



Handling Helicopter Parents

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Just when you think you've seen it all, a new challenge emerges on the human resources horizon. They've been dubbed helicopter parents because of their propensity to hover over their children, most of whom are adults. And hover these parents do, sometimes to the point of attending interviews with their job-seeking children or contacting their children's employers.

A state of mind

"We hire a lot of recent graduates and some interns, and this issue comes up a lot actually," says Scott Testa, director of HR for Mindbridge Software, a leading provider of intranet software.

The most frequent occurrence is telephone calls from parents asking why their children weren't hired, he says. But even when young people get jobs with Mindbridge, it doesn't mean parents won't be in touch with the company.

Parents call about responsibilities of the job once their children start. "We've had people call and say, 'My kid doesn't like the job,'" Testa tells *HRWire*.

Parental involvement often starts early in the process. The company gets a lot of candidates through employee referrals, Testa explains. Young candidates' parents are often friends of Mindbridge employees. Consequently, parents already have some background information about the company.

Nevertheless, it doesn't stop them from trying to obtain more. "Parents scout out the place before kids come for interviews," Testa says. "They get more involved than you'd like."

The company has had instances where parents are in the waiting room during job interviews. Other parents have shown up to help their children fill out job applications.

Testa, who has been in HR for 15 years, tells *HRWire* parental involvement is a relatively new phenomenon. "When the job market was not real good, 2001, 2002, 2003, that's when it seemed that it really started to happen," he says.

Originally, however, parents were mostly inquiring about why their children weren't hired. Now that the market has improved, calls are focused on job responsibilities. A parent will indicate his or her child doesn't like the job and ask what can be done, Testa explains. Sometimes parents will even suggest solutions, like another job or another boss, he says.

Bridging the gap

How Mindbridge handles parental involvement depends on each situation, Testa tells *HRWire*. "We generally take all the calls, but depending on the situation, we're usually pretty blunt," he says.

In cases where people were not hired, parents are told their children were "not the most qualified candidate." However, if a person is an employee, it's more complex. "Let's put it this way, if a person is already with us and parents are calling, it's not looked upon in a positive way," Testa says.

His advice to HR is to take each situation individually. "Sometimes we can view it as a positive. If a parent's friend recommends someone, the kid is less apt to do a bad job," he says.

But Testa says he has gotten calls from a number of irate parents. The company has also received calls from customers who threatened to break off business relations because their children weren't hired.

The most serious situation involved a parent whose child didn't get a job. "The parent called up and was screaming on the phone, to the point of making threats to us. Scary is the wrong word, but there was reason for concern. The person was obviously off kilter," Testa says.

The best approach is to try to defuse a situation, he tells *HRWire*. Rather than discuss a hiring decision over the phone, he generally suggests meeting in person. Parents rarely take him up on it.

On the other hand, when parents want to talk about their employee children's work performance or other job-related matters, Mindbridge has no problem telling them no, explaining that it feels job issues are between the employee and the company.

Another company practice is for HR to handle all parental inquiries. If a parent contacts a department manager, the manager knows to refer the person to HR.

Parental involvement

Handling helicopter parents is a challenge that comes with employing today's recent grads, but it's not the only one.

"In general, there is much more sense of entitlement. There seem to be a lot more people that don't want to pay their dues," Testa says. "What we've found is a big difference between recent grads and young people who are on their second jobs."

Mindbridge's experience is not unique. Indeed, a national poll conducted by Sacred Heart University finds that nearly 83% of adults strongly or somewhat agree that American's youth feel more entitled compared to 10 years ago.

According to Testa, most issues are related to the fact that most recent grads never had a job. "They never had to act a certain way and know certain decorum," he says. "I just think with your typical grad there's a disconnect as to how the real world works."

For HR and other members of the management team, what Testa calls "a sense of reality" presents as many challenges as helicopter parents. "It's almost that doing their job is not nearly as big an issue as teaching common sense and decorum on the job and how to do well in the workplace," he says.

Like Testa, Rick Delano, cofounder and marketing director of LifeCourse Associates, sees a difference in this generation. He's also familiar with helicopter parents.

LifeCourse Associates is a publishing, speaking, and consulting company inspired by the generational discoveries of leading authorities William Strauss and Neil Howe, authors of numerous books including *Generations*, *13th Gen*, *The Fourth Turning*, and *Millennials Rising*. The firm serves companies, government agencies, and non-profits by helping solve marketing and workplace problems and exploit strategic opportunities related to generational issues.

A new generation has emerged, beginning with people born in 1982, Delano explains. Strauss and Howe refer to them as the Millennials, as opposed to Generation Y, believing the term more accurately reflects the differences between this generation and the one that came before it, Generation X.

There are seven core traits of Millennials, they say, including that members of the generation were raised to feel special and are sheltered.

In addition, Millennials have a very good relationship with their Baby Boomer parents; research shows over 80% get along well with their parents. Boomers have good, horizontal relationships with their children and are in essence co-purchasers.

Their involvement has impacted colleges, and the nature of their parenting style is leading to a new experience for employers, Delano says.

He tells *HRWire* that LifeCourse Associates has done a lot of work with the military and its experience with Millennials' parents showing up in recruiters' offices. Parental involvement has meant a shift in approach for military recruiters.

"They have to anticipate the discussions that are going to be taking place and know that they're speaking to really two audiences," Delano says, indicating that even when parents aren't present, Millennials will share whatever they're told with them.

According to Delano, there is no getting around the fact that there will be ongoing co-purchase between this generation and their parents, and that it will extend to the workplace. He therefore suggests that employers rely on the experiences of colleges and the military and implement similar strategies.

Offering parent seminars that outline appropriate and inappropriate guidelines is one way to reach out to the other half of the hiring audience. Technology is another. Because parents are already looking at employee websites, Delano recommends creating a section of the site specifically for them.

He says LifeCourse Associates sees no risk in targeting parents, and parents will appreciate it. In fact, for the company interested in hiring Millennials, it may be a worthwhile approach.

If one's trying to secure a set of new employees in a competitive marketplace, it requires taking initiative, Delano says.

Leadership potential

And what of Millennials, the generation with parents hovering over them, who are labeled entitled by some? Delano points out that entitled can be interpreted as either spoiled or ready to take over.

Although Millennials might not be ready for the corner office quite yet, the Sacred Heart University survey suggests they may indeed have leadership qualities. The poll finds that a majority of responding adults believe young people today are more assertive, more educated, and more responsible than 10 years ago.

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