

The new fear of commitment

thestar.com/business/small_business/people/2012/05/09/the_new_fear_of_commitment.html

May 9, 2012

With fear in his voice and disappointment in his eyes, a recent MBA graduate told me he'd been offered a position by his dream company, a well-known consulting firm. It was a strategic consulting job, the exact type of work he had hoped to be doing on graduation. "It's full time," he said. "I had really hoped for a one or two year contract."

Much is being written about recent graduates delaying their entrance into the world of work. Sometimes it's because of economic conditions, or a lack of entry-level work.

But another significant trend is fueling this phenomenon—graduates have a deep fear of commitment.

It used to be embarrassing to admit that you were out of work—at any age. Not so anymore. We've all learned that employment is not permanent and being out of work isn't shameful. Common exposure to unemployment and downsizing has changed this new generation of workers.

Gone is the pressure to take a job, any job. New graduates feel starting in a position that isn't right for them would dishonour the investment in their education. Forced to choose between a potential mistake or unemployment, they choose not to choose. The job hunt itself feels overwhelming. Often, it never really gets started.

The MBA's interest in a one or two year contract is simple. He does not want to give the impression that he'll work at this company for life. He intends to move on within the first year, or so, of getting started.

Of course, the grad can move from a full-time position just as easily as a contract. Of course, both he and the employer can choose to end, extend or redefine employment terms at any time.

Yet, a contract, without benefits, suits him just fine. It's a way to do work he thinks he'll love, and it leaves his options open. The out makes it feel less scary.

So, how can companies attract talent if traditional perks no longer hold the same draw?

Here are three suggestions:

Provide good role definitions, short term objectives and performance review schedules up front. Gen Y perceives short term contracts at which they can excel as better than open ended, ongoing commitments. They prefer to formalize the start and end of work relationships upfront.

Emphasize the relationships and opportunities you can provide. These employees may not value the total benefits package as others have in the past—at least not right now. Other considerations are more important. Who will they be working with? What opportunities are there in the future? Make it easy for them to see that they can change roles and still remain happily within your organization.

Don't "Go Dark." Most organizations take weeks to get a candidate through the hiring process. Tell candidates your process, what happens next and when they will hear from you. Grads already fear the job won't be all that it seems in the posting. Your lack of communication plays right into their fears of being treated like a number.

Recently a woman in her 50s gave me a call. She decided to transition from a legal to a project management career. Then that familiar fear came into her voice. An agency offered her a job, and it had exactly the right responsibilities and work/life balance. “It’s too good to be true” she said. “Perhaps I should think about it and look around a little more.”

Maybe fear of commitment may not be limited to Gen Y after all.

Lisa Taylor is the President of Toronto-based Challenge Factory, the only company in Canada where you can test-drive your next career. Challenge Factory provides individuals and companies with innovative talent and career programs targeting new graduates, mid-career professionals and Boomers seeking Legacy Careers.

Website: www.challengefactory.ca

Twitter: @changepaths

Copyright owned or licensed by Toronto Star Newspapers Limited. All rights reserved. Republication or distribution of this content is expressly prohibited without the prior written consent of Toronto Star Newspapers Limited and/or its licensors. To order copies of Toronto Star articles, please go to: www.TorontoStarReprints.com

© Copyright Toronto Star Newspapers Ltd. 1996 - 2022 The Toronto Star and thestar.com, each property of Toronto Star Newspapers Limited, One Yonge Street, 4th floor, Toronto, ON, M5E 1E6