

THE FIRST CUT IS THE DEEPEST

Reflections on a very large pile of applications

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Last night, after five straight days of reading and re-reading applications to the WPP Fellowship, I typed the final name onto my list: 108 people, from all parts of the world, who will shortly be receiving invitations to a first interview.

It's a strange feeling. In part, I am happy because the job is complete, and I know that once again we have assembled a wonderful group of candidates. Yet at the same time I look at the large cardboard box that contains the 'no' pile, and wonder, not whether I have made a mistake, but rather how many mistakes I have made. Who have I missed? And what might they have achieved had I decided to place them on the pile on my right, rather than the one on my left?

This year WPP received the highest ever number of applications for our first degree Fellowship program: 1700 give or take a few. Traditionally we have competed not just with other marketing communications companies, but also with management consultants and investment banks. And this year, thanks to the financial crisis, these were looking a little less attractive than normal. To be honest, I had expected that our numbers might rise even further, but many potential applicants have told me that if business isn't likely to pick up for a couple of years then they are just going to wait, take a gap year (or two) and not bother with applications until things improve.

About five years ago we moved to an online application process, which has generally worked well. This year, working with a new technology partner, we encountered more problems than usual, mostly caused by the incompatibility of new versions of some operating systems. It took one candidate two weeks and a lot of individual technical support to submit her application, but we got there in the end. I wrote to everyone to apologise for any problems experienced, but in the event that the technical issues prevented you from receiving my note of apology... well, we're all very sorry for any inconvenience that our technical teething problems may have caused. We'll work very hard to ensure that there is no repeat next year.

Having received the applications, we divided them among twelve current and former WPP Fellows for initial screening. Everyone was given around 150 applications, and I asked them to reduce these to 25. The brief was to identify candidates with high levels of academic achievement, a clear interest in marketing communications, a healthy mix of experience (in life and business), and an interesting perspective on the questions we had asked.

About a week later, I received the top 25 (or, in a couple of cases, 35) from each of the screeners, and a number of late applications that resulted from the technical problems. From a total of around 350, my task was to select a hundred or so for first interview. Most of these interviews will be conducted face-to-face in London or New York, with a few taking place by telephone.

Even though I have been doing this for a few years, I never cease to be surprised at just how difficult it is to distinguish between different applications. It's much easier to say 'yes' or 'maybe' than it is to say, 'no.' At this stage, everyone has excellent academic credentials and seems to have packed an awful lot into a relatively short life. They are interesting, sometimes witty. One makes a joke about Tony Blair 'sexing up' a report on weapons of mass destruction and I laugh out loud. I agree with all the 'must interview' recommendations of my screeners, and the 'yes' pile grows at an unsustainable rate. I want to meet them all.

Only after reading about fifty applications do I start to get a clear idea of what constitutes first interview material and what does not. I thus have to re-read all of them. I have the first of a series of very bad headaches.

I always start by reading the personal introduction. This has to engage me in the same way that a 30-second commercial has to engage before it can inform. It's the equivalent of the first conversation at a party. Is this person interesting? Do I like them? Would I like to continue the conversation? I then move on to academic achievement and interests, looking at the choices they have made and judging the balance of analytical and intuitive skills. Finally I read the essay questions, asking whether the applicant has an opinion, whether that opinion is well argued, and how well they write.

Like all recruiters, I admit to prejudices. For example, I will not extend an invitation to a person who does not write well. I hate bullet points. I loathe jargon, and especially the word, 'paradigm.' My experience has led me to conclude that people who talk a lot about thinking 'outside the box' are generally incapable of doing so. And I believe that if you don't pay attention to detail in an application, then it's a good sign that you won't pay attention to detail in your working life.

This year brought its fair share of basic errors. Applicants wrote about 'knew ideas,' 'pop idles' and 'geographical boarders.' 'Were' inexplicably became 'where.' In the letter that we asked applicants to write to their favourite teacher, explaining their decision to follow a career in marketing communications, several chose to include that old saying, 'those who can, do, while those who can't, teach.' If insulting their favourite teacher had been a part of the brief then that might have been a good idea. And one guy, quoting me from an article I had written, referred to me as 'Jon Peel.' I've been called worse, but it really helps to get such details right.

But one person's loss is another's gain. As the numbers narrowed I felt inspired and humbled in equal measure. Inspired because of the remarkable things that so many of our candidates have done, and increasingly because they look at the

world, and at their lives, in ways that I could not. And humbled because I know that I never would have gained a place on this program myself. At that age, I simply wasn't good enough. (Maybe that's still true.)

I'm looking forward to meeting or talking to each and every one of the 108 people who have made it onto my list. They are drawn from every continent on earth, and between them speak a staggering 30 to 40 different languages. A few lucky ones will eventually join us as Fellows. Hopefully we can find places for many more inside our operating companies.

Of course the process isn't perfect, and I know that in the cardboard box in my office – and even in the larger box containing the applications cut in the first screening – there lie large number of candidates who would, if given the chance, do a great job for us. If you are one of those people, I hope that you won't give up on this industry, and won't turn your back forever on WPP.

To everyone who has applied this year, I would like to say a sincere 'thank you' for all of your efforts. And I wish you all the best for the holiday season and beyond.