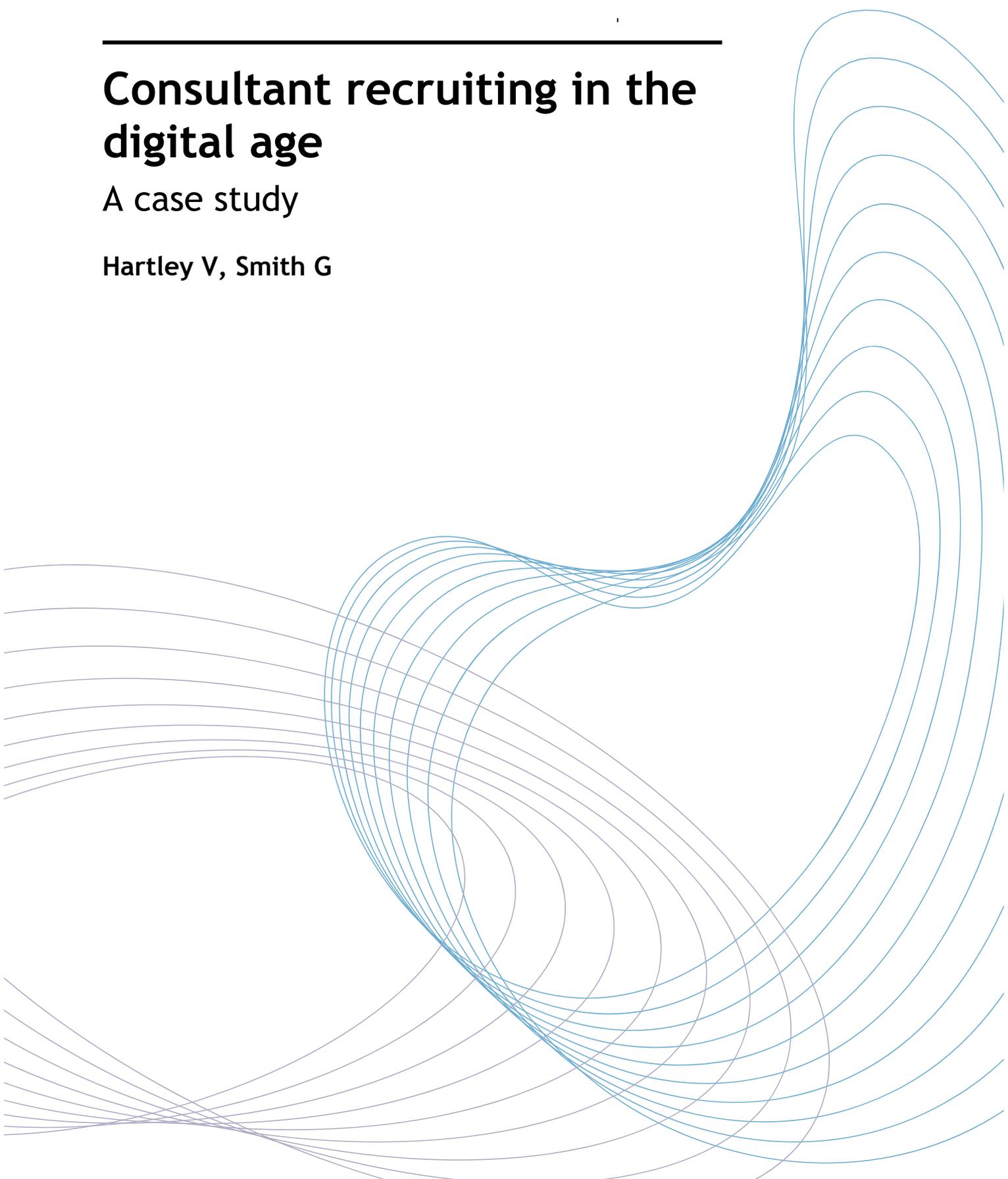


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# Consultant recruiting in the digital age

A case study

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IES Member Paper 93

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# Consultant recruiting in the digital age: A case study

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## The challenge

In the last twenty years, recruitment of consultants has changed beyond all recognition. Highlighting just how much it has evolved, research this year from recruitment company Adzuna, (quoted by King, 2013<sup>1</sup>) revealed that technology firms in the UK are suffering from a skills shortage of IT professionals with vacancies of over 64000 in February this year, and are having to pay increasingly larger salaries to hire the right people. Notably, average salary rates for vacant technology jobs in London have risen by the fastest rate in all sectors, with an 8% growth in the six months up to February. This is at a time when national norms for all roles show only a small increase in vacancies, and plummeting averages salaries. The data for technology specialists shows a disparity between supply and demand: a gap that is apparently forcing employers to offshore or look abroad for talent.

This emphasises the current scramble for talent in the technology and consultancy sectors. A proportion of this talent shortage has arisen from the propensity of organisations to offshore in the last decade or so, choosing to send technology and business processes to destinations such as India, the Philippines and South Africa. This practice has driven down the demand for UK-based technology and consultancy talent. Combined with the fact that in the last twenty years, increasing numbers of students have opted to study 'softer' subjects rather than engineering, maths or computer science, this means there has been a shortage of people entering the technology and consultancy industries.

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<sup>1</sup> The Guardian (2013) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/money/2013/feb/28/uk-job-market-shows-improvement>, February

This is exactly the challenge that technology companies and consultancies like Certeco, a business technology change consultancy, have faced when it comes to attracting the right talent. And not being one of the 'big five' consultancies, means that Certeco has to work doubly hard to source and encourage the right people to come and work for them.

### The context

This problem is magnified for Certeco which focuses on the financial services sector - an industry undergoing unprecedented levels of change and innovation. On one hand companies may be dealing with complex regulatory and legislative changes. On the other, they might be deploying a mobile banking innovation. The consultants they recruit must be able to deal with both types of scenarios.

The people with much to contribute to the role of business consultancy in such companies are those who have grown up technically capable and well versed in new approaches in communicating with people. They represent the customers of the future, and align better with the rapidly changing business of today.

Times have changed in consultancy recruitment. Gone are the days when consultancies simply had to place a job advert in a key trade title to get a flood of qualified people jostling for the job. Several face-to-face interviews would follow and hiring decisions were then made. The media landscape is varied nowadays and media selection for job vacancies is the first hurdle for HR teams and recruitment professionals. The selection approach used for candidates should be consistent with the attraction approach, particularly in the use of various media. The key outcome is that it has to provide the satisfaction to a hiring company that those recruited are capable of being developed into consultants, and also have the motivation to work in the highly regulated financial environment.

This environment has had a significant impact on the way Certeco has had to structure its recruitment strategy.

### The solution

Certeco has addressed each individual issue, coming up with an attraction, selection and development scheme that involves the best decision makers, and produces rapid results.

The company has split the process into a logical train of events within recruitment and initial development. However, it is noteworthy that this comparatively small company has achieved this by perceptive analysis and reaction to its business needs, its appreciation of its clients' needs and its understanding of the type of

people they wish to recruit: an approach based on empiricism rather than one of external guidance. So what has Certeco done that has been so effective?

The company's approach can be summarised under three headings: attraction, selection and development.

## 1. Attraction

The fact that Certeco is not as big as many of its competitors and therefore doesn't enjoy the same brand attraction to would-be employees as a larger company, means it has to rely on other ways to raise awareness and make the company and its employment prospects more appealing.

Therefore, technology and the internet form the basis of Certeco's recruitment tool kit. The most obvious of these is the Certeco website. Somebody searching for a job in a technology consultancy will probably find the company name in a Google search result. As such, there needs to be a place on the company website that addresses this, so the Careers section gives readers a thorough overview of the people, the work, vacancies and how to apply.

But Certeco realised that it can't rely on search engines alone. It needs to be proactive in terms of how it communicates its job opportunities – social media is the lynchpin of this. Certeco has a corporate LinkedIn page, featuring articles, blogs and job posts, so this is a key vehicle for communicating job opportunities. Their Facebook presence is also used as a recruitment tool, particularly for Certeco's Academy, its trainee consultancy initiative where it targets school and university leavers to join its ranks. The company's Twitter account proactively pushes job adverts out from the Certeco website, LinkedIn and Facebook.

Managing these media outlets is quite a task. Certeco researched the market and found a piece of software that easily enables the posting of job vacancies across a range of media with a single action, and offers a simple and consolidated means of fielding the responses. This technology allows recruiters to:

- Post job adverts to multiple job boards using only one form.
- Track candidates' progress.
- add and remove a posting destination in seconds and monitor the performance of each recruitment channel.
- Quickly email groups of candidates with a tailored message.
- Redirect candidate responses from online channels - including job boards and social media - to their own tracking system.

- Search leading job board databases.
- Automatically send 'Apply Online' email invitations to candidates.
- Provide access for candidates to view jobs and apply through the company Facebook page.
- Automatically distribute jobs to Twitter.

Probably the major benefit of the company's approach is that it is reaching people in its recruitment approach that it might not have done so through other methods. This doesn't ignore the very useful source of internal recruitment, as job vacancies are also advertised via the company's Twitter account thereby attracting existing employees as well as external candidates.

## 2. Selection

The selection approach employed by Certeco blends new tactics with more traditional approaches, where the involvement of key people is essential. As consultants are the ones with their fingers on the pulse of latest client developments and the skills and qualities needed by new recruits, their consultancy workforce forms a key part of the hiring team. The consultants also have a vested interest – they will be the ones on the ground working with the new recruits, so they will recommend people they feel have the right mix of skills and the capability to get the job done.

After the initial sifting of applications and CVs, candidates are required to pitch themselves to Certeco consultants and they do this using a video interviewing application similar to Skype. Candidates have a number of questions they have to answer within a prescribed time limit. They are advised to research the company online and practise the online video interview before they go into a "live" interview situation. They are asked a set of unseen questions, based on Certeco and the consultancy industry.

This makes sure they are put through their paces, and checks whether candidates have done the requisite background research and are capable of thinking on their feet – all crucially important skills for a consultant. The videos, about 15 minutes long, can be saved and reviewed by other consultants or the HR team, and anyone else who needs to check the suitability of the candidate.

The beauty of this approach is that anyone who reviews the video interview can see how the applicant may come across to clients, which is a vital characteristic for successful assignments and winning consulting work. Certeco estimates that this process enables them to reject around 75 per cent of unsuitable candidates at this stage. It also allows Certeco to include good quality candidates who may have

failed a conventional screening process. This saves a considerable amount of wasted time for the candidates and the company, and it enables the screening process to happen quickly but far more effectively than conventional face-to-face approaches.

After the screening process, successful candidates are invited in to attend an assessment centre. A measure of the effectiveness of this process is that approximately half of those who get through screening are successful in the assessment centre and are offered a place. The assessment centre follows along conventional lines, with the added benefit that consultants are widely used as assessors.

Clearly, the assessors need to be suitably trained or experienced and for their judgements to be tempered against agreed criteria. At the end there also needs to be a consolidation session from all assessors to decide who has been successful. Each of these elements is embedded in the process. At the end of the process Certeco, their clients and those who work alongside new consultants are reassured that those hired are as close a fit as possible to the demands of being a consultant in this arena.

### 3. Development

Many consultancies do very little, if anything, to prepare their inexperienced consultants for working in a client environment, where they are often cut off by distance from their company's premises, colleagues and support systems. In this context, Certeco prepares its new consultants for their new role by running a three-week consultants' induction course where they are prepared through practice in:

- How to manage their career
- What support they receive from Certeco
  - Line management
  - Other colleagues
  - Buddies
  - HR
  - Client Directors support functions
- An introduction to Certeco's client services
- Client assignment expectations

- Professional presentation skills
- Office and database skills
- Consulting skills

An important part of the course is that each individual is given performance feedback on a weekly basis by the consulting staff who run the course. Beyond their induction they join a consulting assignment in one of the areas of work that Certeco offers. Generally, each new consultant is given the opportunity to work in two of Certeco's three key consulting areas. As they progress in their roles in the first year, consultants are also encouraged to attend the company's Client Centred Consulting Course, to reinforce the importance that Certeco places on meeting its clients' needs.

Each consultant has a development plan prepared with and for them for their first year. This plan is signed off the employee's line manager, and forms the statement of how they should prepare themselves through qualifications and experience for their wider role of consulting. Successful progress results in a biannual performance review and potential pay increment.

### Overall benefits

The new recruitment process has boded well for Certeco; the recruitment process has reduced the lead time for recruiting for key placements by over 50 per cent. The flexibility of the new approach has enabled it to bolster its supply of new consultants quicker than ever before – from initial recruitment to 'feet on the ground' has been reduced by an average of three weeks. This feature has been of specific importance, where, at times, consultants need to be recruited quickly to satisfy headcount requirements of newly won consulting contracts.

There has also been uplift in acceptance rates and a decrease in drop-out rates: changes which can largely be attributed to the more precise recruitment techniques. The effectiveness of the screening process alone has resulted in almost half of the candidates who came along to the assessment days to be offered a job, and more than 90 per cent of those are still employed after a year.

Certeco's approach is one that fits with the consultancy world of today, and how that world has evolved in the digital era. It uses social media and the communication channels that young people rely on and use today; it knows that to succeed in the race for talent, it has to keep abreast of technological innovation.