

Case study
August 2014

Putting social media to work

Cape UK



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Putting social media to work

Cape UK case study

This case study forms part of a research project conducted in 2014. The main research report and other case studies can be found [here](#).

The context

Cape UK (hereon Cape) is a FTSE 250 company that supplies services to the energy sector, working at power stations, oil refineries and offshore rigs. Its main operational areas are in scaffolding, thermal insulation and rope access, with smaller areas including industrial cleaning, asbestos removal, painting and paint blasting, and health and safety.

Recruitment is a particularly significant factor in Cape's operations. The need for Cape's services hugely increases over the summer periods – because of lower consumption, this is when the energy sector tends to run shutdowns. This means that Cape provides a large number of fixed-term contracts, more than doubling in size over the summer months. Because of the unexpected nature of many shutdowns, Cape also faces situations where it has to recruit very quickly, for example finding 20 workers on a Friday afternoon to start on the following Monday. Further, because of the contracting nature of the energy services industry, recruitment is generally very competitive.

‘We're in the type of industry where a lot of employees will jump ship for an extra 50p an hour. If they know they've only got two weeks' work left with one organisation but they can be guaranteed six months somewhere else, they will leave to go to the new role.’

Sarah Keyworth

In 2013 Cape made 2,300 hires, processing 17,500 applications, and had a workforce that peaked at 4,332 employees. Its permanent core workforce is about 2,000 employees.

However, until 2010, when a centralised recruitment function was established in the north of England, Cape was typical of its industry in being somewhat backward in its hiring processes.

‘It was a fairly archaic set of systems and processes from a recruitment point of view. Not everything was set out as it should be, there were some areas where we were non-compliant with the law ... people were working before they were technically hired. They were asking questions around health and well-being at application stage, as opposed to post-offer. We weren't necessarily being transparent in the way that we advertised vacancies. Things were done in a somewhat 'black book' fashion; recruitment took place at site level. Sometimes you might hear the joke that guys would go around the local town, handing out a few business cards and that's how they would find the local employees. ... It really was a case of networking and doing it the old-fashioned way like people would have done in the '50s, '60s, '70s and '80s ... Nepotism is quite established within the industry.’

Martin Tweddle

The industrial environments in which Cape operates demand a number of checks and paperwork

of employees. For example, scaffolders need an up-to-date competency card from the Construction Industry Scaffolders Record Scheme (CISRS) and a letter from a GP to state that they are fit to work in the environment.

The innovation

Cape's use of digital technology has marked a major innovation in recruitment in the industry. It has brought its recruitment process into the digital age, making its processes fairer and more streamlined. Moreover, beyond using conventional online job boards such as TotalJobs and Jobcentre Plus, Cape has uniquely utilised Facebook, a primarily social channel, for its recruitment.

The basic model is simple: once the hiring manager has given the recruitment team the details of how many workers they need, where and when, with what skills, qualifications and papers (for example scaffold cards and clearance to work on nuclear sites), the recruitment team puts this information on an e-recruitment platform hosted on Cape's website. This updates automatically to the job boards and the recruitment team also posts a message about the post(s) on Facebook.

Applicants can click through from a link from Facebook to the e-recruitment platform, where they find the advertised post and application form. The recruitment team looks at applicants' competencies, checks that their

paperwork is in order (much of this is done automatically using the applicant's National Insurance number), checks that they are on the correct pay rate for their qualifications, looks at where they live in relation to the plant to try and source local labour, and sends a shortlist to the hiring manager to make a final decision.

While this may sound uncontentious, it was a far cry from previous practices.

Before, when I started in 2010, it was literally a hiring manager needed a scaffolder so he'd ask in his local pub if anyone knew one. A lot of the time it was family, it was friends that were being employed.

Hayley Kettlewell

The day-to-day monitoring and posting of the Facebook pages is done by the three co-ordinators in the recruitment team. For a few jobs in specialised areas, such as rope access for onshore operations, which requires Level 3 senior-level rope access supervisors, LinkedIn and Twitter are used in recruitment. But for the great majority of jobs, Facebook is seen to be the most relevant platform.

Using Facebook in conjunction with an e-recruitment platform was seen to present three benefits:

- to ensure fairness and transparency, so that instead of 'backdoor hires', the whole workforce could see current opportunities within the business
- to greatly widen Cape's pool of potential recruits and meet its need to hire large numbers of workers in short periods of time
- to make recruitment processing more efficient.

The journey

Martin Tweddle founded the recruitment team when he joined Cape in April 2010. Early on, the recruitment team stressed to the senior leadership the unfairness of the organisation's recruitment practices. Nepotism was a norm, with people being brought in with no experience as apprentices simply because they were an employee's relative. The process was also very inefficient.

A site manager would find someone that they believed was suitable for the role. The guy would turn up on site. That's when he'd produce his competency card – so they weren't checked before he got to site. Then he'd spend about half a day completing a five-page application form so that we'd got all his hiring information. ... So that's half a day's pay ... [and] site manager time, which could be better spent elsewhere, because he'd have to supervise them, making sure they completed the forms correctly. Illegible handwriting ... absolute nightmare for adding them to payroll. What other problems? Not sending the correct identification to prove the right to work in the UK. All sorts of problems like that.

Hayley Kettlewell

Cape's first use of social media was not for recruitment but as an employment relations tool, to prevent what was fast becoming an industrial dispute at a Lincolnshire site in summer 2011. Two years previously, the Lindsey oil refinery dispute demonstrated to the engineering construction industry how wildcat action could be quickly organised through social media. In the Lincolnshire case, Cape decided to use Facebook to clarify their position, engage with people and try to avert the strike.

We'd detected that an unofficial strike action was going to happen at one of our major power stations. There were rumours circulating that Cape was utilising non-qualified labour on site and lots of unemployed engineers were orchestrating picketing of the site. ... There were 80-plus people planning to congregate at 8 o'clock the next morning, which would have had an impact on Cape and our client. We drafted quite a formal, but factual, response and appended it to the post that was used to orchestrate it. We had a little bit of kick back from it, but again we were quite tempered in our response to that. ... So just restating the facts, not getting overexcited about anything, and we didn't have any strike action. It all literally died down.

Caroline Davies

Following this episode,

It was quite apparent with the amount of people that were trying to add us as a friend, that there was a desire there to kind of engage with us. We have this issue where we've got 120 sites in the UK. We can't be everywhere at once, we can't get the same message across, other than going into printed form with some of our sites, so what better way than use social media, where I guess kind of 80-plus per cent of our employees are already online there?

Caroline Davies

Facebook was chosen because it is far and away the main social media platform and many potential candidates for skilled trades were already using it.

Rather than Twitter, which is quite a young, funky thing – or seen to be – and LinkedIn, which is a professional network, we felt that

Facebook captured a lot more people and a larger audience. //
Hayley Kettlewell

However, bringing recruitment onto social media and an in-house digital platform met with resistance within the business. Many managers, who had worked in the industry for many years, found it difficult to imagine how recruitment could work differently and there was an attitude of 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it'.

// We were proud of the fact that we'd never failed to deliver to a client. We were very proud of the fact that we always got enough employees to where we needed to get them. We won work on that basis. We had a reputation as being able to get things done. ... We traded on a, 'We've never failed,' basis. ... We're under extreme pressure to deliver for clients, when a boiler or a generator gets switched off at one of the clients' sites ... the guys there are losing hundreds of thousands of pounds a day in generation capacity. For us not to return something to the grid on time would be absolutely catastrophic for [our reputation]. ... [There was a strong view that] it had to be the way it was because ... the site teams knew all the people in the industry. ... How could you possibly ever take what was held in 120 black books, put it on some kind of database, make site managers feel that they were losing control of the hiring process ... whilst actually delivering or enhancing the service offering that we gave to our clients? //

Martin Tweddle

// We took it to our board, who didn't like the idea, but we did actually go against them and do it anyway. Because we felt that was the right thing for the business. That's when we started to interact with employees, prospective employees, guys that wanted to

get into the industry but couldn't because of all the blockages beforehand. //
Hayley Kettlewell

The opportunity to test the use of Facebook for recruitment came when Cape needed to mobilise nearly 200 engineers to Western Australia with only six weeks' notice. This involved putting 250 applicants through competency assurance programmes, conducting interviews, visa applications, delivering new training, and checking competency cards and qualifications to work on the specific sites, all in an extremely tight timeframe. With a recruitment team of just five people, they started to use Facebook to keep applicants informed of the process.

// We couldn't physically cope with the volume of calls into the office with such a small recruitment team, when it came to giving people constant updates on where individual applications were at, what the mobilisation plan was, what the training plan and the assessment plan was. We started putting the updates on Facebook and then when people would phone, we'd say, 'Hey guys, why not check Facebook ... that's a really up-to-date feed of what's going on. //

Martin Tweddle

However, the team was soon using it to actively market the jobs, which aided hugely with the success of this recruitment drive, enabling it to mobilise 167 engineers. This far outstripped Cape's nearest competitor, which was able to mobilise about 30.

// We found out when we did the reporting at the end of it, that we'd spent £6,000 on an advertisement in the Daily Record in Scotland and it had generated just one

applicant. In contrast, the other 166 people that we mobilised were sourced through Facebook, which cost absolutely nothing. That project contributed over £2 million of EBIT [earnings before interest and taxes] to the bottom line, in no small part because of the size of the mobilisation. ... If we'd gone down a traditional route with the infrastructure that we had in place, we would have done maybe half of that. ... I don't think anybody expected us to source that many engineers in such a tight timeframe. //

Martin Tweddle

Having demonstrated that social media can work as an HR tool, Cape has gone on to make other IT improvements, such as introducing electronic payslips, saving the business about £90,000 a year.

The results

Take-up and use

The great majority of Cape's recruitment is done through Facebook. Cape has 7,753 Facebook followers, which one interviewee wryly noted is more than Hartlepool Football Club. The secret to this success is that Cape actively recruits through Facebook, so followers are 'getting something out of it, rather than just following an organisation to show that they like them' (Hayley Kettlewell). While Cape does have a general corporate Facebook page, it is its recruitment page that has really taken off.

From the recruiting managers' perspective, any fears they had were quickly put to bed.

// [Previously] you'd get supervisors and site managers recruiting their mates because they're their mates. The bit they were worried about was if this became an e-recruitment, then do they lose that ability to select people that

they know have got experience of the site, of the particular job that they're doing? ... In the region I used to look after operationally, we tested it on the biggest sceptic. ... He was the biggest fan of it from day one ... he ended up getting that time freed up and the fears that he had, they were gone. ... He still had the right level of management control. /

John Cauchi

As well as enabling Cape to advertise jobs to a wide audience, the interactivity of Facebook works well, as job-seekers can ask questions on Facebook about the general availability of work or requirements of specific posts.

/ We find it a great communication tool because so many people are on Facebook. ... When we post an advert onto Facebook a lot of people will ask questions about it, but they'll also tag their friends in the comments. So it's sharing and it's going viral. /

Hayley Kettlewell

/ We also build up relationships with them via Facebook. We try and have a bit of a laugh with them and post non-work things out there so that they relate to us. /

Sarah Keyworth

What are the brand risks of using Facebook, a completely public, open-source social media platform? Cape does get some applicants who show their discontent at being turned down for a number of positions on the run and post critical comments on Facebook. Nevertheless, Cape does not remove comments from its Facebook page unless posts contain swearing. Instead, they encourage people who post negative comments and complaints to discuss the matter with them. While this takes up staff time, it is infrequent enough not to be a challenge and considered

well worthwhile to protect Cape's employer brand.

/ We'll let certain comments and phrases slide, but if they've got the more expletive swear words in there, we will take it down. We will then send a message explaining why we've taken it down and asking them to give us a call to discuss it. Nine times out of ten they will call us to discuss it, and generally apologise for that, saying, you know, 'We've just been venting at the time.' ... They've all accepted that actually it was probably the right thing for us to do. We don't want our Facebook page and our social media presence to be a Big Brother mentality and we are a people business; we want relationships with our people on various different levels, social media being one of them. So we'll enter into dialogue. /

Caroline Davies

Some discussions Cape will not get into online, but will put a simple post asking the person to give them a call. A recent example was an applicant who accused Cape on Facebook of blacklisting him:

/ He wrote his letter to us to explain how he was feeling. We obviously don't want people to feel like that. We spoke to him; we explained to him that for each role that he'd applied for, there were over 50 applications that were shortlisted because they were local guys and they'd got the right competency and skills, so it wasn't him in particular. It's just that there are so many people out of work at this time of year in this industry and this process that we go through ... gives a much fairer decision on the successful candidates. Since then, he's taken down some of his comments that were a little bit abrupt, and he's apologised for his behaviour. He now understands that it wasn't just him and five other people that were

applying for the role ... and he now understands to what extent Cape is seen to be a good employer. /

Hayley Kettlewell

Taking such an open approach is seen to pay dividends, as it is the best way of quashing ill-founded rumours and straightening out misunderstandings.

/ [In the past] what would have happened there is that the first thing we'd have known about would be an ET1 [employment tribunal] form landing. It would have been a bit misinformed, misguided and we'd have spent a lot of cash and invested a lot of time internally trying to respond to that. /

Martin Tweddle

The risk of an open Facebook page is also reduced because if some followers make unreasonable comments, others often put them in their place. A recent example of this regarded some derogatory comments about some relatively lower-paid cleaning roles that Cape was advertising.

We could have stamped down on that and could have really stuck up for ourselves, but we put a simple post on, saying, 'Look, it's above minimum wage, it's over 20% above minimum wage, we're proud to be the only employer in the industry that doesn't utilise agencies.' The next comment was from a lady ... [who] responded with a comment along the lines of, 'Never mind Cape, some people just don't want to work. ... If we try to silence [people who are being contrary], we would quickly drive them underground and they'd be having the conversation somewhere else. So it's much better to try and drag it out in the open, try and get everybody aligned to our vision and what we are genuinely trying to achieve. /

Martin Tweddle

Even where the team does remove posts for bad language, it tries to maintain a good relationship with all its followers.

There are some posts where we've had to say, 'Ah, sorry guys, you've used the F-bomb; we've had to delete it.' We have a little bit of a banter relationship with them, so that they understand that we're not just a faceless organisation, and you know, they understand that we are humans as well. But they also understand that children can go on there if they want to; it's not what we want our organisation to be perceived as.

Hayley Kettlewell

At the time of this research, in two-and-a-half years, Cape has had to conduct just two disciplinaries for gross misuse of Facebook. One of these concerned false allegations of drug use on site, which led to a dismissal and an employment tribunal that Cape won on all accounts. It has also blocked a few ex-employees from its Facebook page for persistent online harassment (one of which related to this employment tribunal).

Business impacts

Using Facebook has clearly made Cape's recruitment hugely more efficient and effective. It has enabled it to reach levels of mobilisation that previously would not have been possible (see *The journey*, above), recruit the best talent available and ensure fairness.

Previously, when [recruitment] was site-based ... you would put the word out and rely on, almost, the jungle drums to promote the fact that Cape were hiring. Then, you were almost held hostage to the fact that whoever picked up the phone first to you and whoever the first ten people to phone were, would get the job. That wasn't necessarily getting us the quality that we needed. Whereas now,

instead of having ten people phone and the first people that phone get a job, we have probably, nearly, around the eight mark, eight applicants per role to select from.

Martin Tweddle

Rather than only probably having two or three CVs to choose from through word of mouth, we might now have 52 high-quality candidates to submit to our hiring managers for selection within mere hours of advertising.

Hayley Kettlewell

It has also drastically reduced the management time involved in recruitment activities.

We had one site manager in particular that reckoned because of social media, because it was so easy to see when he was actively recruiting, he saved an entire day [a week], just from screening phone calls and fending off phone calls from people that were phoning asking for work.

Martin Tweddle

Now ... we don't have supervisors and managers spending huge amounts of their time phoning round, going through their little black book, or, if you like, phoning round people to try and recruit when they needed them. It's a lot more co-ordinated; people are doing the jobs that they're supposed to be doing, that is, managing the site.

John Cauchi

Further, expectations within the industry are changing and Cape is well placed to meet them. This has a tangible impact on its ability to win contracts.

The last couple of years, we've seen tenders come in from clients and they're asking more actively about recruitment practice. 'How can you ensure security of supply

to our installations, our assets?' They definitely don't want to hear, 'We've got a site manager with a black book full of employees that he can call on.' They want to hear about technical solutions, they want to hear about best practice. ... [The way we use Facebook] is a very convincing way of working. We've been able to secure work on the back of our recruitment strategy with current clients. ... I personally think that we stand head and shoulders above the competition now, in the way that we are able to demonstrate how we can get hold of employees. ... We've centralised, we've been able to gain some control over recruitment. We've been able to drag it from the dark ages to what I think is fairly modern.

Martin Tweddle

As already mentioned, Facebook is also seen as a useful employment relations tool, as it can be used to clarify potentially damaging misunderstandings, challenge unreasonable positions and dissipate potential conflict.

Trying to get some truth to rumours, or when you see a thread going on about something that initially started with a rumour, you can get some messages out there to confirm the reality.

John Cauchi

Facebook is used to encourage employees to have frank conversations when needed. With an estimated 90% of employees following Cape on Facebook, it can be used to give existing employees a voice and make the HR function aware of problems.

It might be, might not be the case that they don't get listened to a lot at site. The site managers are busy; so they quite often get told to get out of the cabin and shut up and get back to work, start your spanner turning. But

[picking up on their frustrations on Facebook] we can at least spend ten minutes listening to them objectively. Sometimes that's all it takes. Sometimes an employee feels the need to get something off their chest. If they ... have a voice that goes halfway to solving the problems.

Martin Tweddle

When colleagues vent their frustrations online, those managing the social media channel can suggest that is not the healthiest place to make those comments and redirect them. This clearly places another responsibility on the people actually dealing with and monitoring social media, who 'need to be people that can facilitate an answer from the appropriate person in the business.' (Caroline Davies).

Next steps

The recruitment team is aware of developments in social media and keen to keep up with them.

I have a feeling that Google Plus is the next step. It is because I suspect that, because Android has 80% of the smartphone market, because you need to register a Google email to register your Android device, I think, by implication, the majority of the world's smartphone population are already on Google.

Martin Tweddle

There is also seen to be potential to use social media more with Cape's 2,000 core personnel to share ideas and communicate within this group. As it currently stands, the company's intranet and SharePoint do not give sufficient coverage, as only 10–15% of employees have a Cape email address and can access them. Different options are on the table, including using an enterprise social network and integrating such systems with Facebook. Cape

has recently recruited an internal communications co-ordinator to help with this.

Lessons

For social media to be used effectively, it often needs to be tied to a clear business need. In the case of Cape, Facebook works extremely well, both for the organisation and for job-seekers, in quickly and effectively recruiting personnel. In relating social media to business needs, it is important to consult people whose work it will affect.

In the first instance, when setting it up ... canvass the people who are going to be using it ... as opposed to presenting this to them as, 'This is how it's going to be.' Get their views to ensure that the system incorporates as much of what the end user's going to need as possible. And that gets rid of that scepticism and the fears that were there initially.

John Cauchi

One learning point for Cape has been to put to bed the myth that blue-collar workers are not computer-literate.

Some of them can barely write, as the anecdotes went. Without embracing social media, we would never have been able to prove that these people do and can use computers. They are permanently switched on, like everybody else is. It's phenomenally arrogant for anybody sat in an office to assume that a scaffolder or a high-pressure water jet operator or an insulation engineer can't use a PC to the same extent as they can.

Martin Tweddle

Cape's experience also highlights that social media cannot be controlled and the value of personally interacting with people.

If you're not encouraging two-way dialogue, all you're doing is publishing a list. You could have done that in the Yorkshire Evening Post, 15 years ago, with a vacancy list. ... You can't manage social media, social media just is. You either adopt and work with it and alongside it and take the lessons that it will teach you, or you don't. But you can't control it. ... Trying to apply the old management constructs to a new technology that doesn't work in that fashion is going to break the construct more than it will break social media. ... There is no need to be afraid of it, if you do it right. The way to do it right is to give it a certain amount of autonomy. It is, by its nature, a social organism.

Martin Tweddle

There are also lessons in how to behave on social media as an employer.

You do learn on your feet, and I think it would be fair to say that we've maybe had the odd posting that you think 'Possibly shouldn't have put that on' ... very early days ... where potentially you maybe have risen to the bait a little bit to start with and, you know, so at that point you think, 'No, keep it factual, don't rise to the bait. Take it offline.'

Caroline Davies

Finally, there is a balance to strike between protecting the organisation's brand from criticism and encouraging open discussion. Cape has taken a very open, dialogue-based approach to Facebook, but other organisations may need to approach it differently or use a different platform entirely.

I think that any company going into Facebook for the first time needs to understand where they believe that

balance is. ... You might get some of the bigger corporate companies that will not want any bad news on their page, so it's literally good news stories or nothing at all. That's a decision that they make and they obviously make it with some insight and advice that that is the image that they want to portray, and I don't think it's a one size fits all. You have to understand your business and you have to understand who the users of your Facebook page are going to be as well. ... We understand who the end user of our Facebook page is, and we understand the language that we need to engage with them with, the language that they are going to use. ... They want it to be personal. /
Caroline Davies

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