

Screen out wrong candidates

Fiona Harvey explains how the internet has become an important tool

When a company is bombarded with 100,000 applications for every 2,000 jobs on offer, sifting through them manually can be a daunting task. Faced with this problem, Xerox turned to recruiting over the internet to streamline its processes and cut costs.

The company used a software tool from Jobpartners, which allows it to advertise jobs, amass CVs, conduct skills tests online and sift through applications for the candidates most suited to each position.

Nike suffered a similar problem, receiving 300 to 400 CVs for each vacancy, and installed the same software. The company estimates it has saved 54 per cent in recruitment costs since the introduction of the system in June 2002. The average time to fill a position has also fallen, from 62 days to 42.

Cutting recruitment costs is one of the key drivers behind online recruitment for most companies. But

those who view online recruitment as simply a way of dealing with high volume recruitment, rather than seeking out high quality applicants, should reconsider, says Ian Miller, chief executive of Parity, the IT services group. "We are seeing people use online recruitment for jobs at all levels," he notes.

Software is good at sifting through mounds of CVs, but that is only part of the story. Websites can also be useful in recruiting to high-flying positions, if properly designed and implemented.

Some of the mechanisms popular with employers recruiting over the internet in recent years have now outlived their usefulness, Mr Miller believes. "Online job boards, where people post their CVs and employers post jobs, are on the wane. The reason is that they suffer from the classic internet problem of too much data, and too little of it of the quality you want," he says.

Recruiting high quality graduates online is a question of presenting a site well and asking the right questions, he argues. Most highly skilled people today are well up to speed with technology, and will find it easy and convenient to browse and apply for jobs on a site they can visit in their own time and at their own pace.

If employers worry that candidates find online recruitment alienating or impersonal, they should consider the alternatives, Mr Miller argues. "Some companies use phone questionnaires, and our research suggests people really do find these alienating as they are responding to a human voice but one that doesn't care what answers they are giving," he notes.

"When companies use the phone to do psychometric testing, they can find that candidates think they are asking trick questions, because it's so impersonal," he adds. Companies can also

use psychometric tests to screen candidates online much more cheaply than by any other method.

Mr Miller compares using a website for the initial stages of a job application to using an ATM at a bank - people find it efficient and convenient so they don't worry about the fact that it is less personal than talking to a human being.

More traditional methods such as writing in with a CV are also impersonal, as candidates may receive back nothing at all after sending in their application, or just a formula letter several days later.

One of the main advantages of online recruitment is that candidates can receive feedback almost instantly, and can be updated with new feedback easily at every stage as their application is processed.

Employers should not imagine that websites are the panacea for their recruitment problems, however.

There are some things sites are not good at.

Robert Myatt, psychologist at Kaisen Consulting, says that online recruiting is "effective in getting a feel for a candidate's thinking skills and motivational fit, but ineffective in looking at issues such as communication skills. They're easily fakeable online."

Skills and knowledge tests should also be used carefully online, as it is relatively easy for candidates to cheat. Online recruitment can also encourage candidates to do part of the selection process for the prospective employer.

If they do not like the tests, or do not perform well in them, they can leave the site without having applied for anything.

This means those who might not have the requisite skills do not even get as far as applying, making the website useful for weeding out unsuitable applicants

before the recruitment process has even properly begun.

Mr Myatt notes: "Online recruitment is a good way for the candidate to assess their own strengths and weaknesses and, therefore, whether they're actually suited to the organisation."

But if candidates are leaving a site without applying for a job employers should consider another possible explanation for their behaviour. If sites are badly designed, slow or difficult to use, candidates will get a bad impression of the company and may be so frustrated that they give up.

On recruitment web pages, the basic rules of any internet site still hold true: it should be easy to find your way around, and attractive to look at; it should contain all the relevant information; it should be quick to download; it should be accessible to people with disabilities; and it should not break down.

