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How clients and staffing companies can benefit from unconventional candidates.

By Bridget Mintz Testa

Staffing companies follow a number of models in providing personnel to clients. Typically, however, they are focused on conventional, full-time positions, even when the work is project-based rather than recruit-to-hire. That's because most clients want it that way. They're often not comfortable with the notion of flexible employment among their own core staffers. So why would they accept it from their staffing providers?

Mom Corps, Your Encore, and Flexperience Consulting are niche staffing providers. Each one is a case study of how clients can benefit if they'll accept flexibility in their contingent employees. Staffing companies that offer their talent hours and schedules beyond the typical 8 to 5 (or, these days, 8 to 8) corporate workday discover an untapped pool of extraordinary talent longing to put their skills to work, as long as they can do it on their own terms. Clients can benefit from this talent, if they're open to trying it out.

The Boomer Group doesn't look for flexible assignments. Instead, it offers clients maturity and the benefits of, to put it bluntly, age. As the name suggests, the company's candidates are mostly boomers, and The Boomer Group's selling point is its talent's strong work ethic, professional expertise and life experience.

College Helpers isn't a staffing company, but its business model is unusual enough that we included it here, especially since many staffing companies use this job board. College Helpers is focused entirely on matching employers who want college students for part-time, temporary and seasonal jobs with those students at more than a thousand institutions across the country. This company, just like the other four, is an example of how to take profitable advantage of a business niche that no one else sees and make it a win for everyone involved.

Working Moms Want Time for Families

Clients of Atlanta-headquartered Mom Corps don't care that 94% of the company's 25,000-candidate database is made up of moms who left conventional corporate work to spend more time with their children. "Clients are only interested in the right talent," says Allison O'Kelly, CEO and founder of the company. "That's what we pitch -- expertise, qualifications, skills and experience."

Mom Corps' staffing specialties include finance and accounting, human resources, sales, marketing, information technology, and some legal work and strategic consulting. The company's more than 200 clients range from sole proprietorships to large companies such as GE, Wachovia and KPMG.

Clients like other parts of O'Kelly's sales pitch, too. They're happy to learn that Mom Corps candidates won't need training, other than on clients' specific IT systems, and they're intrigued to learn that "flexibility is currency," as O'Kelly says. "If employers offer more flexibility, candidates will view this as one form of payment. So clients might be able to pay less money for higher talent, or they can access candidates who would not otherwise consider the position."

Mom Corps didn't lack for clients even before incorporating in July 2005. The company has since opened offices in Boston, Charlotte, Chicago, the New York metropolitan area and Washington DC. "Clients find us through word of mouth or by looking for internal business development people," O'Kelly says. In addition, press about the company's business model drives clients to Mom Corps.

O'Kelly's own desire for work flexibility was the genesis for Mom Corps. After leaving Toys 'R' Us early in 2004, she used her financial and accounting expertise to land consulting projects with small businesses. "I saw that companies had a need for talent, and I had offers for more work than I could do," she says. She started matching up her stay-at-home mom friends who also had accounting backgrounds with companies who needed help. That informal process became Mom Corps.

For staffing companies that want to emulate Mom Corps' successful focus on flexible work arrangements, O'Kelly says, "The key is finding the right fit for the client. This should be one additional option to meet the client's needs."

(Science and engineering experts) = (Business)2

In a global economy where innovation is crucial to business and engineering and technical personnel are in short supply, Your Encore's success is hardly surprising. The company helps meet the technical personnel needs of a select group of clients. It does this through a database of 4,000 vetted, background-checked and highly qualified engineers and scientists. Of those 4,000 individuals, 90-95% are retired, while the rest are seeking alternative careers.

"We not only connect companies with retired engineers and scientists," says Founder and CEO Brad Lawson, "but [also] we help them do it confidentially so IT and people are protected." Your Encore also manages all compliance issues such as co-employment and pension and payment conflicts with the Employee Retirement Income Security Act.

Founded in 2003, the company struggled to prove itself for a couple of years and then took off like a rocket in 2005. Lawson describes Your Encore as "an innovation acceleration services company."

Although Your Encore experts are paid well, clients can use them much more cost-effectively than "for a fully burdened employee because they can turn them on and off," Lawson says. And for clients skeptical of using retirees, Lawson says, "Retirees really involve themselves in the task at hand. They focus on it totally. They deliver more fully and impactfully than full-time employees." These experts aren't trying to bag their next consulting job, either. Lawson says, "They leave that to Your Encore."

The company has a unique, or at least an unusual, marketing approach: none whatsoever. Your Encore does a small amount of external business development, but doesn't need to. "We are growing so fast we have to be careful about adding new clients," Lawson says. "We want to make sure we can support them."

So where do its thirty Fortune 500 clients come from? The answer lies in the company's origins. "The idea came from Procter & Gamble and their 'Connect and Develop' strategy of looking externally for solutions to problems," Lawson says. "As they saw their experts retire, they figured other companies were having the same problems." Lawson, John Bernard, P&G, Eli Lilly and Boeing partnered to found Your Encore. To date, the company's experts have participated in more than 1,000 projects.

Just College Students Please

Employers with part-time, temporary or seasonal positions can use general job boards or perhaps staffing companies, but if they specifically want to seek out college students, they've historically had little choice but to contact one institution at a time. In 2000/2001, Fred Grant changed that when he launched CollegeHelpers.com. It's a specialty job board where employers can simultaneously look for college students at up to 1,100 (and growing) institutions, and students can simultaneously look for jobs in multiple locations.

In 2007, Grant estimates 1,500 to 2,000 employers used the site, and the number of employers doubles every year. "For a flat fee, an employer can list a job at as many colleges as they want," Grant says. "It provides employers with economy of scale, and also means students have access to more jobs."

Grant can offer economy of scale to employers because of his arrangement with participating colleges and universities. Colleges are typically inundated with job listings and often can't manage the process. Whether institutions ask Grant to manage the entire job-listing process, provide CollegeHelpers.com as a resource to students or just want the listings, they pay no fees.

Instead, the institutions earn money. They provide a link to CollegeHelpers.com from their own Websites, and when an employer goes to CollegeHelpers.com via the link, 10% of the employer's posting fee goes to the college. Grant pays these affiliate earnings annually. "Revenue ranges from \$100 to \$3,000," he says.

Grant has a two-tier pricing system for position listings: one for for-profits and one for nonprofits and families. "There are large corporations that use CollegeHelpers.com," he says, "but there is no way to tell who they are. So I keep the prices low."

Although employers provide the revenue, Grant markets mainly to students via online destinations such as Facebook, college sites and Google keywords and phrases like "jobs for college students." "Employers respond to the speed with which jobs are filled," he says.

For his next project, Grant plans to launch HighSchoolHelpers.com. Employers will pay to post jobs, and

school districts will participate as affiliates. "It will grow even faster than CollegeHelpers.com," Grant says.

Focused on Flexibility

When Sally Thornton was pregnant with her first baby, her brother died. "My mother told me then that I needed to spend as much time with my child as possible," Thornton says. That was the moment when San Francisco/Silicon Valley-based Flexperience Consulting was conceived.

Despite her poignant "aha" moment, Thornton couldn't act immediately. The HR specialist, who'd worked first in HR consulting for Ernst and Young and then at Covad Communications, had to save up. After she'd had her second baby, "Covad went through a transition, and I took the severance package to get the money," she says.

Founded in October 2006, Flexperience Consulting's business model is based on providing her 30 clients, including about twenty Fortune 500 companies, with "highly-skilled, top-level employees who've never signed up with agencies before," Thornton says. Her database of 3,000 candidates "have Harvard and Stanford MBAs, and they are focused on flexibility. It's a win-win situation because companies have access to talent they've never seen."

Thornton defines flexibility as anything that's less than 40 hours a week with some telecommuting. "That's the sweet spot," she says. Most projects take 10 to 30 hours a week including some telecommuting. "[The talent] doesn't want to be there during traditional hours. They want to be results-focused, not face-time focused."

Despite this, Thornton says her talent will sometimes accept jobs requiring 40 hours per week in an office. "They are used to working 80 hours per week with lots of politics, so this is 'flexible' for them," she says. "They don't want to work those crazy Silicon Valley hours."

The company's marketing is based on networking. "In the Bay Area, everyone knows everybody," she says. "[We have] people who went to Stanford, Berkeley, worked for high technology companies and were in moms' clubs. It's a small community." Flexperience stages well-attended events at Berkeley, Stanford and the 1,000-member moms' clubs. "So people hear about us several times before hiring us," Thornton says.

For other staffing companies who'd like to offer candidates that desire flexibility, Thornton says, "Change the paradigm of 'face time' to 'results.' Logistics should always be second to the work product. Also, really screen for talent that will thrive in a flexible work environment, [such as] a professional's ability to self-motivate and manage his/her energy without needing a traditional work environment."

Experience Counts

In 2002, times were tough in the staffing industry, and no one knew that better than Stephanie Klein. At the time, she was working for a large staffing company in Denver, which had been hard-hit by declines in its telecom, finance and call-center businesses. "I had a large financial services company client that was growing," Klein says. "I'd come to work and get all these voicemails from young candidates who had no work ethic -- and weren't coming in to work."

Then Klein encountered a mature candidate with a nontraditional background who was strong in accounting. "I placed this woman with the company," she says. The woman showed up at work every day, had great ideas and sent Klein a thank you note.

"That was the secret," Klein says. "As those young people left, unknown to my employer, I backfilled [their positions] with mature people." While that was happening, Klein researched boomers. She developed a business plan, used her savings and got a bank loan, and The Boomer Group was born, opening its doors for business in January 2004.

Most of the positions The Boomer Group fills are mid- or senior-level, because clients are paying for experience -- both life and business experience. "I get two kinds of calls," Klein says. "Bring me something specific with this kind of background in this area, or bring me someone with good experience and a good work ethic who can be diplomatic and handle our customers." She provides candidates with backgrounds in administration, finance and accounting, HR, and marketing.

Klein finds clients through networking and cold and warm calling. The company has also gotten a lot of positive press, and that's brought clients in as well. "Denver has the highest number of boomers per capita," Klein says. "There are a lot of initiatives on encore careers. I've gotten involved in those, and I make a lot of connections that way."

At just 40 years old, Klein herself isn't a boomer. "I'm a younger person who values experienced people," she says. "When I first started, I had the intention of saying that mature people are better workers than younger

ones. Now, we don't say that all young people have a poor work ethic, we say that for certain key positions, experience counts. This is our difference."

Selling Flexibility to Clients

Many companies still view flexible work arrangements with skepticism. But what concerns them about flexibility for full-time employees, such as paperwork, logistics and "face-time," may be of far less importance for temporary or project workers. The key is to sell clients on the advantages of flexibility.

Here are some of those advantages.

1. Companies can have access to highly skilled, top-level talent that's otherwise not available.
2. Clients may be able to pay lower rates than they'd pay for other qualified candidates, because flexibility itself may be viewed as a form of payment.
3. Candidates don't need training and are often at the top of their game.
4. Candidates completely involve themselves in the work.
5. Experienced workers can handle both independent and team work.
6. Experienced workers can diplomatically deal with the client's customers.
7. Flexible candidates don't get involved in office politics.
8. Clients can try out flexibility with contingent employees to see how it works before undertaking the policy and process changes needed to implement it for core staff.
9. Flexible talent isn't seeking a full-time position or the next consulting contract; flexible talent is happy to let the staffing company find its next position.

Profile Information

Company: **Mom Corps** www.momcorps.com

CEO/Founder: Allison O'Kelly

HQ: Atlanta

Unique differentiator: Professional, experienced moms who want flexible work schedules.

Company: **Your Encore** www.yourencore.com

CEO/Founder: Brad Lawson

HQs: Indianapolis, Cincinnati

Unique differentiator: Retired engineers and scientists who want flexible work.

Company: **College Helpers** www.collegehelpers.com

CEO/Founder: Fred Grant

HQ: Houlton, MA

Unique differentiator: Companies who need part-time or temporary employees find students at up to 1,100 college campuses.

Company: **Flexperience Consulting** www.flexperienceconsulting.com

CEO/Founder: Sally Thornton

HQ: San Francisco Bay Area

Unique differentiator: Top-quality, experienced talent who want flexible hours.

Company: **Boomer Group** www.theboomergroup.com

CEO/Founder: Stephanie Klein

HQ: Denver

Unique differentiator: Baby boomers who take work seriously.

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