



River Island

River Island is a retailing success story with over 250 stores in the UK, Ireland, Europe and the Middle East. The business needed a robust, flexible and candidate-focused recruitment system to enable them to attract and sign up the most talented people that will see them stay at the top of the high street.

Until recently River Island employed a totally manual approach to its Sales Advisor recruitment. This paper-based system, which was driven by Store Managers, failed to offer the organisation or candidates any consistency when it came to screening applications. As a result of this and the high volume of applications received, the organisation acknowledged it needed to revise and refresh its approach to recruitment.

The labour-intensive recruitment system used by River Island also put a great deal of pressure on the Central Recruitment team, led by Recruitment Manager, Janine Jenkinson.

“Often vacancies remained unfulfilled because we simply couldn’t process the sheer number of applications received. Because we weren’t able to track candidates once they had made an application, we frequently weren’t able to offer news or feedback to anyone who contacted the team to check on the progress of their application. As a team and an organisation we recognised the need to give candidates a better experience and relieve the recruitment burden from Store Managers giving them more time to drive sales” she says.

“We needed a recruitment system that would lead and support candidates through a slicker recruitment process.

By emphasising and focusing on the candidate experience we realised we could increase the quality of applications, as well as realising positive benefits for our employer and consumer brand” adds Kirsty Jerome, the retailer’s HR Controller.

Following a competitive pitch at the end of July 2008, River Island appointed online recruitment and resourcing experts, Changeworknow, to develop and deliver a new recruitment solution.

Immediately the pressure was on to ensure this new approach to recruitment was ready for the 2008 Christmas trading season. By going live in early September 2008 the new system would ensure River Island could attract the best candidates early in the season and ensure they filled as many of their vacancies as possible.

Utilising technology to manage talent

The recruitment solution recommended by Changeworknow included leveraging the skill and expertise of the Central Recruitment team to post vacancies on the corporate website and manage candidates once applications had been submitted. By using technology to manage the volume and quality of candidates through screening and filtering of suitable applications it was possible to preserve the time expertise of Store Managers.

“We were keen to involve Store Managers in the recruitment process only where they could add the greatest value. Because we recognised how important it was to take the burden of recruitment administration from Store Managers, the solution we proposed and implemented with River Island ensured they continued to be involved in the recruitment process, but limited their involvement to decision making” explains Lisa Astbury, director of Changeworknow.

The recruitment solution also incorporated vacancy quota functionality to enable River Island to manage the volume and quality of applications. Here, candidates’ online applications are scored and classified as A, B or C. When the number of applications for each vacancy have reached their quota – for example, 10 A class applications have been received – the technology automatically closes the vacancy and takes it off the corporate website.

Once a vacancy’s quota has been reached the Central Recruitment team invites all applicants to a local recruitment event. Store Managers receive details of the shortlisted applicants and they host and manage the recruitment event to ensure they have the opportunity to review and select the best talent for their store. Following the recruitment events, Store Managers advise the Central Recruitment team of the outcomes so the central recruitment database can be updated accordingly.

Exceeding recruitment expectations

The number of applications generated by the new online recruitment system following its launch in September 2008 was totally overwhelming for the business.

“We were concerned we just wouldn’t get enough applications to fill the 5950 seasonal vacancies we have across the business” admits Janine Jenkinson. “Our expectations were entirely surpassed by 51,000 applications that were submitted and the overall quality of the candidates who want to work with us.”

Between September and December 2008 96,000 people started the River Island online recruitment process. Of this group approximately 53% of individuals submitted their application, with the remainder de-selecting themselves from the process based on feedback received on their suitability.

To manage the vast number of applications received the River Island team worked closely and quickly with Changeworknow to tighten the scoring of applications and use the vacancy quota functionality to ensure only the highest quality candidates were selected and invited to attend their local recruitment events.

A flexible future recruitment solution

The online store recruitment system has proved so successful to date that the head office team has used it to staff new stores within the group. “Already one store has filled all its vacancies within nine days and another within 11 days; and when you consider that a store can require up to 400 members of staff, it’s an achievement that should not be underestimated,” says Kirsty Jerome.

The system will continue to be updated to reflect the changing needs of the business. Plans are already in place to include text messaging in candidate communications next year to further manage the high volume of applications received and to ensure the business can turn them around as quickly as possible.



Delivering positive business impact

The recruitment process for Sales Advisors used by River Island before the introduction of the online solution did not capture any recruitment data. Therefore there is minimal management information on which to benchmark the success of this new approach. However, the business is confident the impact it has already had is significant.

“Time to hire is approximately 32 days which, when recruiting for the Christmas trading period, is key to getting the right people in the right stores as quickly as possible” reflects Janine Jenkinson.

The new approach to recruitment has also helped to create a more positive working relationship between the Central Recruitment team and Store Managers. “Not only have we been able to help Store Managers save time, but we have really been able to add value to the recruitment process, ensuring their expertise is focused on selecting from the very best candidates” she says.

Recruiting for the seasonal workers can be very hard for recruitment teams, but with this new approach, River Island’s experience of recruiting for Christmas 2008 was smoother and more effective than had previously been the case.

“All team members were trained on the system, knew the processes and were confident in how best to manage candidates. Because the system effectively managed the applications the team was free to manage candidates and ensure every candidate was contacted quickly and were aware of the outcome of their application. By being on the ball in this way the team were already making offers in October,” explains Changeworknow’s Lisa Astbury.