Minimize Turndowns and Falloffs:  
10 Steps to Recruiting Success

By Jon Bartos

They are the enemies of every recruiter: turndowns and falloffs. And they’re on the rise everywhere. I hear about them so frequently from other recruiters that I think it’s time to take a serious look at these dreaded deal breakers.

We’ve all been there. Your star candidate accepts a counter offer, or that sure thing turns out to be anything but when your candidate suddenly says yes to another position. We’re often left scratching our heads asking… “How could this happen?” The turndown and the falloff are the dirty words any recruiter or recruiting manager would like to live without.

Why are they happening so often now? It’s basic supply and demand. The unemployment rate is hovering around 4.5% (0% for the niche “A” players) and the economy is picking up steam. The demand for talent has increased substantially over the last 12 months. And they know it. Top talent can afford to be picky about their teams. Adding to the mix is the growing commitment employers have to protecting and retaining their best employees. Hiring managers know how difficult (and expensive) it is to find and train replacements for top performers, so they’re willing to do whatever it takes to keep them. It’s a tough market for recruiters, and it’s getting harder and harder to shake loose firmly embedded talent from their comfortable positions.

We make it harder on ourselves, too. Most turndowns and falloffs happen thanks to our own professional carelessness. Let’s face it: recruiters aren’t perfect. No matter how professional or experienced we are, we sometimes miss critical steps in the process. Things fall through the cracks. And when we take shortcuts in the placement process—simple mistakes like failing to cover the counter offer early and often, or not following up after a placement is made, increases the likelihood of a turndown or fall off dramatically.

My firm recently placed a financial advisor at a major national brokerage firm. We thought it was the deal of a lifetime for the candidate. He was recruited from a small midwestern bank and the signing bonus alone matched his previous year’s W-2 of $175,000. When the offer was made, the whole office celebrated. Based on his income it was the largest signing bonus we had ever negotiated on behalf of a candidate. A perfect deal. The candidate would make a ton of money, we would receive a handsome fee, and the national brokerage firm was thrilled with the candidate. But the party was short lived. When the candidate submitted his resignation, his employer counteroffered and matched the signing bonus plus added a few incentives of stock options. The candidate who was offered so much is still working at that small bank in Cleveland, Ohio.
Unfortunate situations like these will continue to occur. It’s a candidate’s market and it’s going to stay that way for the foreseeable future. Don’t throw in the towel just yet, fortunately there are steps we can take to minimize, if not completely prevent, turndowns and fallout.

**10 Steps You Must Take to Make a High-Demand Talent Market Work for You**

1. **Truly get to know your candidate**

Don’t be in such a rush to fill a job order that you skip the crucial step of getting to know your candidate. Instead of completing a rough candidate data sheet and quickly submitting him or her for a position, slow down. Take the time to understand what your candidate likes and dislikes about their current job and employer. Ask what they would change about their situation. Gain an understanding of her personal life: hobbies, recreational activities, their spouse and children, what they would like to do more of. Try to find out everything you can about their personal and professional priorities because a career move is not just about the candidate—it’s about anyone in their circle that will be impacted by the change. Today’s candidates value work-life balance and you need to understand how a career move can affect that balance. Dig in. Find out the real reason behind the desire for a change and it’s usually not money. Finally, understand your candidates dream job. What is their ideal job… the perfect next move in their career? Only then can you be more than just a recruiter, you’re a talent scout, looking out for the best interest of your clients. You’ll know what makes them tick, why they’re ready for a job change, and what they want next in their careers. When you develop this level of professional relationship with candidates, you increase your odds of a successful placement, and decrease the chances of turndowns and fallout.

2. **Encourage candidates to ask current employers for changes**

It may sound like you’re helping the opposing team but it works. Once you understand a candidate’s motivation for a job change, encourage them to ask their employer to accommodate their needs. The vast majority of the time our candidates won’t do this. But it’s a great way to flush out other areas of professional dissatisfaction to help the candidate really commit to the idea of a job change. “Since you’re unhappy with the overtime hours and all the excessive travel, why don’t you just ask your boss to be flexible and give you more time to be at your daughter’s softball practice?” The best time to get the candidate out of the process is in the first conversation. Once the candidate actually attempts to resign, the hiring manager will likely make an effort to change the situation that’s causing the employee to look for another job. Never go forward with a candidate unless they have a good reason for considering a new position or they go to their employer to ask for changes in their current situation. Let them know that you don’t want to waste your time searching for the ideal position unless they’re really ready to make a change. Make them prove it to you.
3. Get a verbal agreement about a potential job change

Eliminate gray areas by attaining a verbal agreement from any candidate about their commitment to a career move. Get confirmation that once you’ve found the right position, one that fills the void their current position does not, one that is a desirable next step on their career path, they will act. Candidates need to say it. By verbalizing this commitment to change, it becomes a reality. Avoid working with candidates who are too unrealistic. If they say, “If you find me the perfect job that fits every criteria I am looking for, then I’ll make a job change.” Perfect will never come. The key to getting a verbal commitment is to take a few of the major motivating points for making a change and fulfill them. Once you have it, it’s time to discuss roles in the process and set expectations.

4. Establishing roles and setting expectations

One of the most important steps in the recruiting process is to establish roles and set expectations. Like any relationship, the recruiter/candidate one needs ground rules to thrive. Clearly define how you will work together. Many recruiters don’t. And then they wonder why phone calls are never returned and feedback isn’t given. A great way to begin a relationship is to explain your role in the recruiting process: a professional job description. It is a powerful tool for a recruiter.

“My role is to become your talent agent. I will present you to new teams that have opportunities that are a potential fit to your background. I will find companies that meet your requirements for the next best step in your career. I will present you in a positive manner, work to get interviews set up, and take care of all the details in between. I will also prepare you before interviews. I’ll discuss with you the hiring manager, the company, and the job description, including what is expected of a successful candidate. I will debrief you after interviews, and openly and honestly address any concerns the company might have. Before the final interview, I will help to negotiate a strong compensation and benefits package so it will be a win-win situation. I will walk you through the resignation process and cover the counteroffer. After you join the new team, I will follow up with you on your first day, after two weeks and after 30 days. If at any time you have any issue, no matter how small, we will work together to resolve it. I want to be a partner in your success… your talent agent for the rest of your career.”

“You have a significant role in this process as well. You need to be as flexible as possible with your schedule for interviews and time to talk with me. You have my total commitment to openness and honesty at every stage of this process and I need nothing less from you. If you have any questions or concerns, it is imperative that you bring them to my attention immediately. If at anytime in this process your interest level wanes, let me know. If you are considering another opportunity, let me know. In order for us to
reach a successful conclusion, we need to be able to work closely together and to trust one another completely.”

It’s also important to set expectations on preferred communication methods and times as well as an expected timeframe to return calls. Be firm. Discuss the ramifications of not honoring the ground rules. Let candidates know that they can and will be dropped from the process if they don’t play fair.

5. **Get their skin in the game**

The more skin in the game, the better chance you have of winning. It all starts by getting the candidate’s commitment upfront to a new opportunity. From being flexible in scheduling time to talk with you, to sending a resume on time, to updating a resume to highlight the most recent relevant experience, it all amounts to skin in the game. I like to have candidates send me an email explaining why they are a perfect fit professionally and personally for the opportunity. I try to have candidates do something for the hiring manager or me all through the process. From providing a list of researched competitors to a 90 day business plan of what they would do if they got the job. This keeps the candidate deeply involved in the process and encourages their commitment going forward.

6. **Requalify at every contact**

Every time you talk to your candidate, make sure you have a handle on their commitment level. Ask, “Has anything changed in your work or personal life since the last time we spoke?” Be a great listener. If something has changed, make sure you really understand the impact it may have on the process or job search. Requalify, “On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being you are ready to take the new job, where are you in the decision-making process today?” Follow up with, “What do we need to do to get you to a 10?” Life comes at you fast. Things can change in an instant. Make sure you’re in your candidate’s head – daily.

7. **Accepting the offer on their behalf**

Know where the candidate needs to be financially. Many candidates hate this, but if you are truly working closely together, there are no issues with discussing this up front. Ascertain what an offer needs to be financially in order for the opportunity to make sense for the candidate. Don’t accept, “I want to evaluate the opportunity first to determine that.” That is a losing proposition. What many candidates want is to take a job is based on its requirements. This is invalid in the eyes of hiring managers. They consider a position pay range and what a candidate currently earns and come up with a figure that usually doesn’t go much beyond the mid point. Inject a dose of reality here. Candidates need to understand that at max they’ll be looking at a 10-15% raise. If a candidate has a problem with these figures, it’s time to remove him from the process.
Once you’ve agreed upon a number that the candidate can live with from an earning prospective, get a further commitment of acceptance. Ask, “If things go well in the interview and you like what you see and the hiring manager likes what he sees, can I accept an offer at $X on your behalf after the final interview?” Many times candidates don’t like this question. But a good recruiter maintains control of the process at all times. If the candidate raises any objections— I need to see the benefits, vacation policy, etc… Simply say, “Let’s assume all the data is in line and meets expectations in the final interview, can I accept the offer on your behalf?” If there is any answer other than yes, there’s more going on than the candidate is telling you. There may be another issue pending, or a hidden objection. It’s time to start digging for the real issues.

8. Covering the counteroffer – both emotional and financial

Because companies won’t let their best talent walk out the door without a fight, it’s hugely important for recruiters to give candidates a thorough explanation of the counteroffer and a strategy to deal with it. Cover this early in the process. Make sure candidates understand it is a certainty.

There are two types of counteroffers that come when a good employee resigns. The emotional counter offer appeals to an employee’s sense of honor, loyalty or guilt. It may sound like, “We built this together!” Or “You are a critical part of our team!” Or “You’re like a daughter to me!” Prepare your candidate for an emotional roller coaster and help them ride it out.

Financial counteroffers are becoming more and more aggressive thanks to the costs associated with losing a productive employee. Make sure your candidate knows its coming. This is the time to explain the reality of working for a firm once they’re on notice that an employee has considered another job. From the firm’s perspective, the employee’s loyalty is gone and they’re the first to go if cuts need to be made. From a candidate’s perspective, point out that things haven’t changed, it’s still the same job, company and people they were dissatisfied with. Rejecting counteroffers, both emotional and financial, is in the long-term interest of the candidate, no matter what the circumstances.

9. Role-play through the counteroffer

Handle the counteroffer by equipping a candidate with confidence. Role-playing is a great way to prepare for this eventuality. It gives the candidate the chance to address in advance any emotional and financial counteroffers. You can be of great help here. Encourage the candidate to focus on the transition plan, explaining that it’s not about the company, it’s about the candidate’s future, their family and their career. Make sure they understand the importance of keeping a friendly relationship with their current employers. Entertaining a counteroffer and then rejecting it completely destroys that relationship; burning bridges is not the way to walk out the door.
10. Don’t forget about a placed candidate

Starting a new job is tough. Many companies really struggle with the on-boarding process, and have trouble insuring the new employee gets off to a good start. It’s an uncomfortable first 30 days for most new employees. And this is when they’re most vulnerable to a call from their past employers. Recruiters should touch base often with any placed candidates for the first 90 days in a new position. I usually contact candidates on their first day, after two weeks, on the one-month anniversary of their hire and after 90 days. If, in your conversations, you detect a problem, address it immediately with the hiring manager and the candidate. Ask the hiring manager to help resolve the issue and to help with bonding and on-boarding. Your goal is to make sure that your candidate and the hiring manager have the best chance of successfully working together.

Turndowns and fall offs are professional hazards for any recruiter. They can be damaging to your reputation, to your confidence and to your relationship with your client that you have worked so hard to attain. That’s why the best recruiters are proactive. They work with their clients to develop a win-win hiring process, educate them on the market place and get them involved in helping to sell candidates on opportunities to head off these deal breakers.

Minimizing turndowns and fall offs is all about the details. Don’t take short cuts that cause you to miss critical information. Take the time to implement these 10 steps into your process now to maximize your recruiting success in the challenging market ahead.