

Recruiting High Caliber Trainees at NEXT

NEXT, the high street fashion retailer, is one of the UK's retail success stories, having achieved and sustained an impressive rate of growth since it first started trading in the early 1980s. The organization's product range is the brand of choice for men and women throughout the UK and Ireland who expect style, quality and value in everything they wear and choose for their homes.

The NEXT product range is designed largely in-house and is exclusive to the NEXT brand. Each collection for fashion or home is the result of nearly 12 months of planning by their talented product teams.

Employing more than 35,000 people in their 484 branches, the organization recognizes the importance and value of its employees. "We are aware that our continued growth depends upon our ability to recruit and develop high calibre people," said Mandy Young, Product HR Officer at NEXT.

Each year, NEXT receives up to 2,500 applications for approximately 70 trainee positions. The organization recruits trainees for the positions of Buyer, Designer, Merchandiser and Product Technologist.

Seeking a New Supplier

NEXT approached Kenexa to help it enhance the sifting process at the trainee application stage. The company had used online psychometric tests for a number of years, but decided to seek a new supplier due to the limitations of their existing provider.

"Prior to working with Kenexa, we had always used some form of online test, but it wasn't as user-friendly either for the candidate or us in terms of administration," said Young. "With Kenexa, we have been able to make the tests look and feel like a NEXT product with our own corporate branding, and the tests are a lot easier to manage and administer."

Verbal and Numerical Reasoning Tests

All of NEXT's merchandiser and buyer trainees have to complete Kenexa's Verbal and Numerical Reasoning Infinity Series tests.

"Verbal reasoning is important to us, as we have to make sure our employees can communicate with suppliers and understand the questions they are being asked," said Mandy Young. "It is also important for our merchandisers to do the numerical reasoning tests, as they have to be able to interpret and analyze numerical data, work out percentages and, of course, understand profit margins and mark-ups for each of our products."

Enhanced Recruitment Process

One potential drawback to administering traditional reasoning tests online is that the tests may become over-exposed, and organizations may be concerned about the risk of candidates cheating.

Kenexa's item-banked reasoning tests reduce the possibility of this happening. Each candidate is presented with a randomized sample of questions, so that in essence each candidate is completing a different test. Candidates cannot predict which questions they will be given, which makes it impossible for them to prepare in advance. Because there are many different versions of the test, the exposure and practice effects are practically eliminated.

"Kenexa's tests have been extremely easy to set up and administer," said Young. "It has been very simple to set up projects on the system for our Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter recruitment campaigns."

The tests have been incorporated into the second stage of the selection process to help sift applications at an early stage.

"With 2,500 applications it makes sense for the testing to be early in the process," said Young. "When we involve assessors from across the business, we want to keep the number of candidates they meet to a minimum, particularly at our assessment centers as this is the most expensive and timely stage of our recruitment campaigns. We only want candidates at this late stage who have the potential to fulfill the roles."

Candidates who make it through the online tests are required to participate in a telephone interview and then attend an assessment center that involves candidates completing an individual presentation, a group exercise and a structured interview. Successful candidates are required to complete an 18-month training scheme, during which they undertake a variety of tasks.

"Our designers develop a range of products that feature the latest colors, fabrics and predicted trends for future seasons," said Young. "Our buyers look to develop our products at excellent prices. Merchandisers focus on maximizing the company's turnover and profitability and manage the relationships with suppliers, while the technologists provide the technical support."

Business Benefits

NEXT's new process has resulted in a number of business benefits. "Since switching to Kenexa, we have lowered our recruitment costs and we have enjoyed a number of efficiency savings."

The most significant efficiency saving has been time, which has allowed the retailer to reduce the amount of time it takes to hire. According to Young, "In such a fast paced environment, time is so important to us. Kenexa's tests have helped free up more time in our recruitment process. They have catered for our exact needs and adjusted what they can offer us to fit our full requirements."

A Fast Moving Business

NEXT is a fast moving and exciting business that wants its employees to feel challenged and make a meaningful commitment to the business through their individual contributions.

"Our biggest challenge looking forward is to continue to attract the right candidates to further drive the success of our business," said Young. "We have to react to these challenges and Kenexa is helping us to identify these candidates at the earliest opportunity."

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About NEXT

NEXT has 484 stores throughout the UK and Ireland. The organization also has a ground-breaking mail order operation with its 1117-page hardback catalog. Online shopping was introduced in 1999 and the entire catalog is available to shop from on the Internet—another first in home shopping in the UK. Website: www.next.co.uk