

Stephanie Eberhart

It's Not About the Finish Line

Stephanie Eberhart was only 10 years old when she began mowing her parents' lawn. They hadn't insisted on it; she just wanted to contribute, and she enjoyed being outside, cutting grass. Most little girls weren't interested in the labor-intensive task, but Stephanie was a tomboy, and more likely to be found playing sports around the neighborhood than playing with dolls. "I didn't ever wear a dress until I was 21," laughs Stephanie. Some time passed, and her next-door neighbor asked whether Stephanie might come over and cut their lawn for a little bit of money.

Thus began Stephanie's neighborhood lawn business, and what started as cutting grass here and there became a full-blown operation as more years went by. In the winter, she shoveled snow, occasionally joined by her brother as they cleared the driveways of families and elderly folks in the area. By the age of 16, Stephanie was able to buy her first car. It was used, but entirely paid for out of her own savings. "I even used to buy groceries for the family," remembers Stephanie, "not because I had to, but just because I was making enough money, and I wanted to contribute."

By the time she was in high school, Stephanie was splitting her time between school, mowing lawns, excelling in athletics, and working retail. And even around the house, she was known for taking on chores without being asked; washing the family cars, washing the outside windows, vacuuming, cleaning, and generally ensuring everything was in good order. She had inherited her father's work ethic, and it just didn't occur to her not to work.

Stephanie has carried this attitude forward throughout her professional career, finally realizing she wanted to start her own business after years of experience at recruiting firms.

As usual, her ambitions were anything but

run-of-the-mill. Stephanie and her partner, a former co-worker named Bridget Pulivarti, aimed not only to build a successful recruiting firm, but to revolutionize the process of recruiting itself. "Recruiting had been done the same way since the 1950's," Stephanie points out. "We wanted to offer a new model that was forward thinking. We wanted to be the Netflix to the old, Blockbuster way of doing things—take something that everybody knows, then reinvent it to be more efficient, more effective, and less expensive. What we wanted to do was offer a scalable, affordable recruiting solution that would not only help our companies hire great full-time talent, but could also allow them to build a pipeline of talent."

TalentRemedy, now seven years old, has done just that. Traditionally, recruiting firms charge a large fee once a candidate is hired by a client firm. This fee is a percentage of the hire's annual salary, an amount that easily runs into the tens of thousands of dollars.

At these firms, each client is assigned a single recruiter, and that recruiter handles all hiring company-wide. Often, these firms offer a limited amount of personal attention, forwarding resumes found on job sites, and shopping candidates around to multiple clients.

Stephanie and Bridget have worked to change all of these practices. First, they charge an hourly rate, rather than a commission. This means that clients begin paying as soon as the process commences; something that can be a hard sell for companies that are used to paying only at the end of the recruiting process. However, the hourly rate produces such fantastic cost savings for companies, Stephanie notes that TalentRemedy's clients aren't one-hit wonders; they're return customers.

"We give them an average of hours that the search may take based on our extensive recruiting experience. To new clients it always



sounds too good to be true," laughs Stephanie. "Our fees are typically 40-60% less than what a company would pay for a direct recruit. What we're trying to do is develop a recurring revenue model, which means those clients come back to us for every search over, and over, and over. When I'm talking to a business owner, I'm talking about cost savings, but I'm also talking about our process, so they understand that those savings don't translate to any cut corners. We will provide the same high-quality people at a lower price."

Where process is concerned, TalentRemedy again diverges from the norm. The first step is a sixty-minute interview with the company itself knowing that not every company is a fit. "I don't want to work with someone who just wants to put butts in seats," explains Stephanie, "we're not just a recruiting firm that's sending you resumes off a job board." Instead, TalentRemedy works to learn more about a company's needs, mission, vision, goals and values before launching the search. The end result of these preliminary conversations is a joint effort to craft what Stephanie calls a "true story"—a true story about who the firm is, what they're looking for, and why talent would want to join their team.

The companies are not assigned just one recruiter; instead area-specific recruiters focus on different departments within a single firm. So, for example, one recruiter on the team will specialize in IT hiring, another in accounting and finance, another in marketing and sales, etc. Then a manager oversees the entire team on the single account.

TalentRemedy heavily vets any candidate sent over to the client company; they are screened for experience, qualifications, salary range, and, to a degree, culture. All that remains is for the business to meet with them and decide who is the best fit. Unlike at other firms, TalentRemedy doesn't shop their candidates around to different companies; instead, the companies are encouraged to keep a file of all the talent recruited for them. "The candidates are siloed," explains Stephanie, "in small business, there's enough competition. We don't need to pit one client against another."

TalentRemedy generally works with small to mid-size emerging businesses, for which Stephanie and Bridget have a special affection. "They're really the bread and butter of America," affirms Stephanie. "I enjoy speaking with the owner or senior leadership of an organization, and

I understand how to help them really make a difference. I have a passion for helping them achieve success and efficiency."

The bold strategy of TalentRemedy has paid off in spades, with extremely high rates of both satisfaction and repeat business from its clients. The company offers a broad range of services that run the gamut in terms of business recruiting, from professional services to manufacturing firms, from non-profit associations to government contractors. "We've built a great client base," says Stephanie, "because they trust us. We get the job done. All we have to do is prove it to them once! They may come to us for a marketing department hire, the next time they'll come back for an IT department hire. For us, it's about having that relationship that we're able to nurture, you get to know them, they get to know you, it's not just a transactional sale anymore, it's a mutual relationship. And that's more gratifying to Bridget and myself than having those big placement fees."

Stephanie attributes her tireless work ethic to her father, an Air Force veteran who, even at 89, remains active to the present day. Stephanie was born in the Netherlands while her father was serving there, the second of three children. Her younger sister was born after the family briefly moved to Charleston, South Carolina. Finally, when Stephanie was 3 years old, the family settled in the Washington, DC area, where, excepting a two-year stint on the West Coast, she has remained since. Her father retired from the service soon after their move, and entered the private sector, working for government contractors until his retirement at the young age of 57.

Stephanie's mother was a homemaker. She was French Canadian, and in the winter when it snowed, she'd make the kids maple syrup candy.

Sadly, Stephanie's parents went through a tough divorce when Stephanie was 9. She remembers it as a challenging time, but one that taught her a lesson that stayed with her. "My mom had never worked outside the home, and she was really struggling to adjust," recalls Stephanie. "That was the moment I said to myself, I'm never going to be in that position. There's nothing wrong with being a stay-at-home mom, but she didn't have options. I felt like, I don't ever want to be trapped in a situation where I feel like I can't do something. I thought, if I make my own money, then I never have to worry about someone

supporting me.”

Five years after the divorce her mother decided to return to Canada, and she and Stephanie’s sister moved to Montreal, while Stephanie and her brother preferred to stay in the states with their father. Stephanie was in high school by now, very much embedded in her community and reluctant to leave it. During her junior year in high school, her volleyball team made it to the State Championship tournament, and this experience, too, brought an unforgettable lesson. “We had a really good team,” reflects Stephanie, “but when we got to States, I realized we had not put in the work to be a championship team. I thought, what a shame, because if we had done more work, I think we could’ve taken it.” The revelation reinforced Stephanie’s commitment to her work ethic.

Stephanie graduated a semester early, and, unsure what to do next, began attending Montgomery College, a local community college. By now, Stephanie had been working retail for several years, a job she loved for its high energy, fast-paced nature and customer service. Quickly recognized for her enthusiasm and capability, Stephanie thrived there. Before she’d quite finished her degree at Montgomery, the department store where she worked offered her a different opportunity: a place in their management training program.

She completed the program and moved into management, staying with the store for two more years. Still happy in the industry, she moved on to two more independent department stores; the first, a large volume discounter in the days before TJ Maxx, Homegoods, or Marshall’s came on the scene, then a maternity store. Along the way, she met the father of her children.

The two married a mere six months after meeting, and Stephanie was pregnant a single month after that. The whirlwind was a motivation to try something new; after all, as much as she’d loved working retail, the hours were long and irregular. “It was not conducive to having a normal family life,” explains Stephanie, “it was important to me to be able to be at the children’s Thanksgiving feasts and Halloween parades and soccer games at their school. I wanted to be able to do those things with my children, especially as a working mom. So we both made a conscious effort to search. I wanted a career that was very much like retail—fast-paced, high-energy, and customer-

focused. That ended up being recruiting.”

Stephanie stumbled into the field of recruiting. Her husband, by chance, took an interview with a recruiting firm. After speaking with someone there, he decided it wasn’t a fit for him, but seemed like a perfect fit for his wife. He put Stephanie in touch with the firm, and the rest is history; she absolutely loved the new job, and the new job absolutely loved her.

In under three years, Stephanie went from being a recruiter, to an operations manager overseeing a recruiting team, to being a branch manager, to running multiple offices. Despite these successes, Stephanie decided she needed to step back from management as that schedule, too, was very demanding. Often she found herself coming home to eat dinner with her family and put her children to bed, then returning to the office after 8:00 PM and staying until midnight. Instead, she went into recruiting sales, a job that involved building relationships with businesses in the area and networking.

“I was in sales and I worked mostly for small organizations. That really is where my passion for small businesses started,” remembers Stephanie. “My favorite positions were places where I felt like I was really making an impact, where I felt like it wasn’t always necessarily just about making a dollar.” At this point her brother made a comment that stuck with her. He told her she should start her own business. But the timing felt wrong; she was the major breadwinner in a family with two small children, and the mortgage, car payments, and private school tuition made launching a business feel like too big a risk.

Still, her career continued to progress; in recruiting, it’s unsurprisingly quite common for talent to get recruited to other firms, and she hopped along to bigger positions with more responsibility. But in 2008, she encountered a setback; despite being the number one producer at the company where she worked, Stephanie was let go in a round of layoffs. The owner apologized to her, explaining that the employees who had been with the firm the longest had to have precedence over newer hires, no matter their talent.

It was a recession, and Stephanie remembers that something dramatic changed for her that day. She got home to find her divorce packet waiting for her in the mail. Her divorce was finalized, and now she’d lost her job. “All of a sudden I didn’t have money coming in and was

responsible for all these bills,” remembers Stephanie. “That was the moment I said, things are going to change.” It was about two years later that Stephanie and Bridget launched TalentRemedy.

The culture at TalentRemedy is more collaborative than authoritarian. “Bridget and I don’t want to act like we’re above everyone else,” nods Stephanie. “I think it’s important our people feel empowered. We give them the tools, we give them the training, and we empower them to rise to the occasion. I want men and women to feel like they can have a family and also a career, and not feel like their career is jeopardizing their family. It doesn’t mean you don’t work hard, it means you work smarter, you work differently. So I say, if you can do your job between 6:00 AM and 10:00 AM, go do it. And I think when you show people you really trust them, they do incredible things.”

Stephanie also feels it’s crucial to lead by example, never expecting a level of commitment from her team that she herself doesn’t bring into work every day. And as a manager, she prioritizes kindness. “I’ve seen a lot of cutthroat managers in my day,” she asserts. “I’ve seen people who convey that it’s all about the bottom line. I’m not saying don’t be smart about your business, we all have to make tough decisions. But I think it’s important to be nice. And not just to say it, but to act it.”

To young people entering the working world today, Stephanie advises a sense of pride and self-worth. “Don’t believe for a second that you’re not the greatest generation,” she encourages. “The millennials are so smart, so talented and so resourceful. There are so many naysayers out there, and I feel bad for these kids, because they’re amazing!” She also counsels young

people to find a way to become their own boss, sooner rather than later.

It’s perhaps unsurprising that Stephanie doesn’t see retirement—at least not a traditional one—anywhere in her future. “Whether I do recruiting for another 20 years, or whether I eventually step away and do something else, I don’t think retirement is what it used to be,” she reflects. “I think it’s about reinventing yourself, figuring out who you’re going to be in that phase of your life. I don’t wake up every day going, I can’t wait until I retire, because I’m living the life I want to live right now. I’m excited about what I’m doing every day. I think it’s really important to remember that this isn’t about a finish line. It’s about what you can do along the way.”

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