

## Chapter 5

---

---

# The Role Stories Can Play in Human Resources

This chapter looks at some of the ways stories can be put to work in human resources. Collecting and analyzing stories from your organization makes it easier to perform the following tasks:

1. Recruiting
2. Interviewing
3. Employee orientation
4. Performance appraisals
5. Employee relations
6. Conflict resolution

In this chapter we briefly explore each of these areas. The remaining four chapters in this section offer a comprehensive strategy for using stories in the areas of training, competency modeling, knowledge management, corporate culture, change management, and leadership.

### RECRUITING

Companies are hungry for talented employees. To attract and retain talent, companies offer all sorts of incentives and benefits. Many companies have had to learn the hard way that it costs more to continually hire and train new employees than to find the right

ones and retain them. Recruiting should be more than a numbers game. It needs to be a matter of excellent communication, and one of the best ways of establishing that is through storytelling.

The Internet has given recruiters new tools for reaching larger pools of applicants more quickly than ever before. Yet they still have problems finding the right people. Leaving supply and demand aside, let's look at how companies can use stories to improve their odds of attracting candidates.

Stories are the perfect way to bring a company and a job to life for a prospective employee. Your challenge is to bring the company and job alive for a candidate. Granted, it is easier to tell someone facts and figures about a company or read them a job description, but that is flat and ineffective. Put on your competitor's hat and differentiate your company.

It all begins with active listening. Start by trying to elicit stories from an applicant. Here are some questions to ask to get the ball rolling:

1. What does the applicant know about the company?
2. What has he or she heard about it from other people?
3. Has the applicant read any recent articles about the company?
4. Why is the applicant interested in the company?
5. How does the applicant envision his or her position at the company?
6. Has the applicant explored the company's website? If so, what did he or she learn?
7. How would the candidate present the company to someone else?
8. Has the applicant heard stories from other employees?

Let candidates' stories and assumptions about the company drive your conversations. Use their stories to figure out what stories you should tell. Scan their stories for accurate facts and impressions versus gossip. Evaluate their choice of story and tone for things like

1. Underlying attitude toward the company
2. Attitude toward work in general
3. Level of interest
4. Communication style

If you have positive feelings about the candidate, share a story that will spark his or her imagination. How about a success story of an employee? Perhaps you can whet his or her appetite by telling a story of how someone in the role you are recruiting for had a profound impact on the company or a customer.

Would an a  
tomers to com  
tion and some  
involved. Initi  
municate in te  
you know it y  
company, and  
didates tell. S  
sion." If you d  
your job is goi  
of your own st  
thoughts and  
tell, or in thei  
Work with y  
partment to in

1. Newspaper
2. Radio and t
3. Job fair dis
4. Brochures
5. Web sites

And remembe

Before you c  
sume with you  
a resume. Don  
ing them reite  
ing the resum  
comfortable, d  
the opposite ef  
it will be to el

As you read  
facts. In addit  
ments. Now is  
mation before  
Synthesize th

Consider ex  
standard que

1. Do you see
2. What is the

Would an advertiser just list product features and expect customers to come running? Not likely. Successful ads grab our attention and somehow personally connect us to the product or service involved. Initially, you will find it much harder to think and communicate in terms of stories, but it gets easier with practice. Before you know it you will have collected a wealth of stories about the company, and you will get very good at listening to the stories candidates tell. Stories are not for the "faint of imagination or passion." If you do not believe in the company you are recruiting for, your job is going to be difficult, and if you take the time to be aware of your own stories, you will notice that you cannot hide your true thoughts and feelings. They will show through in the stories you tell, or in their absence.

Work with your company's public relations or communications department to incorporate stories in all of your recruiting strategies:

1. Newspaper ads
2. Radio and television ads
3. Job fair displays
4. Brochures
5. Web sites

And remember: Stories do not need to be long, only effective.

### INTERVIEWING

Before you even speak to a candidate, *really* read his or her resume with your "story mind." Some recruiters do not even glance at a resume. Don't waste your own and your candidates' time by having them reiterate information that can be easily learned by reading the resume. Instead of making a candidate feel important and comfortable, demonstrating you haven't read the resume will have the opposite effect. The more comfortable the candidate is, the easier it will be to elicit stories.

As you read a resume, look beyond the list of dates, degrees, and facts. In addition, temporarily set aside your laundry list of requirements. Now is the time to activate your imagination. Use the information before you to construct a story and image of the person. Synthesize the details to generate preliminary impressions.

Consider exploring the following areas in addition to asking your standard questions:

1. Do you see any patterns in the candidate's job history?
2. What is the most intriguing piece of information?

3. What experience on the resume is the least relevant to the job the candidate is interviewing for?
4. Why does the candidate enjoy this type of work?
5. What is his or her motivation?

For example, let's pretend you are trying to staff a research position for your legal department. An example of part of a candidate's resume is shown in Figure 5.1.

On the surface, this resume (Figure 5.1) appears to be dry and straightforward. Hidden in the details, however, are dozens of interesting stories. Each story can provide a wealth of insight. For example:

Guiding Question	Relevant Information	Interviewer's Story Prompt	Points to Explore
Do you see any patterns in the candidate's job history?	Housing	Tell me about the most memorable housing case you worked on.	Does the candidate take pride in any aspect of the case? Does the story shed any light on candidate's approach to things or values?
What is the most intriguing piece of information?	Researched and drafted legal memoranda on federal housing tax credits, low-income housing development, compliance issues, architectural access, fair housing, federal, state, and local historic sites.	If you could rewrite any of the federal housing laws, which ones would you choose? How would you change them? Can you give me examples of cases you worked on that guide your current thinking?	How does the candidate form an opinion? Are there issues the candidate is passionate about?
What experience listed on the resume is the least relevant to the job he or she is interviewing for?	Activities: Participant, Some University Summer Institute of Law, exotic foreign country	Tell me about your summer. What was it like to live in an exotic foreign country? How is that country's legal system different from ours?	How does the candidate handle cultural differences? How might the culture and work environment of your organization affect the candidate?

Figure 5.1  
Sample Resume

EXPERIENCE

EDUCATION

Figure 5.1  
Sample Resume

EXPERIENCE Sample & Sample, Inc. Nowhere, USA

ASSOCIATE *Time Fiction to Time Fiction*

- Experience in residential and commercial conveyancing, commercial lending, condominium conversion, business and corporate law, estates, wills and trusts.
- Draft estate instruments including wills and trusts.
- Advise clients on estate instruments suitable for clients' estate planning goals.
- Represent major banking institutions in residential and commercial lending.
- Conduct commercial and residential loan closings. Advise clients as to title issues.
- Manage client and vendor relationships.
- Negotiate, prepare, and review loan documents for commercial loan closings and documentation for organizing, incorporating and amending some State for-profit and non-profit organizations.

Independent Contractor Nowhere, USA *Time Fiction to Time Fiction*

- Legal research and writing on various topics for several general practice firms.
- Researched, drafted, and reviewed environmental and zoning opinions, documentation necessary to obtain federal housing tax credits in low-income housing development, and various documentation for organizing and incorporating not-for-profit tenant associations.
- Researched and drafted legal memoranda on issues of federal housing tax credits, low-income housing development, compliance issues, architectural access, fair housing, federal, state and local historic sites, nonconforming zoning and land uses, and contract issues arising in low-income housing development.

EDUCATION Some Law School Juris Doctor

Activities

Participant, Some University Summer Institute of Law,  
Exotic Foreign Country

Interviewing should be fun. Go beyond the demands of filling jobs, and see each candidate as a story waiting to unfold. Some people find it easy to look for stories in a candidate's resume and ask the right questions to elicit them. If it is not immediately easy for you, there is no need to worry. Start with the desire to discover candidates, and with a little practice, the rest will become second nature.

### EMPLOYEE ORIENTATION

How do things look from the perspective of a new employee? What do you want him or her to know about your company, and what do you want him or her to know about the job? Time spent on employee orientation can be organized into the following types of activities:

- Structured-formal
- Informational
- Unstructured
- Coaching-informal

#### Structured-Formal

This is your chance to formally welcome an employee to your company. Think of it as a ritual. People appreciate ceremony, and all of us want to feel that we are getting special attention. Ask senior-level managers to host a breakfast or lunch for new employees. Use it to share a vision of the company, celebrate the company's success stories, and introduce employees to the company's defining stories. Coach the managers on how to use stories. Select stories that will create an environment full of energy and possibilities—for example, the story of how the company got started. Managers should share personal stories about their involvement and experience with the company.

The formal orientation should include time and activities that encourage new employees to use stories to dialogue with one another and with senior employees and to start the process of binding and bonding. One way of doing this is to place cue cards with story prompts at everyone's seat. Some suitable story prompts are:

- My first job
- The day I grew up and figured out what I wanted to be
- The funniest thing that ever happened to me at work
- A fun fact about myself

- My greatest
- My favorite

Such an  
belong.

#### Informa

New em  
most effici  
room full o  
tation, you  
stream of i  
or her own  
follow his o

Use tech  
ployees can  
enroll in p  
important  
resources p  
with some  
tions answ  
cuse to lose  
perceive y  
bottom lin

An Intra  
orientation  
ration, and  
Many tech  
capturing  
Collecting  
nies want  
the princip  
best practi  
company v  
In this wa  
ing orient

#### Unstru

Part of  
people. Pu  
and indica  
each conv

- My greatest success
- My favorite hero or heroine

Such an orientation will leave new employees feeling as if they belong.

### Informational Time

New employees have to digest a lot of information. What is the most efficient way? A nonlinear approach is best. If you have a room full of people, and everyone has to listen to the same presentation, you are slowing down many people. A speaker offers one stream of information, yet everyone assimilates information at his or her own rate. Our minds tend to wander. Allow each person to follow his or her own path of questions and needs.

Use technology to your advantage. Set up an Intranet site. Employees can use their web browser to read policies, sign documents, enroll in plans, and get answers to questions. However, it's very important that you do not eliminate anyone's access to a human resources professional. Many employees will want to speak directly with someone. They may not feel comfortable having their questions answered through an Intranet site. Technology is not an excuse to lose your focus on internal customer service. How employees perceive your treatment of them directly affects your company's bottom line.

An Intranet is also a perfect vehicle for maintaining an employee orientation process for all of your employees. Groupware, collaboration, and knowledge management software packages are in vogue. Many technology companies are scrambling to develop tools for capturing and presenting knowledge and making it searchable. Collecting, storing, and mining information is not enough. Companies want to transform their information into knowledge. One of the principal enablers is story. Use stories to express your company's best practices and lessons learned. Employees from one area of the company will benefit from hearing other employees' experiences. In this way, an Intranet site can be a way of maintaining an ongoing orientation for all of your employees.

### Unstructured Time

Part of any new employee's orientation includes meeting lots of people. Put together a list of all the people he or she should meet, and indicate the reason for each choice and what you hope for from each conversation. This list should include an indication of why

you want the new employee to meet each person and what you hope will be gained from each conversation. You must also take the time to speak with the people on your list. Give them a sense of what you want them to discuss, and ask them to share as much as they possibly can in the form of stories. Help them to think of some useful stories to recount. Here are some options:

1. Customer interactions
2. Successful projects
3. Lessons learned
4. Department history
5. Personal history
6. Challenges ahead

To emphasize the importance of stories as the principal learning and communication vehicle, let me use the analogy of acquiring a new skill. When you learned how to ride a bicycle, drive a car, or learn a sport, all of the verbal instructions in the world did not help until you physically experienced the sensations. It's just as difficult to be a new employee. A new employee will not be lacking for verbal instructions. What he or she needs are stories to activate the imagination. Stories are like physical sensations. Of course, a new employee's best teachers will be his or her experiences. However, before an employee begins to acquire experiences, hearing stories will make him or her more aware of what to pay attention to and learn.

#### Coaching—Informal Time

Part of any employee's continuing orientation must include coaching. The coach needs to take the time to build a relationship with the new employee. Trust and respect are the key ingredients. Without them, coaching is perceived negatively. Stories will help you build rapport, share knowledge, and assess what areas of knowledge and performance need attention.

### PERFORMANCE APPRAISALS

If you dread performance appraisals and they feel like a formal requirement devoid of meaning, you are not alone—but what a shame. Performance appraisals can be a great process for giving feedback, rewarding performance, improving performance, and conducting strategic planning. Unfortunately, we have become slaves to the bureaucracies we have created and are paralyzed by the or-

ganizational and performances. S

Although app focused on quan

Employee d  
or her assign

I

Strongly dis

There is more than from the c give an employe two important c ment? What if l projects? In the dropped what h was a mission-c doing so he save here. The point conducting the j stories.

Stories provid information to l way street. How company? Are t the company ne How can the co performance go

Elicit stories tions. What wen below expectatio sion new perform

Take the time tools. If you are employee. Be su asize quantifyin dialogue and le

One of the ma tion. Commun

ganizational and political ramifications of evaluating employees' performances. Stories can come to our rescue.

Although appraisals include space for comments, we are more focused on quantifying an employee's performance:

Employee demonstrates ability to follow through on all his or her assignments.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly disagree			Strongly agree	

There is more to be learned from the stories driving a perception than from the quantitative rating. For example, a manager may give an employee a low evaluation. What if an employee on one or two important occasions purposely dropped the ball on an assignment? What if his plate had been too full, and he prioritized his projects? In the absence of any formal instructions, what if he then dropped what he was doing so he could focus on what he thought was a mission-critical project? What if he was right? What if by doing so he saved the company money? There are many "what ifs" here. The point is that the supervisor filling out the evaluation or conducting the performance review may be totally unaware of the stories.

Stories provide a mechanism for dialoguing. There is a wealth of information to be learned. Appraisals should be viewed as a two-way street. How does an employee's performance reflect upon the company? Are there things the company needs to do better? Does the company need to provide more resources or more information? How can the company strategically align its objectives with the performance goals of its employees?

Elicit stories from employees. Listen carefully to their explanations. What were the causes of their successes? Why did they perform below expectations in another area? Get them to use stories to envision new performance goals and devise tactics for achieving them.

Take the time to revisit your performance appraisal process and tools. If you are not careful, you may inadvertently discourage an employee. Be sure to define and clarify future expectations. Deemphasize quantifying performance, and incorporate stories to promote dialogue and learning.

### CONFLICT RESOLUTION

One of the main causes of conflict is a breakdown of communication. Communication always breaks down when we cannot see an-

other person's perspective. Understanding another person's point of view means we must often suspend our own. We do not like to abandon our perspective. Doing so can be very disorienting. So, entering into a conflict actually becomes the path of least resistance. It does not take much energy to start a conflict. Yet ironically, holding on to negative feelings takes more energy than resolving a conflict. Even negative perception drives future destructive behavior, and things can quickly spiral out of control.

Let's use a simple example. Joe Employee and Jane Manager are having problems. Joe is furious with Jane because she will not give him funds to hire an outside consultant to help with a project. Initially, Jane had promised him all of the resources he would need. The project was a top priority. Jane had selected Joe to head it up because of his proven ability to deliver. Jane had also recognized that outside help would be necessary in order to complete the project. Joe took on the project in good faith, understanding he would be able to hire consultants. When things suddenly changed, and Joe could not hire outside consultants, he took it personally. He believes Jane is setting him up for failure. Joe starts going out of his way to criticize Jane and lets other projects slip through the cracks.

Due to new management, Jane's budget was cut by more than 30 percent in the middle of the year. New priorities are being articulated, and management has been unclear about its new direction. Jane is experiencing a lot of pressure and uncertainty. She is doing her best to get through all the chaos. She is frustrated that Joe, one of her best and most loyal employees, is being cantankerous. Jane is cross with him at meetings, and starts to cut back on other resources Joe needs.

Your job is to be a story facilitator. Joe and Jane need to tell their stories. You need to get behind each story and help the two see each other's perspective. Active listening will play a major role. Joe needs to see how he became wrapped up in the project and inattentive to Jane and her situation. He will have to recognize how his zeal for the project affected his behavior and attitude. Perhaps Jane had always been a good communicator, but the current pressures made it difficult for her. She may also have been waiting for clearer information from powers above. Jane will need to see how seriously Joe has taken the project, and how disillusioned he became when he was unable to complete it. Despite the lack of information, and the company's conservative management style, Jane needs to acknowledge the impact of her poor communication.

Before conflicts happen, offer employees workshops on how to resolve their conflicts by actively listening to each other's stories. Try conducting conflict resolutions in a special room. Decorate the

room with pic  
big picture an  
ployees to us  
point where  
conflicts but  
edge and enc

Maintainir  
they are recru  
pany is centr  
some of the v  
Being conscio  
may take som  
well for huma  
works and ar

room with pictures and objects that remind people of the company's big picture and their experiences in the workshop. Encourage employees to use the special room before a conflict escalates to the point where a facilitator is required. The goal is not to eliminate conflicts but to seize them as opportunities for increasing knowledge and encouraging richer communication.

### SUMMARY

Maintaining good communication with employees from the time they are recruited and throughout their entire tenure with the company is central to human resources. We have taken a brief look at some of the ways stories can be used to improve communication. Being conscious of using stories and putting them to work for you may take some practice but the benefits are great. Stories will work well for human resources because they represent the way our mind works and are the most efficient form of communication.