

Necessity is the mother of invention

Solace has shown a willingness to take advantage of the opportunities that digital presents the sector, most recently using current technology to ‘virtually’ recruit for Adur and Worthing Councils. Steve Guest explains

Wednesday 1 April 2020 will go down in Solace history as a bit of a milestone. Nothing to do with April Fool’s Day (something that was appropriately muted given the global pandemic), but because it marked the successful conclusion of our first entirely virtual permanent recruitment selection process.

Offering elements of recruitment services virtually has been a part of our offer for some time and we have already successfully concluded more of these since, but I thought it might be useful to share the experience of successfully delivering an entirely virtual executive-level recruitment with sector colleagues.

At Solace, we have always struck a careful balance between industry best practice, quality and innovation. We are continuously seeking to adapt and flex our approach to mirror the rapidly evolving needs of the clients and candidates we serve. That said, did the project start out with the intention of it being delivered entirely virtually? No.

It’s useful to understand the timeline. We were commissioned by Adur and Worthing Councils to recruit their next director for communities on 22 Jan. On 3 Feb we visited chief executive Alex Bailey to take the brief for the role and agree a full project delivery plan. The recruitment campaign launched on 20 Feb, with an application closing date of 9 Mar. I even made it back to the south coast on (Friday) 13 March to discuss the applications face to face and agree a very healthy long-list of candidates to interview. So far so good... we didn’t know it at the time, but this was to be the last non-digital interaction this project would have.

It was built into the project plan that we would interview the long-list of candidates face to face in London the following week. It was over that weekend it became increasingly apparent that we needed to adapt to a rapidly changing set of circumstances. There was no official lockdown at this point, but the writing was on the wall.

We therefore took the decision to move all of the face to face preliminary interviews to video conference format. We had a technical assessor based in London, with the rest of the panel based in Yorkshire and Essex and the candidates in their homes. The four-way video conference format worked well, with members of the panel owning specific question areas and holding the conversation around that question, avoiding the risk of people speaking over each other (which can happen quite easily on multi-screen video calls without a bit of discipline).

An important learning point to remember is to test the technology in advance – particularly from a candidate experience perspective. We did this and found that different candidates had user experience of and/or access to different video conference software. The onus was on us to adapt and flex in this regard. It is also important to consider the quality of wifi connection for all parties and have a plan b if needed. In this case, plan b was ‘telephone interview’.

The test for me was whether the views of the panel were as consistent as we would expect if the panel had been sitting in the same room. I’m pleased to report that they were.

Unsurprisingly, with the lockdown now official, the planned shortlist meeting to discuss



the outcome of the interviews was moved to a video conference. This was less unusual and something we’ve been doing with our local government clients already. As an aside, the travel cost and time this saves, as well as the wider environmental benefits suggest to me that this really needs to become the new normal wherever appropriate – I suspect it will.

The approach requires a lot of flexibility and letting go of convention

The next part of the recruitment process was the assessment centre. Normally this would happen onsite, hosted by the client, and this was the approach that was originally planned. The benefit of this approach is that candidates get to walk the halls and get a sense of the organisation and the place. This is something that is at least partially lost when assessing virtually, although having said that, some clients have always chosen to hold assessment centres offsite, using hotels or other venues – so there are no hard and fast rules here.

At Solace, we have always taken advantage of the opportunities that digital can offer. Delivering assessment services across the UK, we offer considerable experience of delivering them remotely – because some of our clients are in very remote locations. Our assessment centres offer a blend of psychometric assessments, written tests and stakeholder engagement, so moving these to a virtual realm was critical in these circumstances, but straightforward given our depth of experience.

We were able to rapidly adapt the planned assessment exercises and tests so that all candidates could participate from the comfort and safety of their own homes. Stakeholder engagement is a critical aspect of most senior leadership executive-level assessment centres in local government and this process was no exception. We were able to facilitate that in partnership with our client with some highly effective diary management and via video conference call technology.

Upon completion of the assessment exercises and the virtual stakeholder engagement sessions, a video wash-up session was held with our client to relay the findings and agree the final list of candidates for interview.

Final interviews were then conducted remotely via video conference, with panel members, the candidates and Solace dialling in from four different locations. Similar discipline around allocating questions and follow up discussions were observed.

Chief executive of Adur and Worthing Councils, Alex Bailey, reflected on the use of technology to conduct this critical stage of the process: ‘At a time of rapid change, adaptability to circumstance is key. The final stages of candidate assessment proved to be just as effective in a virtual environment as they would traditionally be face to face.’

Another candidate who participated remarked: ‘I just wanted to thank you, and your colleagues, for an excellent process for the Adur and Worthing director for communities role. Despite being the most stressful recruitment process I have been through (mostly due to coronavirus, but it was also the most intense), it has also been

the best. All the technology worked, everyone was supportive of me engaging in it, and I don’t feel it affected my performance – if anything, it made it easier as I didn’t need to take lots of time off work to travel to interviews etc.. So while I am sad not to have been successful in the role, I have learnt a great deal, and enjoyed doing so.’

In summary, despite our original intentions, circumstances meant that neither we at Solace nor our client had any physical face to face time with any of the candidates as part of the recruitment process. Nevertheless, a successful appointment was made.

Even at an executive level, it can be done. We have done it.

The approach requires a lot of flexibility and letting go of convention. However, given the uncertain times we live in, it is good to know the art of the possible – especially for critical senior leadership roles that will directly lead the response to the challenges COVID-19 presents.

But we must also be mindful that this isn’t just about the short to medium term or a quick workaround in the time of an unprecedented crisis. It is already clear that we won’t be going back to ‘normal’. There will be a new ‘normal’ in many walks of life and it’s my view that this will apply to senior recruitment. We have always been innovating the approach, but modernised recruitment practices will form a part of the new world we find ourselves in. Maybe we’re already at least partially in it. ■

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