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It's Not A Skills Gap, It's A Communication Gap

Grads of Life*Voice*

Build A Stronger Talent Pipeline

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Millions of words have been written about the "skills gap," the theory that employers can't fill positions because job seekers lack adequate skills/training for the positions companies are eager to fill. And for highly technical jobs -- a coding job for example -- I don't doubt the pervasiveness of that problem. But in my experience, the "skills gap" is either overblown or irrelevant. The recent graduates I work with are deterred or intimidated from applying OR applying for the wrong job, by something much simpler: poor communication, in the form of carelessly worded job descriptions.

At Match Beyond, a college-jobs program in Boston created in partnership with Southern New Hampshire University, my job is to help our students and recent graduates navigate the job attainment process. We are a relatively new program – only about two years old – but have had success building relationships with employer partners that help our students and graduates (almost all with Associates' degrees) earn jobs that suit their skills and interests, whether that's as a program coordinator with a local boys & girls club or as an entry-level associate at a financial firm. More often than not, securing a position requires us to translate a job description from jargon to real-world language.

Let me give you an example. The copy below is excerpted from a four-page job posting by a recruiter at a travel company:

> **Position title:** Travel support specialist
>
> **Position description**: [FIRM] is currently seeking a service minded *Travel Support Specialist* to help us keep up with growing demand for our award-

winning tours and adventure travel packages. Our goal is to provide an excellent experience to our travelers. Join our team and find out what makes us a world leader in the travel industry. As a member of our Travel Support team, you will respond to traveler's questions about their tour reservations as they prepare to travel around the globe.

Do you know what the job entails? Have a sense of what the day-to-day tasks or schedule might look like? Me either. And neither do the students I'm working with. Faced with four long pages of equally opaque language, many of my students would simply click next – and it's *not* because they aren't qualified, it's because they don't understand what the job actually is.

In this case, I did what I always do: I called up the recruiter and asked her to clarify. What I assumed was a "sales" job, was no sales job at all – it was a troubleshooting job, perfect for someone who excelled in customer service and enjoyed helping people solve problems (a missed train, a lost passport, an illness). If I hadn't been on-hand to intervene, I worry my student would have missed out on the opportunity and the employer would have missed out on a great hire.

If applicants make it past the job description hurdle, they may get tripped up by online assessments: it's a technology many large corporations use to quickly whittle 500 applications to 50. Except, it's akin to being dropped into a game of Minecraft, where applicants don't have any sense of the rules or objectives! More often than not, applicants don't know basic logistical things, such as how long an assessment will take, or what skill is being evaluated.

It doesn't have to be this way. Here are four recommendations for employers eager to overcome the communication gap:

1. **Eliminate internal jargon and industry buzzwords from job descriptions.** My high school English teacher always said "don't use a $50 word when a $5 word will do!" Same for using company jargon (including acronyms) and fancy terms that may unintentionally intimidate and discourage potential qualified candidates from applying for a position. Just because an applicant doesn't speak an employer's language yet, doesn't mean he or she can't learn it once on the job.

2. **Make job titles more descriptive of the work an employee will be doing.** This might be my biggest pet peeve as a frequent reader of job postings. Please employers, say what the job actually entails. If it's door-to-door sales, write that. If it requires hours on the phone, write that too. Don't make candidates guess at what their responsibilities might be.

3. **Identify hurdles in your process.** Do you know where you lose candidates in the job application process? For many companies, it happens during the online assessment. If you are a hiring manager, ask yourself, why? Is it too long, too cumbersome, too intimidating?

4. **Be human**. Yes, algorithms can create an efficient process for eliminating unqualified candidates from a pool of applicants. But how many great hires are accidentally swept out with the process, because they accidentally selected 'B' when they really meant to select 'C'? Bringing back a little humanity could make a big difference.

Applying for a job is always high stakes. But these days, it seems knowing how to game the application system can be even more important than having the skills or temperament for the job.

At Match Beyond, our students may not have resumes packed with internships and office experience, but more often than not, they are leading complicated lives with great success: managing school, a job (or two) and family, they have mastered the art of prioritization and time management – key attributes in any professional work environment. I want to make sure these young people don't forgo a career-track job, with benefits, because of a technical glitch or a misleading job posting.