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\$13 an Hour? 500 Sign Up, 1 Wins a Job

By [MICHAEL LUO](#)

BURNS HARBOR, Ind. — As soon as the job opening was posted on the afternoon of Friday, July 10, the deluge began.

[C.R. England](#), a nationwide trucking company, needed an administrative assistant for its bustling driver training school here. Responsibilities included data entry, assembling paperwork and making copies.

It was a bona-fide opening at a decent wage, making it the rarest of commodities here in northwest Indiana, where steel industry layoffs have helped drive unemployment to about 10 percent.

When Stacey Ross, C. R. England's head of corporate recruiting, arrived at her desk at the company's Salt Lake City headquarters the next Monday, she found about 300 applications in the company's e-mail inbox. And the fax machine had spit out an inch-and-a-half thick stack of résumés before running out of paper. By the time she pulled the posting off [Careerbuilder.com](#) later in the day, she guessed nearly 500 people had applied for the \$13-an-hour job. "It was just shocking," she said. "I had never seen anything so big."

Ms. Ross had only a limited amount of time to sort through the résumés. While C. R. England has not been immune to the downturn, it has added significantly to its stable of drivers and continued to hire office staff members to support them. Ms. Ross was also trying to fill more than two dozen other positions.

The 34-year-old recruiter decided the fairest approach was simply to start at the beginning, reviewing résumés in the order in which they came in. When she found a desirable candidate, she called to ask a few preliminary questions, before forwarding the name along to Chris Kelsey, the school's director. When he had a big enough pool to evaluate, she would stop. Anyone she did not get to was simply out of luck.

She dropped significantly overqualified candidates right away, reasoning that they would leave when the economy improved. Among them was a former [I.B.M.](#) business analyst with 18 years experience; a former director of human resources; and someone with a master's degree and 12 years at Deloitte & Touche, the accounting firm.

Over the course of four days, Ms. Ross forwarded 61 résumés to Mr. Kelsey, while rejecting 210 others. The remainder never even got a look. Many were, in fact, never uploaded to the company's internal system because there were too many.

Just before the advertisement was removed, a standard one-page résumé arrived from Tiffany Block, 28, who lived in nearby Portage and had lost her job four months earlier as an accounts receivable manager at a building company when it closed its Indiana office.

Someone she knew had applied for the job and had said so on [Facebook](#). Ms. Block went to the company's Web site and filed an application online, which many others had not. By doing so, her application went directly into the company's system. She was hardly optimistic, since she had not had an interview in months.

Ms. Ross, however, passed it on the next day to Mr. Kelsey.

Attendance at Mr. Kelsey's school has surged during the recession. Mr. Kelsey, 33, had just promoted one of his three administrative assistants, who handle the paperwork needed for drivers to hit the road. He needed a replacement quickly.

The overwhelming response astonished him. He asked Cheree Seawood, one of his current assistants, to go through the résumés and help pick out several to interview. To make the task easier, he decided they should be even more rigorous in ruling out anyone who appeared even slightly overqualified. Mr. Kelsey, an ardent New England Patriots fan, compared his personnel strategy to the team's everyman approach.

"We like to get the fair and middling talent that will work for the wages and groom them from within," he said.

In other words, he said, he did not want the former bank branch manager Ms. Ross had sent, or the woman who had once owned a trucking company, or even the former legal secretary.

He also realized that in this climate he could afford to be extra picky and require trucking industry experience.

The company eventually settled on eight people to interview, inviting in the first two just five days after the job was posted.

In the past, Mr. Kelsey had mostly ad-libbed interviews, but this time he asked his company's human resources department for help. They sent him a list of 13 questions, as well as an [eight-page packet with 128 questions](#) grouped under 50 "competencies." He decided he would ask them all.

At the end of each hourlong interview, he and Ms. Seawood each jotted down a rating for each applicant and then compared them.

Invariably, the candidates' job search travails came up. One woman who lost her job had started working as a waitress and confessed she had come directly from her job on the overnight shift.

But Mr. Kelsey resolved to keep his personal sympathies at bay. "If you start judging applicants on want or need, eventually that want, or need, will go away when they get the job and their financial situation stabilizes," he said. "Then you're left with whatever skills they have."

Before Ms. Seawood called Ms. Block to schedule an interview, she had been getting increasingly depressed.

"I felt like, I'm 28 years old, and I don't have a job," she said. "What am I doing with myself?"

But Mr. Kelsey was immediately impressed when she came in on the second day of interviews. Dressed in a conservative business suit, Ms. Block patiently answered all of the 100-plus questions. Mr. Kelsey liked that she remained consistent in her answers and showed independence.

Afterward, Mr. Kelsey gave Ms. Block a 9; Ms. Seawood rated her at a point lower.

The next week, however, Ms. Seawood gravitated to a different candidate. The woman had just had nose surgery and came in wearing a protective mask. Besides her qualifications, the fact she had not tried to postpone impressed Ms. Seawood.

But when Mr. Kelsey invited the woman back, the interview was a disaster. She grew visibly irritated amid his battery of questions.

Mr. Kelsey immediately called Ms. Block to ask if she could come in for a second interview.

Was an hour from now too soon?

Momentarily panicked, Ms. Block quickly assented.

Mr. Kelsey marched through many of his questions again. Then, trying to gauge her ability to be assertive among truck drivers, he added a new hypothetical: if she were in the stands at a baseball game and a foul ball came her way, would she stand up to try to catch it, or wait in her seat and hope it fell her way?

The other finalist had said she would wait. But Ms. Block said immediately that she would jump up to grab it.

Mr. Kelsey decided he had found his hire.

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