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# HR Dimensions

March 2006

## The Hidden Beauty of Career Fairs

By Fay Hansen

Recruiting at career fairs is cheap and fast. Fairs can deliver high-quality hires, fill pipelines and generate some unexpected benefits for building long-term recruiting strength.



In this age of Internet recruiting, career fairs and job expos have a quaint feel about them. But smart companies are using fairs to pull in highly qualified candidates to fill jobs in days, all at a relatively low cost. And when the fairs are staffed by employees, they can help build morale and turn workers into year-round recruiters.

Mike D'Amico, director of compensation, benefits, staffing and HRMS at Cognos Inc., is a career fair convert. With 3,500 employees and high growth, the business intelligence software company is actively recruiting sales, customer support, R&D and finance employees and signed up more than 150 new employees this year for its Canadian facilities alone, with 60 of those hired through a career fair that the company hosted on May 7, 2005.

Cognos typically recruits with an in-house team for nonexecutive hires and a third party for senior-level positions in its headquarters in Ottawa, Ontario, and Burlington, Massachusetts. But in the spring of 2005, the company had too many open positions. "We started to see the market tighten, so we scheduled the career fair," D'Amico says.

Cognos held the fair at its Ottawa facilities and staffed it with 140 employees who volunteered to work at the Saturday event. The total cost was \$55,000, spent mostly for radio spots and other advertising and for the CDs about the company that each attendee received.

Cognos made it clear in advertising for the fair that the bulk of the jobs were highly technical and required experience in the high-tech industry. Its objective was to fill 70 open positions, including 40 R&D jobs. The company also

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wanted to invigorate its pipeline and launch a branding and marketing initiative to aid future recruiting efforts. "We wanted to use the fair to get out information about the value proposition that Cognos has to offer," D'Amico says.

### Low Cost, High Quality

The half-day Cognos fair pulled in 1,800 attendees, with some candidates arriving hours before the doors opened. Candidates passed through a pre-screening process that routed 375 "yes" candidates and 500 "maybe" candidates to specific areas for each position. The rest were routed to a "not likely" table.

"Almost half of the 1,800 were high-quality candidates, and this far surpassed our expectations," D'Amico notes. Additional screening and short interviews with hir-

ing managers generated more information about each candidate, with 200 finalists invited to return for an extended interview at the firm.

Offers went out within a week. Cognos hired 35 attendees directly and an additional 25 through referrals from attendees or candidates who applied online because of the fair. One of the hires was placed in a senior director position and has already been promoted to vice president. "We considered it a resounding success to get 60 hires out of one day's activities, and on a cost-per-hire basis, it was incredibly cheap," D'Amico says. "There's no way we could have spent the money more effectively."

Cognos went out of its way to ensure that unsuitable candidates left the fair with a positive image of the event and the company. Some were counseled about the additional training they might need to work in the high-tech in-

dustry; all left with handouts to help them in their job search. "We treated them with dignity and they walked away with something of value," D'Amico says.

As a pipeline-building event, the fair was a huge success. Before the fair, Cognos received 50 to 150 online applications a day. "This jumped 200 percent when we were publicizing the fair and then another 200 percent in the month after the fair," D'Amico reports. With the pipeline re-energized, Cognos has cut time to fill by 45 percent for hiring completed since the fair.

With a cost of less than \$1,000 for each hire and benefits that reach well beyond the immediate recruiting results, Cognos has now decided to hold fairs on a regular basis. "It was so successful that we are now planning to have a biannual or annual fair, depending on our level of hiring," D'Amico says. The employees who worked the fair received meals and a personal thank you, and became more committed to the company, he reports. "This was a great side benefit of the fair. The employees were energized and excited to see the firm grow by bringing in good talent."

### Campus Connections

Using career fairs to hire direct from industry works well for IT companies such as Cognos that are looking for specific skills and experience. They also work well in accounting, where labour markets are tight and firms are looking for new graduates because of the severe shortage of candidates with three to seven years of experience. Rachlin Cohen & Holtz, a regional independent accounting firm based in Miami, has turned to campus career fairs as the best method for filling positions. The firm has found that job expos not associated with colleges do not draw suffi-

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*The Hidden Beauty . . . from page 2*

cient numbers of public accountants because of the tight labour market conditions.

Rachlin goes head-to-head with the Big Four and other large regional accounting firms when it recruits new accountants and staff. The company hits fairs at Florida colleges in the spring and fall, with on-campus interviews conducted the day after a fair and office visits scheduled for the following week. It also pays some of its interns a stipend to become the firm's campus representative when they return to school.

"The labour market for accountants has tightened so more firms are recruiting at the fairs," notes Marc Grad, director of human resources. At the fall 2005 University of Florida fair, Rachlin manned its booth with two partners and two staff members, including one recent graduate who knew many of the students and could establish an

immediate connection for the firm.

After the spring 2005 fairs, the company made 24 offers and received 17 acceptances. "We were thrilled," Grad recalls. "That's a very high acceptance rate in this market." Grad believes that the quality of hires at the career fairs is generally higher than it is through other sources. But competition for the top candidates is tough.

"At the fairs, the Big Four put on a glossy dog and pony show, followed by spa and golf outings," Grad says. In contrast, Rachlin candidates meet with a managing partner and spend a day at the firm. This year, the firm developed a new pitch based around the idea that it offers candidates a "big-firm experience with a small-firm feel," where new hires work with clients as large as Big Four clients and gain more hands-on experience and variety in their assignments. "It's been a successful differentiation," he reports. "We have a better story to tell and we're attracting higher quality candidates."

Rachlin uses signing bonuses only as a last resort. With the Big Four often offering a salary that is 10 percent higher, Rachlin tries to close the gap with a direct call to the candidate from a managing partner and a \$1,000 signing bonus. "It's not all about money, fortunately," Grad says. "A direct call from a managing partner is worth a lot. New graduates want opportunities."

The tighter markets have pushed up salaries in accounting, and in the spring of 2005, Rachlin found that it was lagging in the market. The firm has just completed a massive round of increases. "This spring, we increased salaries 10 percent to 20 percent for new recruits, which caused compression elsewhere in the organization, so we had to give bonuses and across-the-board merit increases of up to 28 percent," Grad says.

**Career Fair Comeback**

"Hiring through career fairs is a veritable bargain," Grad says. "In addition to filling our immediate hiring needs, we get to eyeball other firms, and there are great marketing opportunities. We can build a pipeline by talking to younger students who can be slotted into internships. Also, candidates at the fairs have their own sets of friends that they can refer to us. The fairs provide a lot of bang for your buck if you look at the exposure you gain and the number of people you reach."

With job growth improving at most companies, career fairs are making a comeback as an effective recruiting tool. In October, Compuware Corp. held an invitation-only fair for IT candidates in Montreal to fill 100 open positions. Qualcomm, the wireless technology giant, hit five different recruiting fairs for minority candidates this fall in addition to two dozen campus fairs. Industry fairs for pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies often draw more than 1,000 candidates.

Career fairs allow companies to balance the high-tech approach to recruiting with high-touch methods and strengthen their recruiting pipelines, which will become increasingly important as labour markets continue to tighten in many industries. As Cognos and Rachlin have discovered, fairs are a fast, inexpensive method for achieving face time with high-quality candidates and building the employment brand in all the right places.

*Reprinted with permission. Your Workplace magazine: Positive Strategies for Progressive Leaders. Issue 8, volume 1. Your Workplace magazine can be reached at 613-549-1222, www.yourworkplace.ca.*

# KD-HRPA Dine Around

The Dine Around is KD-HRPA's most popular annual event. This year, the Dine Around was held at the Days Inn on January 26, 2006 with 100 members and guests in attendance. The event was an excellent means of gaining valuable information about timely and relevant HR topics from experts, most of whom are from the local area.

The evening included time to network and then the Dine Around began. Each person had the opportunity to listen to 3 experts and enjoy a great meal. Topics included: Team Building, Work/Life Balance, Infection Control in the Workplace, WSIB Issues, Recruiting & Verifying Foreign Credentials, Wrongful Dismissals,



Leadership Development, Professional Image, Change Management and Employee Assistance Program.

Thank you to everyone who attended as well as all of the businesses who generously donated door prizes.

Special thanks to the presenters: Kristina Sisu, Jim Gauthier, Nancy Millward, John Russell, Elaine Johns, Melanie Steers, Wendy Hay, Alan Whyte, Carol MacKillop and Deborah Kimmett.

If you have any suggestions for next year's Dine Around or know someone who may be interested in presenting, please forward any information to the KD-HRPA Administrator.

*Steve Wowk, CHRP  
Membership Director*

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Welcome to our . . .

## New Members

By Steve Wowk, CHRP

Membership  
Director

As of March 2, 2006, KD-HRPA has 169 members versus 147 at this time last year (15% growth). Thirty six percent of our members have a CHRP designation. In the past year, KD-HRPA has experienced the third highest growth rate of the 28 Chapters.

KD-HRPA would like to welcome our 8 new members.

*Collen Cross  
Catrina Moniz  
Tracey Mallen  
Steven Menard  
Leanne Deodato  
Melanie Steers  
Laura Millichamp  
April Brown*

If you know of anyone who may be interested in membership information, please email our HR Administrator and I will ensure that the individual is contacted and receives the necessary information.



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# HRPAO Annual Conference

Thousands of other HR Professionals recently participated in HRPAO's Annual Conference in Toronto. This year's conference began the evening of Tuesday January 31 with speakers Loretta LaRoche, Keith Ferrazzi and Fredrik Härén and ran through to mid-afternoon February 3 at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre.

In addition to a great exhibitor showcase (Ceridian had two very

entertaining Zero Gravity Circus performers – I am pictured with one of them), passionate keynote speakers and fun networking events, there were over 100 sessions offered. If you have never attended the conference, or were unable to make it this year, a lot of valuable information can be gathered, taken back to the workplace and applied in your HR role. For example, Michael Fitzgibbon's

"Employment Contracts: Tips, Tricks and Techniques" provided valuable (and very applicable) information on how to more effectively write and revise employment contracts.

Mark your calendars now, as next year's conference will run from January 31, 2007 to February 2, 2007 at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre.

*Paul Eves, Newsletter Director*



Paul Eves, January 31, 2006, at the HRPAO Conference in Toronto

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# Did You Have Your Recess Today?!

Do you remember when you were in school? Maybe it was quite a while ago, but do you remember your favorite subject? I know mine was definitely recess. I could run and play outside and didn't have to sit still. Sitting still was a challenge for me. When you see children outside running and being free, just following their need to play and have fun, it feels so wonderful to witness that freedom and exuberance.

One morning when I was in Toronto I decided to take the AM commuter train downtown on a Monday morning. As I stood there waiting for the Go train to arrive I watched the commuters coming up the stairs and standing, stoically waiting. No one spoke and there was definitely no fun happening here. No smiles – very little chit chat – just many grim faces starting yet another work week.

I think having fun and taking time for “recess” is a critical component of success and abundance. Without it our energy gets drained, we become consumed by doing, and we get caught up in the “doing until we are done in syndrome”. Having and being fun is an amazing way to bring our energy levels back and to lessen those wrinkles that come from frowning (it takes many more facial muscles to frown than to smile). Many of us may have an old tape, “you can't go out to play until all your work is done”, running in our mind. Let's face it, our work will never be all done! There will always be another truckload waiting for us. Taking time to have recess and to play will free up more energy to tackle the next barrage of things we need to do. When all we focus on is work guess what shows up? You guessed it – more work! Remember the old line “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy”?

Another amazing way to free up our energy while we are in the “doing” mode is to celebrate our actions. You just made a phone call that you were not looking forward to making, or completed a task on the computer that you were dreading. Celebrate this action by a thumbs up, a “Yeah that's done!”, by taking a tea break or by just acknowledging to yourself “I am so glad I got that done!” and by feeling good about it. The benefits of doing this are amazing. You will find you are less drained and have much more energy to again get into the “doing” mode.

I think we all need to build recess and celebration into our lives and to take time to play. How can you play more? What are things you like to do that are playful? Make a list of things that you consider play and start planning time for them. What are some ways that you can celebrate your actions? Write these out and put a reminder somewhere for yourself to take time to celebrate your actions. You will be so glad you did.

Be kind to yourself and remember to take time for “recess”.

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