

And the Winner Is...

Competitive Nature

The beauty of contests is that they appeal to a person's competitive nature. People like to test themselves. They like the chance to prove they're the best.

That's why contests can be effective in recruiting an elusive audience, those people who are happy at their work and aren't actively searching for other jobs. Often, these are the very people you would love to hire, but want ads and other traditional recruiting methods won't reach them. But "give them a game, and they're there," says Gerry Crispin, principal of CareerXroads, a staffing strategy consulting firm in Kendall Park, N.J.

TopCoder has built a whole business on games. The Glastonbury, Conn.-based company holds all sorts of computer-programming competitions, both on its Web site and on location at tournaments, for the purposes of recruiting and software development.

Some 90,000 people in 200 countries participate in TopCoder competitions, and participants collect all sorts of stats on how they perform. Like kids looking at statistics on the backs of baseball cards, contestants can

compare themselves not only to others, but also to their prior performances. "There are reams and reams of data," says George Tsipolitis, TopCoder's vice president of employment services and software development.

Needless to say, recruiters looking for computer programmers and engineers want access to these statistics. "Companies are struggling to find the best engineers out there," Tsipolitis says. For them, TopCoder is like an ultimate dream, the place where constant contests identify the best in the world.

The company, however, is protective of its community. Recruiters can contact TopCoder participants, but only if permission is given first. In fact, the chance to be recruited is not the main reason thousands of people participate; they're primarily hooked by the lure of competition, which Tsipolitis describes as a "huge aspect" of the site.

Tips for Running a Successful Contest

Companies thinking of running a contest should remember it's not something you do on a whim. "It's not easy," says George Tsipolitis, vice president of employment services and software development for TopCoder, a Glastonbury, Conn.-based company that runs numerous programming contests. "[Companies] don't realize there's a whole process."

To begin with, the contest should involve a practical skill and match the expertise for which you're trying to recruit. "If the contest is how many hot dogs you can eat, and the job is a programmer, that would be pretty dumb," says Gerry Crispin, principal of CareerXroads, a staffing strategy consulting firm in Kendall Park, N.J.

Increasingly, these games are accessed via the Web. That may be a convenient way to run a contest, but it can also allow players to cheat. Instead of entering a contest himself, for instance, a contestant could coerce his genius older brother to go online and do it for him. For that reason, companies may consider holding a contest's final round in person, Crispin says.

Clearly outline the game's ground rules. Be fair. You don't want your contest labeled as discriminatory or rigged. "Even if you make it completely fair, you always will have someone who will complain," says Ted Daywalt, CEO and president of VetJobs, a military-related job board based in Marietta, Ga., and consultant with the Herman Group, a Greensboro, N.C., consulting firm.

Make contestants register before playing so you have all their contact information, then do follow-up. Finally, remember that contests often work best during a labor surplus. If there's a shortage, people will be less inclined to participate, especially the elite candidates. "They will look at it as demeaning," Daywalt says.



George Tsipolitis