

Winning approach

Sharon Rumens and Stacey Kenyon provide an overview of their recruitment practices and take readers step by step through their highly effective recruitment evening



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All of us working in the childcare sector know that it's been increasingly hard to recruit in the last few years. After the dramas around the English and Maths GCSE requirements, changes to apprenticeship funding and the introduction of the childcare levy, everyone has found that recruitment has been more challenging than ever.

An added problem for us is having all five of our nurseries in one small town. Over the last 27 years that we've been in operation, we feel that we must have employed or at least met or interviewed most of the nursery nurses who live locally to our nurseries!

We have been lucky that our usual vacancies (down to maternity leave or perhaps a team member moving out of the area) are normally quickly filled by recommendations from existing team members, candidates who have sent in speculative applications or sometimes students or apprentices who have just finished their college courses.

However, we have occasionally needed to recruit large numbers of team members in a relatively short period of time. The most recent of these occasions was in September 2015, when we opened our fifth and largest nursery in the same town as

our four other nurseries. We knew then that we would have to be inventive in order to recruit the extra 45 team members needed.

It works for us!

Getting recruitment right on an ongoing basis is often the result of lots of different types of initiatives and we've always felt that we've done that well. We have a great relationship with our local college, where we visit to meet childcare students and offer training on interview skills and becoming 'work-ready'. This means that we build relationships with the nursery nurses of the future who will then apply to us when starting their careers. We also offer placements to childcare students from our local college, some of whom we offer jobs to for when their college courses come to an end.

Then there's social media, which we make full use of - perhaps unusually - with the help of our 195 existing team members who will share recruitment posts for us and tag in friends of friends who may be interested. We encouraged their support with the introduction of our

recruitment bonus scheme for referrals.

Crucially, all team members know they bear no responsibility for the performance of anyone they refer - that's our problem to interview, monitor and induct appropriately - but when someone they recommend successfully completes three months' service with us, they then get a financial bonus in wages or additional holiday days.

Inspiration required!

But, back in 2015, when we needed to recruit a significant number of new team members all at once, we needed to think of a new approach. We wanted to attract people who perhaps wouldn't ordinarily be looking for a job, people who were loyal to their current settings, too settled to actively look for new roles or simply had no time to attend interviews during the working week. These were the people we wanted the most.

It occurred to us that our stylish new purpose-built nursery that we were recruiting for could be part of the solution to our recruitment difficulties. We had been building the new nursery for the last nine months; it had attracted a lot of attention as an attractive new purpose-built nursery building and people working in childcare locally understandably wanted to see inside!

We, therefore, decided to hold an evening, primarily aimed at

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recruitment, but open to all to come and see the building, meet the team and share best – outstanding - practice (all our nurseries are rated outstanding by Ofsted).

Planning

We had previously held an open morning on a Saturday. This proved to work well, but we thought we might be able to get more prospective team members if we held an open evening where people could come along after work and meet us or simply look around the new nursery.

To help publicise the evenings, we really embraced the power of social media and Facebook, in particular. In June 2015, our recruitment evening post was shared over 300 times and reached over 25,000 people! We also used traditional methods of notices in each nursery building for parents to read and large bright banners outside our nurseries situated on main roads.

Anyone interested could come along on the night with or without an appointment. As the date became closer we received lots of calls from people interested in attending and also wanting to book in for interview. Initially, anyone interested was pre-screened by our central support team and once they had passed the initial screening they were booked in for interview. As momentum and interest grew, we had to ask current team members, nursery managers and senior team members for help on the evening.

On the night

Our pre-booked interviews were arranged on the evening: these were organised into three groups with a senior person assigned to each group,

and three interviews taking place at the same time. We had a number of qualified applicants, as well as apprentices and, finally, people looking for part-time work, either on a job share or lunchtime cover basis.

On arrival, each candidate was greeted, their personal details taken, copies of certificates made and a photograph taken. This was really helpful when looking back and discussing applicants the following day. They were then taken for a tour around the new nursery with a Mulberry Bush Nursery team member, before attending their formal interview. The interviewers were a nursery director, a long-standing nursery manager and the senior manager, all of whom carried out consecutive interviews.

On meeting the applicants, it was clear that some were attending just for a look around the nursery, while others simply wanted general careers advice. We met lots of different people that evening, from people wanting a total career change and nursery parents thinking of working in childcare to qualified practitioners and people looking to start their working career in early years. We also met a number of the local college childcare students whose courses were

coming to an end towards the end of June.

Before leaving us, everyone who attended the evening was given an information pack full of details about Mulberry Bush Nursery Group, the roles we had available as well as the staff benefits available to Mulberry Bush team members.

The following day each candidate was discussed and successful candidates were asked back for second interview. Second interviews are an important part of the recruitment process involving candidates spending a few hours in one of our units working with children and being observed on their interactions with the children as well as how they use their initiative. They also have an opportunity to speak with the team members in the unit.

Result

Over 25 serious applicants attended our third recruitment evening. Twenty of these were invited in for a second interview and to spend some time in the units and then an impressive 14 jobs were offered (and accepted!) over the following week. In other words, this model has worked really well for us and we will be repeating it on an annual basis. ■

- Sharon Rumens is the HR manager and Stacey Kenyon the senior manager for the Mulberry Bush Nursery Group. The group currently operates five Ofsted-rated 'outstanding' nurseries in Bury, Lancashire employing over 195 team members.

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