants may be looking at the company websites and concluding that they have better things to do than try to fight these online hiring systems? How many good people give up?

For companies to succeed they must address the flaws in their hiring systems. As engineers working in industry, it's in all of our best interests to help companies deal with these issues. As a start, let's challenge the assumptions by asking some simple questions.

For example, would it hurt to employ some good recruiters to find the right people and bypass the shields that companies have put up to keep away candidates? What if a candidate could talk to the hiring manager or a knowledgeable HR person instead of being brushed off to the website? Why do HR departments act like they are guarding the hiring manager and actual decision makers like they are protecting a nuclear power plant? What's the harm in talking to someone for five minutes to see if both parties are interested in working together?

What if we spent the money on good engineers instead of web-based shield software? Why can't we return the supporting departments within companies to truly *supporting* roles and let engineers, engineer and innovate?

Is the hiring blockade there to keep the horde of unemployed people away or do we have lots of unemployed people because they can't get past the blockade? What if the right people could get the right positions in the right organizations and contribute to the bottom line? To get there, we need to restore common sense to the process, which can't happen soon enough for me.

What can engineers do while waiting for common sense to kick in? Use LinkedIn and other social networking sites to connect with people in important roles at companies you admire and want to work for. This is one way to bypass the "go to the website and apply" dead-end approach. I actually had an HR VP talk to me recently about getting more candidates and ask whether they should use social networking to attract people more effectively. This same company has one of those inane hiring systems. I told the VP to fix that system first, then worry about social networking.

Another piece of advice for engineers: attend some conferences. For example, APEC is a leading power electronics conference coming up in March. This event presents a good opportunity to talk to people about their work and what it's like to work where they do. Visit with exhibiting companies and find out what they are doing and what skills they need. PSMA now lists resumes online as a service to the industry at www.psma.com. People do business with *people,* and people hire people. So do your best to meet and make direct contact with people and bypass the robots whenever possible.

About The Author

Kevin Parmenter has over 20 years of experience in the electronics and semiconductor industry. Presently the director of Advanced Technical Marketing for Digital Power Products at Exar, Kevin previously led global product applications engineering and new product definition for Freescale Semiconductors AMPD - Analog, Mixed Signal and Power Division based in Tempe, AZ. Prior to this, he worked for Fairchild Semiconductor in the Americas as senior director of field applications engineering. In this role, Kevin led the FAE team in the Americas region plus three regional design centers.

Previously Kevin held various technical and management positions with increasing responsibility at ON Semiconductor and in the Motorola Semiconductor Products Sector. Kevin also led an applications engineering team for the start-up Primarion where he worked on high-speed electro-optical communications and digital power supply semiconductors.

Kevin serves on the board of directors of the PSMA (Power Sources Manufacturers Association) and was the general chair of APEC 2009 (the IEEE Applied Power Electronics Conference.) Kevin has also had design engineering experience in the medical electronics and military electronics fields. He holds a BSEE and BS in Business Administration, is a member of the IEEE, and holds an Amateur Extra class FCC license (call sign KG5Q) as well as an FCC Commercial Radiotelephone License.