Rap Session Wrap Up:

APEC Panelists Explore Social Media As Cure For Corporate Hiring Woes

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In the September issue, I wrote about my frustration with corporate hiring systems that make it difficult for technology driven companies to find talented engineers and for talented engineers to land rewarding jobs. During the recently held APEC 2011 conference, I had the opportunity to moderate a rap session on this very topic. The session—which was titled "Jobs and careers: Are corporate hiring & recruiting practices helping or hurting?"—allowed me to compare my experiences as a hiring manager and as a job applicant with the experiences of other engineers in the industry.

This session also gave me the chance to ask recruiting experts why such counterproductive practices for hiring and recruiting exist. And finally, the rap session provided a forum in which other panel members, audience participants, and I could discuss possible solutions to the current bad practices in hiring.

Joining me on the panel were Brian Fuller, editorial director for EELife and EETimes; Ruth Glover, president and owner of Career Consultations; Gail Houston, social media program manager at Intuit; and Charles Brown, director of technical talent at Fusion408. The audience included a cross section of APEC attendees from the conference.

Our spirited discussion began with a review of the state of our industry and the caution that seems to be permeating the hiring process overall. Panelists found that the alternative energy market is growing like mad and needs people now, while other segments of the industry are taking a more-measured approach to hiring. The technical experts participating in this discussion expressed a love of their work and their happiness in seeing the economy start to improve. So, the overall consensus on the state of the electronics industry was positive and reassuring.

However, one of my goals in leading this discussion was to uncover the reasons why seemingly successful companies are making it so difficult for engineers and others to apply for jobs through their online application processes. I wanted to learn what these so-called Applicant Tracking Systems (or ATSs) are all about. To that end, the rap session discussion proved to be very informative as I heard from both job-applicant users of these systems as well as recruiting experts familiar with corporate hiring practices.

Regulatory Compliance Trumps Common Sense

Many APEC attendees in the audience expressed confusion with the application process in general. The apply-on-the-web process is viewed as inane and seemingly never ending. It seems to go on for pages—with applicants asked to enter and re-enter the same information that is already on their resume. Is it just me or has this complexity gotten out of hand?

The explanation for this process came from one of the panelists who mentioned that these complex (and in many cases "store bought") systems are designed to assist with EEOC compliance for "when we get sued (not if)." In other words, the ATS helps to maintain all the information needed to defend the company against the inevitable lawsuit.

But beyond the user-unfriendly nature of the ATS, audience members expressed other qualms with the application process. For example, one of several newly graduating PhD students commented on how Fortune 500 companies' websites will advertise openings for recent PhD graduates but then, within the job description specify a requirement for "5 years of recent experience." This new grad wanted to know how someone is supposed to meet these requirements.

Again, the answer from recruiting experts is heavy with compliance regarding how jobs are structured within the company for the purpose of writing the ads. The structure has to do with "levels" of experience. The explanation seemed to show a trend to make the job description so full of buzz words and requirements that no human being could ever qualify. (Applicants can't sue them I guess?) There may be job openings, but who can qualify? So, while organizations poetically state that attracting top talent is a priority, our systems have made the process unwieldy and extremely difficult for both the candidates and the recruiters.

A One-Size-Fits-All Approach

Accordingly, you have to use the same exact process for any opening in the company, whether a high school grad, BS, MSEE or PhD scientist—engineers or what have you—let's call it technical talent brain power. Organizations have also placed the burden of this on the candidates looking to join the company and rely on web-based systems and descriptions designed to keep lawsuits at bay and to automate the process. Apparently, there is a big business in selling these monstrosities to HR departments to make life easy and solve all of the legal compliance issues.

Ruth Glover of Career Consultations added, "Applicant tracking systems are not just to prevent legal issues: they are called tracking systems, so recruiters can see quickly and accurately where we are in the hiring process, as well as search the database for top talent." That's true, but I wonder whether *any* hiring managers get to see the resumes most of the time.

Many companies use these tracking systems to collect potential applicants (which they likely were never going to contact.) Then, when a recruiter brings in a resume they use the database as a reason to not pay the recruiter.

Company to recruiter: "Sorry, this candidate's already in our database."

Recruiter: "But you never called them."

Company: "Doesn't matter."

This capability might be an ROI selling point for ATS system suppliers. Whether the company hires anyone or not—the ATS saves them from paying out recruiting fees!

In the rap session, we discussed how organizations could differentiate themselves from others by simply hiring data entry clerks (high school students, interns, or others) to enter resume info into these systems rather than asking applicants to spend hours online re-entering information that is already on their resumes.

As I said during the discussion, I still don't understand why we don't just get to talk to the hiring manager for a few minutes to see if there is a fit? The answer from the recruiters: No—not allowed! You MUST use the website so every candidate is evaluated equally. The EEOC and legal stuff again. What I do wonder is whether companies have to do all this crazy stuff just in the U.S. because of our obsession with the legal system or do they have to do it globally as well? If in fact, the hiring process is less encumbered abroad, that might explain some of the growth in other countries' tech forces and provide further evidence that our "policy-legal rules and regulations gone wild" environment is not helping engineers here in the U.S. very much.

Many attendees (some with two advanced degrees) mentioned that they simply don't apply to many companies that have these complex systems in place. Consider the possible implications of that response. In the face of adversity and complexity, there is always opportunity for those who wish to drive simplicity and ease of use. Perhaps, the newer, more innovative companies can use this opportunity to their advantage to land engineering talent that might otherwise seek out the more-established employers? In a competitive marketplace, innovative companies will figure out ways to simplify the application process for the APPLICANT rather than themselves, while still finding ways to protect their companies from legal issues and EEOC rules and regulations.

We also discussed how, in many organizations, even if you apply, it does not mean anyone will ever see your resume unless some complex search engine robot scans the right key words. This fear has led to candidates rewriting their resumes in an attempt to incorporate job description buzzwords to increase the odds that the robot search algorithms (or hopefully a not-overly-tired recruiter) will extract their resumes and present them to the human decision makers at the company. Some call this approach "Taleo-jamming."

The rap session discussion up to this point left us with the problem statement: Companies are barricading themselves from prospective employees to protect themselves. So, having discovered that we know what and why it's all happening and how come it's not like it was even five years ago (when the hiring process was simpler and made more sense), we needed to know whether there might be a solution to this problem. Was there any good news?

Social Media: An Antidote To The Hiring Runaround

Fortunately, the panel discussion did lead us to a silver lining in this corporate hiring cloud. If you have the right attitude and skill set for the position you will likely get the position—IF you can get someone's attention. So how do you do that?

Social media.

Our industry is using social media to bypass the "vending machine," one-size-fits-all, no-human-to-talk-to interfaces and crazy job descriptions. It's a way to communicate with actual people who work for a given company. This allows potential job applicants to find out what the corporate culture is, who works there, what's really going on, what they really want (unfiltered), and who the hiring manager is. Somehow in this environment LinkedIn jobs has established a simple, easy-to-use interface that makes it easy to apply for several jobs without unnecessary complexity. The popularity of LinkedIn jobs is growing like crazy and LinkedIn overall is a great way to look for and apply for positions.

Many of the panelists mentioned that we, in the power electronics community, need training on social media applications. We need to learn how to set up profiles, and to proactively use the tools effectively and efficiently in Facebook, LinkedIn and more. There are classes on social media and it appears this training should be included in a PhD or MSEE curriculum or that graduates should seek these out on their own so they can be considered for openings. It's in our best interest for both hiring and being hired to learn to use these new tools.

In the rap session, we also talked about the importance of a well-connected recruiter—some of them will actually take your resume and enter it into the companies' systems. It is to their advantage to do so since they get paid if the company hires you. Entering your data into a corporate hiring system allows the recruiter to document that they brought you to the company's attention. That is, unless the company has convinced everyone in the white pages to apply so they don't have to pay the poor recruiter for the names in the database they don't have time to contact.

It struck me as funny that several companies are asking how they can better use social media even as their their IT departments are attempting to block social media sites as a time waster. The takeaway for me is that Scott Adams, the creator of the popular Dilbert cartoon series, will have an endless supply of new material as the proponents and opponents of social media develop measures and countermeasures to either foster or block its use, and as job candidates find new ways to deal with new hiring processes and applications systems. All this effort just to become gainfully employed in the critical roles of the future. With both employers and applicants expending so much energy on the hiring process, will either side have any energy or time left to do real work?

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.