

# HIRING IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

NEW RULES, NEW GAME

Kristine Dery  
Carole Tansley  
Ella Hafermalz

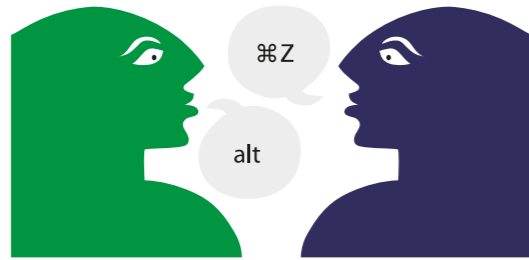
control

esc

What is your biggest weakness?  
Give an example of a time when you had...  
Where do you expect to be in five years' time?  
How do you manage your time and priorities?  
Give an example of a time when you showed...  
Give an example of your lateral thinking...  
What motivates you?  
Why do you think you will be successful in this job?

► Organisations should consider embracing gamification to enhance graduate selection and recruitment

LENGTH : 10 min (2240 words)



**THE EXPONENTIAL GROWTH** in social media has resulted in the disruption of many traditional organisational processes. One such activity is recruitment and selection, where social media have been used to disrupt practices at industry, organisational and individual levels.

COMPANIES are beginning to bypass traditional agency channels with new in-house recruitment practices, new executive search entities are challenging existing models, and individuals are using novel pathways to reach out to prospective employers. This is one of the areas of interest for a team of researchers and industry partners in the University of Sydney's Digital Disruption Research Group (DDRG), which is looking at fundamental changes that are occurring in business as a result of digital technologies.

In this study, we worked alongside a large, global professional services firm to understand the impact of social media on corporate recruitment, and to identify ways in which the recruitment processes can be effectively managed for better quality outcomes.

The ability to attract and retain top talent is a source of sustainable competitive advantage for such firms. Large accounts are won and retained through the ability of professional service firms to offer a wide range of accounting, consulting and advisory services that leverage the talent of staff to add value to clients. Not only is the process of finding and recruiting this talent expensive, it is also inefficient and wasteful when the wrong people are recruited. Findings from this study suggest that graduate recruitment activities can be improved by applying a form of game mechanics called 'gamification'.

Social media is now so integrated into our daily lives that we can barely remember a time without it. Many junior employees have never known a workplace without the capa-

...at times it is hard to find the line that divides our workplace from our home as we constantly switch digitally between the two.

bilities to interact with a wide range of web-enabled technologies and mobile devices. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Snapchat and other social tools are part of the vernacular in both our personal and corporate lives. In fact, at times it is hard to find the line that divides our workplace from our home as we constantly switch digitally between the two. Hand-held devices such as smartphones and tablets make our online engagement ever easier as we connect any time, anywhere. The growth of social media has seen channels such as LinkedIn (238 million members globally and adding 50 million new members a year), and Facebook (more than 1 billion users globally) explore new ways of finding and engaging with people.

Processes associated with attracting and selecting the best available talent are built around networking, relationship building, and engaging with people who have the necessary attributes to add value to the organisation. Social media is designed to enhance capabilities around all of these activities, and therefore is well positioned to alter traditional talent management practices. It is clear that organisations able to use these platforms effectively have much to gain.

In the context of talent management, and more particularly graduate recruitment, we were interested in whether or not digital technologies were fundamentally changing the way applicants engaged with the recruitment process. If the process was being disrupted we would expect to see induced shifts in power relations and changes in the way information traveled.

## Recruiting Graduate Talent

LARGE organisations—professional services firms in particular—deploy considerable resources to compete for the best university graduates, many of whom juggle multiple job offers. Online processes have been characteristic of graduate recruitment for some time, with organisations using websites, online application processes and talent management systems to attract and manage applications. Millennial graduates—those born between 1982 and 2003—tend to be highly technologically connected, and therefore the use of online channels is more characteristic of graduate recruitment than experienced-hire recruitment. However, little research specifically addresses how graduates engage with social media, which increasingly is seen by companies as a cost-effective vehicle for recruiting top graduates.

Professional service firms typically have large graduate recruitment programmes, with the firm selected for this study (here called Consultex to preserve anonymity) hiring some 500 graduates each year. These are chosen from more than 11,000 applicants in complex and rigorous selection processes that use social media and other web-based technologies. Consultex has a talent management strategy aimed at developing a diversified workforce to support business development focused on innovation. Graduate recruitment is an integral part of that strategy and therefore is designed for both renewal and growth. The firm has a history of working closely with universities and their graduate programmes are highly contested among the student applicants.

The present research project was designed to understand how social media was impacting on the recruitment process; in particular whether the existing processes had been augmented and modified by social media, or whether a more fundamental shift had changed the rules of the graduate recruitment game.

We examined the Consultex recruitment process over a period of nine months and analysed social media activity on Twitter, Facebook, Yammer, Whirlpool and LinkedIn. We also interviewed the executives involved in graduate recruitment, together with a sample of students who had been through the company's recruitment process. The

process itself worked like a funnel, with a series of sifting points where graduates were either retained and advanced to the next sifting point, or were politely ejected. Social media was not a part of the process itself, but was a presence around it. At first, it didn't appear to disrupt the process, but rather to support and enhance the experience as graduates were filtered through a series of phases. However, further analysis of the data suggested that more fundamental shifts occurred that reframed and redefined the graduate recruitment process, opening up new opportunities to generate value.

Thinking of the recruitment process in three distinct phases—recruitment, selection, and on-boarding—gives a clearer view of how social media was used by Consultex.

## Phase 1: Recruitment

Traditional face-to-face campus activities still formed the foundation of the graduate information and recruitment activities, but increasingly Twitter and Facebook were used to augment these activities and draw applicants to the website and the on-line application process. This is typically the 'fishing' phase where students may apply to many firms to see who 'bites'. Social media was used to answer simple questions and to provide information to assist with the application process. In this context, social media was considered background to existing recruitment processes.

## Phase 2: Selection

For those graduates who were invited to the more advanced phases of the selection process (including the assessment centre, case study analysis and partner interviews), social media activity began to fundamentally disrupt the process. At these stages there was a significant

increase in social media activity as graduates were connected with current employees in the areas of the business aligned with their stated interests. They were consequently invited to engage with topics of interest to Consultex, and generally encouraged to participate in conversations designed to provide applicants with an authentic view of the organisation. The use of social media to engage applicants at this stage was designed to (1) enable graduates to self-select out of the recruitment process if they recognised that they did not fit with the firm, (2) provide the graduates with the opportunity to be more Consultex-informed in order that the interview process might be further enhanced, and (3) begin the process of establishing networks with existing employees. In this phase, social media was used as a way of enabling candidates to identify with the organisation and to begin a more integrated dialogue designed to enable them to get to know the people of Consultex. In other words, social media effected a broader window into both the company and the applicant beyond skills and potential abilities, and into less tangible identification processes.

## Phase 3: On-boarding

Given that these roles were accepted 12-18 months (and for some of Consultex's competitors up to two years) before the candidate completed his or her degree, there was a substantial period after the offer was accepted during which the candidate was vulnerable to other offers or different opportunities. Social media was therefore used to seamlessly extend the recruitment process into the on-boarding process. Yammer, the main internal social media communication tool at Consultex, was also used to connect graduates to on-going corporate conversations.

Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter were further used to build networks and maintain regular contact with the future employee. In this way most on-boarding activities were completed prior to a graduate's start date.

## Recruiting Graduate Talent

THE CONSULTEX experience highlights the way in which social media was used to enhance the graduate recruitment process. But could this be classified as disruption? Information flows were extended and enhanced, but it could be suggested that existing processes were simply being automated and augmented. However, when we look closely at social media platforms, in particular Whirlpool, we find evidence of a crowd-sourced community of stakeholders sharing experiences, states of mind and understandings of the Consultex process.

In recent years, Whirlpool has evolved from a forum dedicated to the discussion of broadband providers to an active set of online communities. At the time of writing, the site had 627,774 registered members, with 2,019,235 threads and twenty times as many posts. The 'Life' section of the site includes threads on jobs, education, finance, lifestyle and travel. An established graduate programme section includes hundreds of threads, each relating to a specific company and its current graduate recruitment or vacation programme. Members on these threads adopt pseudonyms and are usually not represented by profile photos. This anonymity effects the nature of web forum data.

Although members' posts are technically public, they are often candid, and relate experiences as they happen, often asking others in the forum for advice on upcoming assessments. For example, one forum member asked: "Hi Guys, I have an AC [assessment centre] on Monday. What should I be expecting for the case study and how should I approach working within a team. Eg. Do I find the right balance of leadership (eg 50% talking 50% listening)?"

A significant number of such graduate recruitment posts on the Whirlpool site were dedicated to the Consultex process, either in the form of questions and advice, or the sharing of experiences.

In order to make sense of the implicit (hidden) rules of the selection process, students were using this social media open forum to share information in much the same way as online gamers use social network-

ing platforms to better equip themselves to play their games. Tips on how to navigate the process, what to ask, how to engage in discussions, what to wear and so on were willingly shared by successful and unsuccessful applicants alike. Even interview questions and feedback were explicitly discussed, with one applicant saying that in their behavioral interview: “It seemed like they already had a list of things that they wanted mentioned in a response, ideal actions and such...one question was about giving a time when there was a problem or a disagreement on a team. In feedback I was told that I didn’t say anything about bringing other members of my team in and getting them involved in resolving the disagreement”.

In the open Whirlpool forum, freed from the Consultex spotlight in social media discussions that were mediated formally by the graduate recruitment team, potential applicants more openly discuss how they might “win” the game and “fit” with the Consultex model.

Gamification involves the application of game-like mechanics to encourage certain desired behaviours in an audience. As students in the study interacted with social media, they appeared to continually adjust their behaviour and responses as they ‘gamified’ the recruitment process in order to improve their chances of progressing to the next level. Applicants both competed and cooperated in order to translate the process into a ‘game’ in which those with the best knowledge of both the explicit and implicit rules were likely to be more successful.

As information flows shifted beyond the Consultex-controlled process into more open crowd-sourced platforms, the power base that was previously centralised within the firm shifted toward the applicants as they shared information to ‘be’ the candidate who met the Consultex brief.

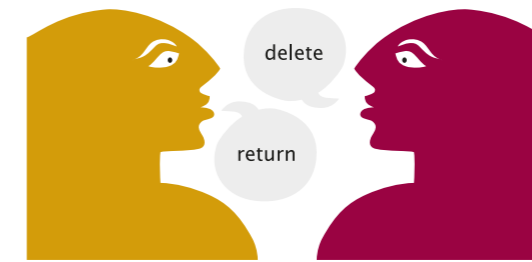
Given Consultex’s aim of creating a diversified workforce to support a growth strategy based on innovation, its graduate recruitment would seem to be problematic. Social media was used to digitally enhance the existing process, rather than to elicit the unique networking and co-creative capabilities of these platforms. The added complexities of the social media platforms, while designed to provide applicants with

an authentic view of the organisation and create touch points, tended to also open up more ‘moves’ for applicants within the process.

To succeed it became more apparent to applicants that the implicit rules needed to be understood. Given the high desirability to ‘win’ the final prize (i.e. to be employed), informal social networking platforms were enabling crowd-sourced strategies that led to a ‘gamification’ of the process by the applicants themselves. Those who learned fastest how to play to the rules and appear most like the current Consultex employees were more likely to be able

to keep playing.

While we cannot claim that the selection process accounted for all of the fall out of graduates in their first two years, there appears to be potential to better engage with the capabilities of digital technologies to disrupt this process. The explicit adoption of the mechanics of a recruitment ‘game’ potentially opens up significant opportunities to mitigate against the selection of Consultex clones, and instead to engage a more diverse and innovative cohort of graduates capable of meeting the organisation’s longer term objectives. ■



Those who learned fastest how to play to the rules and appear most like the current Consultex employees were more likely to be able to keep playing.

### KEY TAKE-OUTS

- **Social media must not be seen as automated versions of traditional organisational practices. Alternative forums should be recognised, and their impact and value understood, as part of the recruitment process.**
- **Graduate employees should be valued as resources in the process. Rather than broadcasting conventional messages through social media, they can suggest new ways to engage with applicants.**
- **Given that graduates are competitive and treat recruitment as a game, organisations should consider embracing gamification to enhance their graduate selection process.**



**Dr Kristine Dery** is a Research Scientist at MIT Sloan School of Management’s Centre for Informational Systems Research and co-founder of the Digital Disruption Research Group in Sydney.



**Carole Tansley** is Professor of HR Innovation at Nottingham Business School in the UK. Her areas of research encompass talent management, knowledge management and e-HRM.



**Ella Hafermalz** is a PhD student at the University of Sydney Business School. Her research looks at how remote workers stay connected with the organisation and how technology can help maintain a sense of organisational cohesion.