

Kicking and Screaming into the New Millennium: Using a Web-Based Vacancy Posting Network to Streamline Recruiting Practices at the Louisiana Department of State Civil Service

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From Paper to Pixels: a Timely Transition

The Louisiana State Department of Civil Service is a centralized personnel system moving towards decentralization. The Staffing Division of DSCS, responsible for recruitment and selection of candidates for jobs in this system, has developed an Internet application, Job Search, which has successfully replaced the costly, time-consuming paper vacancy bulletins that we had previously depended upon. Job Search provides this information to our applicants in a format that makes it easier for job seekers to find the specific vacancies in which they are interested by defining their interests to a search engine for this database. State Human Resource officers can recruit via this database at no cost to their agency but a couple of hours of training.

Envisioning Our Future

The Louisiana DSCS is in the process of delegating many human resources functions to State employers. We are in the process of transferring a great pool of knowledge and skills to Louisiana State employers in order to give them the resources and flexibility to manage their workforces to the best advantage of their organizations. Eventually, the Staffing Division sees State employers taking charge of hiring from start to finish. The Staffing Division of Civil Service will serve as consultants and resource experts for agencies, assisting them with information, training and advice. Job Search will be the State's online job board, where all State employers will be able to post their vacancies. Applicants will apply directly to the State agency that posted the job, who will assess their qualifications for the job, rank the qualified by means of an appropriate selection procedure, and choose the best person for that vacancy.

State employers will accomplish this through the medium of Job Search. Instead of sending inquiries to hundreds of people that have a score for a certain job to find out whether any of them are available, employers will use Job Search postings to solicit inquiries from applicants. They will post their vacancies and instruct interested candidates to reply directly to them. Rather than getting existing lists of candidates from Civil Service, many of whom fail to respond to employer inquiries or otherwise turn out not to be interested in that particular job, State employers will create their own lists of candidates from those who reply, and will even create position-specific selection procedures in some cases. Even at this early stage, with Civil Service continuing to administer nearly all selection procedures, State employers using Job Search report being thrilled with the ease of reaching interested candidates.

The Past

Our past was built of paper: paper job fliers, paper promotional announcements, paper announcements of jobs open to the public. All of this paper served our aim of providing our State Human Resources offices with good lists of people qualified for and interested in the jobs that they needed to fill.

The complex paper process was designed to strike a balance between resource use and benefits to our customers. If all these jobs were open to application all the time, application processing would take up too great a proportion of our resources. Although the announcement process for probational hires consumed considerable time and labor -- the time it took for a State employer to get a list of names from a Special Announcement could be as long as three months, sometimes even more, under our former procedures -- it at least confined our efforts towards certifying candidates for rarely-filled jobs within the time period of the announcement.

So we ended up with three types of paper information: job fliers included the jobs open to everyone all the time; promotional announcement bulletins were issued for infrequent promotional openings, and bi-monthly Special Announcement bulletins were issued for jobs not usually open to public application. As job information changed, fliers had to be updated, reprinted and redistributed. These methods of communicating job vacancy information consumed considerable materials and labor.

Furthermore, the product of these bulletins, the certificate of eligible candidates that Louisiana Civil Service issued to State employers, was often not very useful. A great number of the people on the standing lists are not actually available for every vacancy in a particular job in a particular parish (Louisiana is divided into parishes rather than counties; a legacy of the Napoleonic Code). They may only want to work for certain employers, for example, or be temporarily unable to work, and so forth. Lists with hundreds of names sometimes yielded only a handful of candidates to interview. When job seekers respond directly to State employers' announcements on Job Search, this facet of the availability problem is virtually eliminated.

Another shortcoming of paper announcements was the limited reach of their distribution (the logistics of distributing paper promotional announcement bulletins had its own set of headaches in some very large agencies). Our Department mailed out copies to subscribers; both State employers and our own recruitment offices posted them to bulletin boards; we mailed them to Job Service offices. Subscribers, however, and customers of our recruiting offices, were people who had already found the State as a potential employer. So were the people looking at bulletin boards at State agencies. But did everyone who wanted to work for the State know where to find these bulletins? And what about the jobs that our Department was not obliged to announce in these bulletins? How were we to make job seekers aware of the employment potential in State service, and how could we maximize the job information available to the public?

Enter Job Search

The growing importance of the Internet as a mass communications tool stimulated the growth of online job information sites. We realized that the Net was a low-cost channel for job information with a potentially global reach. Not only would we have the opportunity to disseminate vacancy announcements to far larger applicant pools than ever before, but we would also gain a valuable opportunity to replace our slow and costly paper announcement processes. We also realized that such a vacancy system would offer State employers an inexpensive and convenient way of announcing their own positions, a crucial resource in our enabling them to manage their own recruiting and hiring. So we set to work, with our I/T staff and a consulting firm, and Job Search went into production for probational announcements only in May 2001. Promotional announcements were added in June, 2001, and we began to train the first agency users at that time.

Here's what Job Search looks like to the job seeker. **[attachment: What the job seeker sees]** In the frame on the left, we have such resources as a simple FAQ on State of Louisiana employment; information on taking written exams (we had been moving away from scheduling exams to allowing candidates to report to test centers on their own, which we referred to as "walk-in testing"); road directions to testing centers; information on jobs open to application continuously; and an explanation of the features and functions of the Job Search site itself. Some links to webpages of other State employers are also available.

We imagine that most job seekers jump right in to searching for a job without reading the Tips for Searching, selecting either the "Search Statewide" or "Search By Parish" link. The search screen looks nearly the same in all cases. **[attachment: The search screen]** The scope of the search is identified by a keyword in the upper right corner of this form. Job seekers can simply leave all search terms set to their default, and click "go". Or, they can define one or more of these search parameters to narrow their searches down: the type of vacancy, a salary range, an occupational group, or an agency. All of these terms except the type of vacancy depend on active job postings in the system. If, for example, the Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism has no active job postings, it will not appear in the list of agencies to select from. This way we cut down on "no jobs found" results to searches. The last parameter on this form simply sorts the results of the search by the seeker's choice.

The results of a search **[attachment: The results of a search]** list basic information about each vacancy: The job title, employer, parish and closing date. The candidate then clicks on a particular posting to see the complete information.

[attachment: Example of a posting] The next attachment is an example of a job posting. A posting includes a lot of information: the employer, the salary, the location, whether a written test is required, how long the posting is open, and who to contact to apply. We include a link to the job specification so that applicants can read about the common duties of the job as well as its qualification requirements.

As you can see, it's easy for a job seeker to tailor searches to specific geographic areas, to salary requirements, to occupational interest areas, even to specific State employers with whom they would like to find jobs.

The only preparatory step that a user needs to take is the creation of the contact instructions, which are entered on a separate page [**attachment: Creating contact instructions**] and saved, then appearing in the Contact/Instructions menu. [**attachment: Sample of contact instructions**] The following attachment shows an example of contact instructions created by a State employer, which tell applicants to reply directly to the hiring authority.

State employers posting to the database find it very easy to use. [**attachment: Posting entry form (top)**] See the next attachment for the top of the form. Most of the data is pulled in from our computer system via menu choices. Almost no typing is required: only the name of the city and any Special Notes -- added at the bottom of the form -- need typing. [**attachment: Posting entry form (bottom)**] The bottom of the data entry form appears on the next attachment. If the user wants to change the default closing date, two weeks from the posting date, then that date must be typed. But that's all.

By design, it is extremely simple to create postings, as our HR users quickly discover in training. A single posting takes only a minute or two to create. They can also easily be edited once created, so changes or updates to vacancy information are easy to add.

So far, so good ...

Eliminating the paper bulletins meets one goal of the JS project. We are now working towards the second goal, to train Human Resource staff at State employers to use Job Search for recruitment. In 2002 we are working to increase the participation of State employers in this endeavor. This participation is essential to prepare State employers for our ultimate goal, the delegation of nearly all vacancy announcement and filling to the employer, which is, as I said in the beginning, a component of broader decentralization initiatives which the Louisiana Department of State Civil Service is carrying out. As more agency staffers are trained and add vacancies to the site, more State agencies will gain the capacity to reach a potentially world-wide applicant pool at no cost but a short training session, and job seekers will be offered even greater access to opportunities for employment with the State.

As of this date, we have trained users at eighteen of the twenty major State employers, and at twenty-two other agencies, including universities, hospitals and other health care facilities. They are posting vacancies in any category that the DSCS does NOT have to post, by our rules. Agency postings comprised only 10% of Job Search entries in the month after trainings began, and this proportion has increased to nearly 25%, as we continue to train additional users.

The benefits of moving from paper bulletins to Job Search are accruing quickly. Just posting the probational bulletin to JS instead of publishing it on paper, which we accomplished in January, 2002, cut in half the time that State employers had to wait to see their probational vacancy posted. Certificates of Eligibles from announced jobs took an average of 70 days to issue at the end of last year, and now we get those certificates out in 26 days, on the average -- 63% faster than we were able to issue these lists under our previous system. We shortened employers' waiting time even more by increasing the frequency of posting intervals on Job Search in April. Job postings now go up within 3 business days of our receiving the request -- a savings of as much as two weeks. Also in April, we eliminated paper promotional announcements, saving those production and distribution costs and time for ourselves, and making it much easier for employers to disseminate that information to their workforce, even in widely-separated offices across the state.

The Response of Our Customers

HR staff in our training sessions are typically surprised and delighted with how easy Job Search is to use and the prospect of quick, cost-free Internet recruiting. Training can be completed in two hours or less due to the application's simple and intuitive interface. They often express excitement and anticipation about getting back to their offices and getting their vacancies online. As they realize how large an applicant pool this tool could bring them, they become quite enthusiastic about the potential of Job Search to aid their recruiting efforts.

Responses from the customers of our old bulletins include some resistance to change. Private subscribers who became accustomed to seeing all the announced jobs in a single group in our bulletins adjusted fairly readily to the different way in which Job Search provides information on vacancies. Human Resources staff responded differently depending on what they felt they were expected to provide to their employees. Most of them had to change internal procedures that used the paper bulletin as the database to be distributed.

We have discussed issues such as Internet access and policies on disseminating vacancy information with agency staff in several meetings. The access of the workforce to the Internet while at work varies widely from agency to agency -- in some, most employees have desks with PCs and Net access, while in others, large numbers of employees do not even have offices. State HR officers have come up with different solutions to the problem of access. One agency installed employee kiosks with Internet-ready PCs for their workers' use. Another, a university, directs employees to access the Net in the library on campus. Others are still working on this question.

Some State employers set policies which limit the information that the HR office is obliged to provide to their employees. In one large, statewide agency, for example, HR shares information only about their own vacancies with their workers. Others feel they must meet the expectation of their workers that they will themselves provide employees

with all of the information that our paper bulletins provided in the past, and make up for missing Internet access for many workers by printing out JS postings.

Some State employers also have a special contract with the Staffing Division that delegates to them the authority to announce and effect competitive promotions internally (a process overseen by Staffing in other cases). Beginning July 1st, 2002, these agencies now use Job Search as the primary method of distributing these announcements to their workforce.

So What Have We Learned?

We've gained valuable knowledge about both the care and feeding of consultants, and about anticipating customer responses. The contract we wrote did not spell out such things as the scope of maintenance and knowledge transfer to our in-house IT staff, for example. In the contract for our next round of development of Job Search, we will include a good deal more detail on our expectations for such elements as time frames for work requests, who is responsible for what aspects of troubleshooting and maintenance, and even on the expected parameters for communications between our staff and contracted staff.

Also, although we did solicit user input in the planning stages, we would have gotten better information if we had asked a wider group of State employers to participate in both planning and development, and if we had requested their feedback more frequently and in more detail. Our next round of development will include this more in-depth user involvement, not only so that we will get the best information that we can, but also to give HR staff plenty of opportunity to understand and plan for changes that they will want to make in their own policies and procedures.