

TALENT IN ON-LINE PANEL COMPANIES

Attracting and retaining good talent continues to be the main pre-occupation of the market research industry. On-line panel companies might be better placed to attract and retain talent by being simply operating in a new, cutting edge industry. In March 2010, Asia Research interviewed Martin Filz, Regional Director for on-line panel company Research Now, and reports on the HR dynamics in on-line panel companies today.

Martin comments that simply being an 'on-line' business tends to attract go-getting individuals keen to develop a career in a fast-growing and innovative industry. "We have a young and dynamic working environment," Martin comments. "In Asia, we have to cover eight time zones, so we work hard but we also have a fun working environment. We put a high proportion of our profit into training and extra-curricula activities such as monthly social and sporting events."

Although not exclusively a 'young club', on-line panel companies are typically populated with people in their mid-20s, contrasting with some of the main stream research companies with 'more seasoned' researchers in their 30s, 40s, and 50s. But like research firms, the industry also attracts more women than men.

Candidates for on-line panel companies generally come from two sources - firstly there is the regular graduate intake. On-line panel companies are promoting their industry to the next generation of professionals by undertaking speaking engagements at universities, educating students about the existence, role, and application of consumer insight through on-line data collection methods. This in itself promotes the mainstream research industry and can perhaps assist the industry in raising the status of survey research as a career choice for graduates.

The second main source of candidates is from the main stream research industry itself. A good source of candidates is people who have worked in operations departments of large research agencies. Filz comments, "We find that people who have worked in large CATI units often have the skills we look for, such as good organisational skills, attention to detail, empathy, etc. Even though we don't do research, staff with research experience are very useful since they understand the interface between research and the respondent, and are therefore better able to advise clients in aspects such as respondent recruitment and questionnaire design."

On-line panel companies generally split themselves between 'Sales' and 'Operations'. Each department requires different HR qualities, but both have well-structured career paths. Salespeople need to advise clients and talk around the research considerations. Clearly salesmanship is also important, such as the ability to chase business, understand client needs, create empathy with clients, close deals, and so on.

A typical career path in sales would start in a support role to an account manager, and then moving to the account manager position after a period of training and experience in compiling quotations and general client management. From here, the salesperson can move on to a team leader role. Generally on-line panel companies organise themselves on

geographical demarcations, e.g. a team leader might cover clients within a particular city or state, and then move on to become a country manager. Sometimes salespeople would be assigned to regional key accounts; for example, where they are managing clients organised in similar roles such as regional account directors within the mainstream agencies. Some panel companies who deal both with research firms and end-clients are organised by verticals such as 'agency', 'government clients', and specific end-client industry verticals.

For a career in Operations, there are several sub-divisions including 'Sample Only' teams, technical teams such as those working in flash development; and 'Full Service teams' that manage sample, scripting, hosting, and data processing. The 'Sample Only' teams usually work with research agencies that have their own on-line web-hosting software and data processing - usually the larger firms. The Full Service teams provide the end-to-end on-line solutions for smaller agencies that do not have on-line capabilities. Interestingly, Martin Filz comments that demand for Full Service is increasing, in the last 12 months rising from 40 percent of their business to 60 percent today, indicating that smaller research firms are gaining market share.

On-line panel companies have purposely avoided going into the mainstream research business and people interested in analysis and consumer insight are either not attracted to on-line panel companies or will not last. Some argue that the on-line panel companies are missing an opportunity by not offering analysis and insight services, but the business managers and investors in these companies see the benefit of the data collection-only business model producing fast project turn-around, high cash flow, lower overhead and, of course, profit.

Contrast this with mainstream research agencies who see data collection as a hassle, an unreliable business stream, and who are winding down their field departments.

Although on-line panel companies have become rich in this new research era, talent is not so much attracted by the financial rewards of a career in this industry and usually the financial rewards are no greater than that of mainstream research business. People are attracted to on-line panel companies by the entrepreneurial spirit in these companies, the exposure they get to so many different clients, the dynamic working environment, and the companies' commitment to training and development. "We are like a Google and want to act like one!" Martin concludes. ■

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