

By Amy Bingham

# JUDGING A BOOK BY ITS COVER ... AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

It happens to everyone who works a desk at some point. You toil away locating the perfect candidate for the job order, you excitedly send him over to your customer's site for an interview, and the hiring manager

calls afterward with this news: "He's just not the right cultural fit." So you ask questions for clarification but find you can get no concrete reasons for the rejection. Your gut tells you your client's cultural fit rationale is a thinly

veiled excuse to reject your candidate based on some aspect of his appearance. You're frustrated, because this guy was really hard to find, and you're not sure you can find another qualified candidate.

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As the workforce continues to contract, filling job orders is getting harder. The last thing we need now, more so than ever, is to have our candidates rejected based on appearance. And appearance today is defined beyond age, gender, race and weight – though we know discrimination still occurs on all those fronts. It's the social and attitudinal dynamics in play that can trip us up. Three generations in the workforce that all think very differently is presenting unique new challenges. For example, candidates with tattoos and piercings – most common among the 80 million 17-31-year-olds that are "Gen Y" – are problematic for those more conservative. If your client's a buttoned-up Baby Boomer or Gen Xer, and your candidate's a hip 20-something Gen Yer with tattoos and piercings, you may get that cultural fit phone call.

The challenge for recruiters is to enlighten their clients about the need to relax rigid standards that no longer fit the times to be competitive in the war for talent. Because, unless attitudes change and hiring practices are adjusted, job orders will go unfilled, and both the client's and the staffing firm's revenues will decline.

So how do you coach our clients to



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look beyond appearance? It's a slippery slope, but sidestepping the issue is not an option. Fortunately, some employers are starting to get it, and the best way to illustrate the benefits of change is to provide your clients with examples of what other companies are doing.

As a resident of Orlando FL, I have the opportunity to frequent the multi-

tudes of famous theme parks in the area. Because theme parks hire thousands and thousands of workers each year, and the talent shortage has made it harder for them to fill positions, they've been forced to relax outdated hiring criteria. Over the last year or so, with unemployment in the area as low as 3% at one time, I've observed interesting changes. Most notable are



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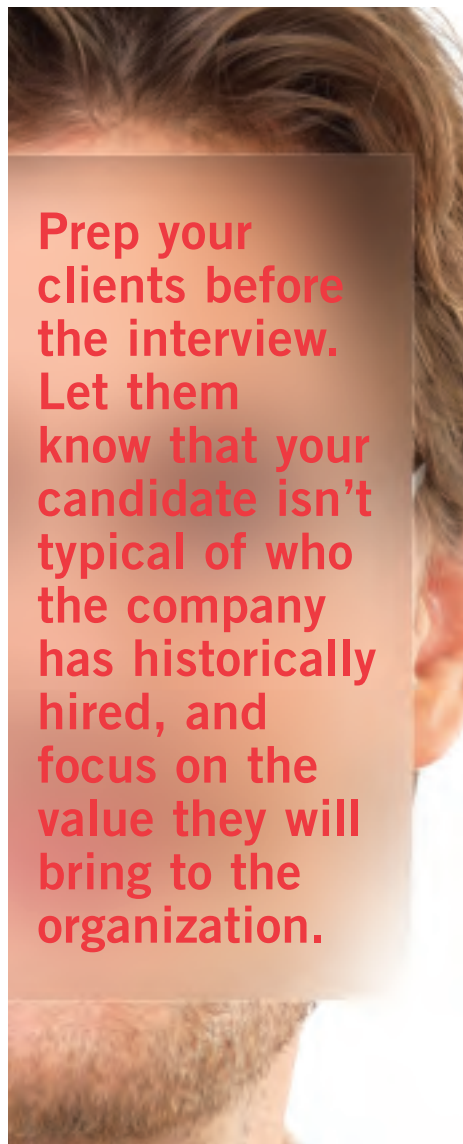


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the increasing number of mature workers that greet me at the park entrance, serve me sandwiches and burgers, and instruct me to "keep my arms and legs inside the vehicle at all times," as I board those high-speed thrill rides. The theme parks now understand firsthand that maturity is synonymous with responsibility and commitment. Older workers show up on time, and turn over less, which means customer satisfaction increases right along with profits. They're trading the fresh faces that personified their image for years for these benefits. But I've also noticed cultural changes reflective of the times – like ride attendants with tiny diamond studs in their noses and servers in restaurants sporting multiple visible tattoos. Only a few short years ago when a firm I worked for was servicing the theme parks, candidates we attempted to place who had tattoos and piercings were likely to be dismissed outright as not representative of the family image the company desires. Today the parks recognize these are adornments consistent with today's younger culture; they're more common than uncommon among their typical applicants. If they reject all otherwise-qualified candidates with tattoos, they narrow what's already a tight labor

pool considerably. Some have balanced their objective to preserve a historical image by requiring employees to remove piercings and ensure tattoos are covered when at work.

Bottom line, the social stigmas that resulted in the rigid hiring practices that were just speed bumps a few years ago are now roadblocks to our success in the staffing industry. Generation Y in particular is forcing older Baby Boom and Gen X hiring managers to modify their beliefs to remain competitive in the war for talent. Here are some tips to avoid the cultural fit roadblock:

- Know your clients. The stronger your relationship, the more confidence your clients will have in you as the staffing expert you are, and the more likely they will be to accept your coaching.
- Prep your clients before the interview. Let them know that your candidate isn't typical of who the company has historically hired, and focus on the value they will bring to the organization.
- Prep your candidates. Advise them to remove earrings from visible piercings if possible, cover tattoos and ensure that long hair is tied

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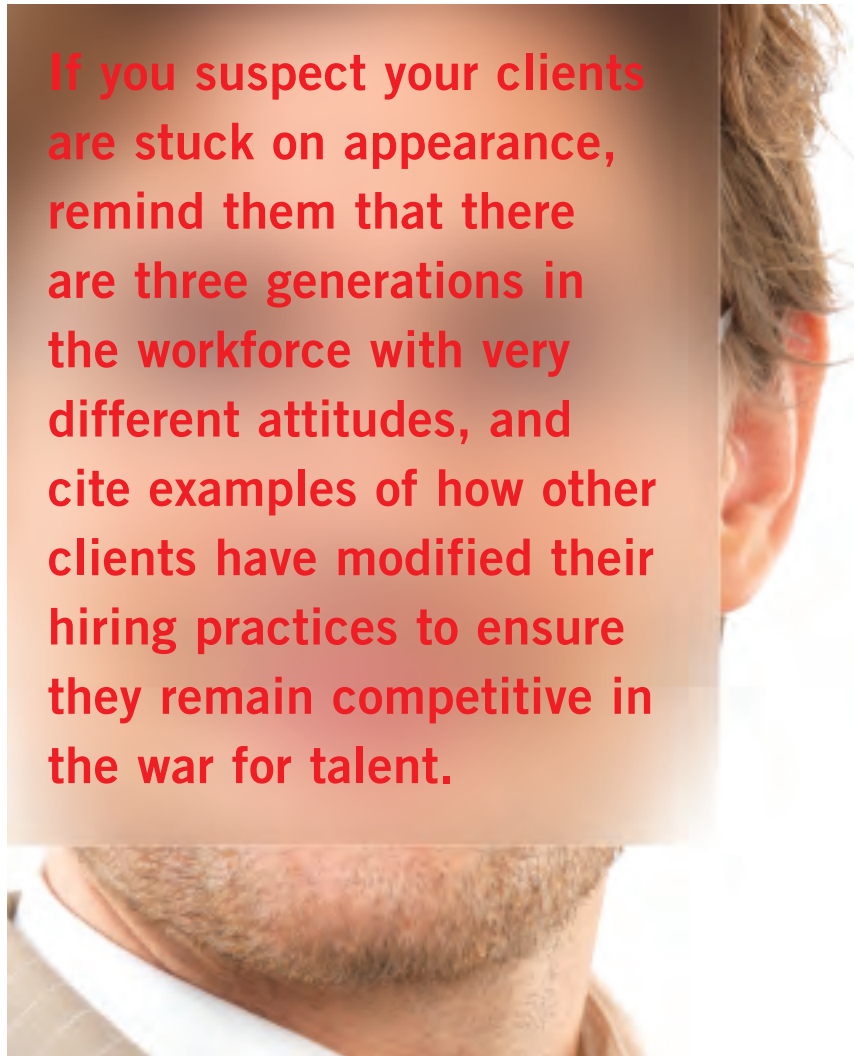
back. Let them know the company has historically had a conservative image, and though you respect their individuality, you want your client to focus on skills and attitude, not appearance.

- If you suspect your clients are stuck on appearance, remind them that there are three generations in the workforce with very different attitudes, and cite examples of how other clients have modified their hiring practices to ensure they remain competitive in the war for talent.

Lastly, remember that it's human nature to resist change. Even if your coaching doesn't immediately change the outcome of a particular placement, it will give your clients pause, and they will begin to see your relationship differently and view you as an employment consultant, not just a staffing firm. **SI**

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