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Tech Talk: CIO to CIO

How an "Old" Company Still Attracts the Best IT Talent

O.C. Tanner (OCT) has been in business for a long time – this year marks our 90th anniversary – and has experienced a number of revolutions and evolutions to its business model in that time. Historically, we were primarily manufacturers of custom products (and are amazing at things like lean manufacturing), competing against companies like us. But that started to change a few years ago with our new competition coming from software companies. The new competitors approached life from an entirely different perspective and at a much faster pace. Looking into the future we realized we needed to change our focus so that we could survive and thrive in this new world. We had to make a lot of changes in our thinking, practices, and tools to ensure we were still competitive in this new marketplace.

I suppose our story is not too different from what is happening with others in our technology-driven, fast-paced world. And in this world we now compete head-to-head with everyone else who is attracting, retaining, and developing IT talent. To make matters worse, we are headquartered in Salt Lake City which is one of the country's largest high-tech hubs with lots of tech companies and start-ups requiring IT talent. To make matters even worse, no one thinks of OCT as a technology company. As far as technology talent knows, OCT does not exist.

In order to win the talent wars, we knew we had to change the perception about OCT. I gathered my team so that we could brainstorm what to do to hire who we needed. After generating our ideas we agreed to take an experimental approach – we would try a number of ideas, measure the results and then keep the ideas that work. This is my report – three years into our efforts – of what has worked:

Building Our Brand

- 1) We had to build a brand for IT at OCT. We partnered with our marketing department to develop our IT brand. We defined our core competencies and our market differentiators and then worked out how we would build both practices and messaging around what we do better than anyone else. With that done, we had to take our brand to the IT talent market. How did we do that?
- 2) We got really active in the IT community. Some members of our IT team were already active in users groups but we expanded participation in those and other users groups. We started to host the users group meetings and, for certain critical IT skills, became the title sponsors of the users groups. With our participation and influence we have been able to share what we are doing with our products and technology and describe our culture (one of our key differentiators). At a minimum, the members of the users groups start to think differently about OCT. Even if they are not interested in looking at our job opportunities, they speak highly of us to their nerd friends. And user group support is a bargain. We pay less for all of our user group sponsorships than we pay for a single recruitment fee.

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- 3) We have also invested and participated in the broad community efforts to expand the IT talent pipeline. We are engaged with Women's Technology Council and, through our relatively small annual sponsorship, participate on their board. This raises our profile as a technology company and connects us with a wide range of IT leaders who start to think differently about OCT. We participate in SheTech - an all-day event that uses games and competitions to encourage female high school students to pursue careers in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM).
- 4) We have worked closely with our local colleges, universities and technical training providers to build an IT skills apprenticeship pipeline. From our apprenticeship program we get access to new IT talent and also interact with faculty and student leaders who get to know us, learn the types of things we are doing, and then tell others about us. The goal of our community activities is to build that brand we have worked so hard to create, define, and protect.

We have a deep and abiding passion for helping good people get on and stay on the IT career track, whether it's with OCT or elsewhere.

Doing Interesting Work

One element of our branding is that we do meaningful, interesting work and so we must work to make sure we keep that brand promise. Now, to be honest, a lot of the work that we need to do might not initially sound that interesting. Modernizing our legacy products can be pretty mundane and boring work. But, can we do that modernization in a compelling way? Of course we can. Rather than doing the incredibly uninteresting work of just rewriting old code, we can do our work in a way that sets us up for both the present and the future by shifting to a micro-services architecture. All of the cool technology kids use micro-services and we do as well. The people modernizing our legacy products are on the leading edge of micro-services / API-centric thinking and tooling to get this work done.

We have focused on being really good at things like agile, lean, and DevOps and allowed a high level of innovation in those areas. Four members of our DevOps team have developed some application- and deployment-level security tools that we are now patenting. We experiment with things like machine learning, social graphs, and behavior analytics. If the work will align to our product, IT, or company goals, the team is free to try it out. All of this helps make the case of our brand and gives those involved with the users groups and the broader IT community something to talk about when people ask them what we are up to at OCT.

We still have a long way to go to win every head-to-head competition for IT talent. But we have turned the corner in changing how people think about IT at OCT. How's that for a 90-year-old company?