



**Talent Solutions
trends:
The art of saying
'no' and the rise of
ESG**

“Another terrific event organised by TALiNT. A timely event looking at the key sector topics as well as the near-term future.”

Peter Howarth, Joint Managing Director, Armstrong Craven

Talent Solutions trends: The art of saying ‘no’ and the rise of ESG

The first in-person lunch hosted by TALiNT Partners since the first lockdown in March 2020 brought 30 RPO leaders together at the Orangery at Kings Fund on 23rd June 2021 to re-connect, review the market over the last 12 months, and share insights for adapting to new challenges and opportunities.

Co-hosted with event partner Cornerstone-On-Demand, the event attracted leaders from Gattaca, IBM, Lorien, Reed Talent Solutions, PeopleScout, KellyOCG, Hudson RPO, Green Park Interim & Executive Ltd, Aston Holmes, Armstrong Craven, Manpower Group Talent Solutions, LevelUp HCS, Datum RPO, Group GTI, RGF Staffing, Page Group, Resource Solutions and Comensura.

TALiNT Partners MD Ken Brotherston opened the event by inviting these leading talent solutions providers to discuss whether the incredible levels of demand across the market means they are increasingly having to learn how to say no to clients, what they are achieving a premium for, and how they are adapting to growing demand for ESG credentials from their clients?

“Often the quickest way to ruin a long-term relationship is to take on work and do it badly, so how are you turning down the wrong kind of projects?” he asked.

The consensus among many guests was that they are having to push back to clients now to set realistic expectations on when a project can start. With some attrition in their teams, they needed time to backfill and train which has impacted their ability to start new projects and timescales for completing them.

One RPO leader said: “There was a time when we would chase every opportunity, but the demand is so high now, that unless it is in the sweet spot, we won’t waste our time on it.” Another added that: “We have a specific model with a clear scope and we don’t veer away from that. We also recognise when clients need



Ken Brotherston
Managing Director
TALiNT Partners

something different and when they have outgrown us.”

“Our internal process to justify funding for project RPO delivery has thorough due diligence to qualify the lead as we need to present an internal business case,” added Tom Mason, Executive Director of IBM. “It’s a good discipline.”

Nick Greenston, CEO of recently launched Retinue Talent Solutions, part of nGAGE Group, said: “I’ve grown up in this industry saying yes to everything but our talent solutions offering is more relevant to today’s market so it’s easier to say no when it’s not the kind of business we want.”

One way to say no without losing the client is to make it too expensive, another leader observed, adding that having to temporarily resource a team to deliver a major interim workforce project at short notice is expensive – especially for one client that may not have a clear idea of what they need.

“The market is exceptionally busy, especially on the tech and professional side. We’re starting to notice more urgent requests from customers looking for recruitment team augmentation or a head to manage workload; sometimes the ask is just for a price rather than a detailed proposal, which can indicate they may not have a clear idea of exactly what they need, just that they know they need help,” said Joanna Fagbadegun, Sales Director at Lorien.

Jason Dunwell, Service Delivery Director at Hays, added that it’s easier to understand the problem if you have a deep relationship with your client. You’re also less likely to get scope creep and it’s easier to have a ‘no’ conversation.

“It comes down to a good qualification process,” said Scott Siwicki, Group Solutions Director at RGF Staffing. “Ask more questions to see why they need it and if they need it that quickly to determine if the leads are worth pursuing.”



Olly Harris, Global MD of Page Outsourcing added: “Be clear about why it will cost more and price properly for all of the project RPO cost. Make sure you have the right controls and T&Cs to qualify leads and avoid being exposed.”

Adam Shay, Global Marketing Director of Resource Solutions, highlighted the talent barrier to servicing interim project RPO. “The market challenge is always quality of workers in recruitment to support growth and enable the flexibility for new offerings. We haven’t learned from past downturns and upturns in demand.”

Nick Greenston at Retinue, agreed, adding that the industry has focused on growing outsourced juniors instead of attracting and retaining more experienced talent.

Environment, Social and Governance, or ESG, is becoming another key issue for suppliers to negotiate. “It’s another level of compliance that needs to be measured,” said David Needham, Managing Partner at Green Park, observing that PWC plan to recruit 100,000 people into ESG.

But how has the staffing and RPO industry adapted to ESG?

For example, Hays conducted an internal survey which identified Environment as a key issue for its own employees. As a result, Hays will only have electric cars in their company car fleet and Page Group are now carbon neutral.

Teams and virtual meetings have cut commuting time and carbon footprint, and this will continue beyond the end of lockdown for clients and candidates. However, one leader observed that virtual interviews had contributed to lower commitment from candidates. Easier to attend, with less effort required, it has led to a rise in back out rates and no shows.

This is undoubtedly an area where RPOs are able to demonstrate value add to their clients, with one leader highlighting a client’s TA team that had a back-out rate of 10% while they were achieving less than 3%.

Hybrid working is a common area that candidates ask about in interviews, so employers need to be able to commit one way or another regarding flexible working. “Being on the fence and not committing to a position on flexible and hybrid working has deterred candidates,” one leader observed, adding that there is increasingly an opportunity for RPOs to advise on this and show what best practice looks like.

“RPOs are finding the opportunity to monetize their internal mobility, so they can help employers to fix their own attrition with guidance on career path analysis,” said one RPO leader.

Wellbeing was also highlighted as a growing priority. “Clients want to know how well we are treating our employees,” one leader confided. “This was never a question that came up before.”

So what will have changed because of Covid when we come out of lockdown?

More of a level playing field between candidates and employers, but with furlough coming to an end a lot of people will come onto the market – or start their own businesses. And with so many people moving out of cities, and commuting less, will employers still offer London weighting and how will they make it fair if more people are working from home?

The final point was succinctly put by Ken Brotherston: “Those employers who seek to put fairness at the heart of their decisions between legitimate business needs and the aspirations of candidates and employees are far more likely to do well in finding and keeping the people they need; and talent solutions providers are uniquely placed to help them.”

“Really enjoyable event, and great to engage with industry colleagues on such important topics of the moment.”

Michele Smith, Client Engagement Director,
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