

Kew and its challenge

Royal Botanical Gardens (RBG) Kew is a world centre of excellence in the field of botanical research. Celebrating its 250th anniversary this year, RBG Kew is uniquely positioned to be the world's partner for plant conservation, ensuring plant communities are resilient moderators of climate change. Working in partnership with organisations worldwide to help secure a future for some of the most threatened species and habitats, RBG Kew was officially included in the list of World Heritage Sites by UNESCO in 2003.

The challenge

To find an exceptional individual to lead and drive Kew's ground breaking activities in the discipline of restoration ecology – the process of assisting the repair and recovery of an ecosystem (habitat) that has been damaged by human activities or natural phenomenon. This relatively new science aims through empirical research, to guide people working in this field, to successfully restore areas affected by overexploitation, farming, industry or natural catastrophe. Its importance to the planet cannot be overstated as the restoration of plant communities and species is needed to provide basic human needs such as food, fuel, and water and soil fertility. The research and work done by the Kew Restoration Ecology Team will help deliver long term solutions to mitigate climate change. It is estimated that one fifth of Earth's carbon emissions comes from the destruction of wild vegetation.

The client need

The worldwide pool of suitably qualified candidates with the potential to fill this role was relatively small because as a newly emerging scientific discipline, there are not yet large numbers of Restoration Ecologist's around. Despite having spent a lot of time and energy advertising and searching for candidates using well accepted approaches, RBG Kew was disappointed in the responses. When they approached TAL, their need was to quickly find some exceptional individuals with the right expertise, wherever they were working in the world and engage with them to excite them about RBG Kew, its values and objectives and the potential of the Restoration Ecology Team.

TAL's approach

TAL's key objectives in this assignment were as follows:

- Find the elusive experts and enable them to fully understand the challenges of the role.
- Engage them in realistic dialogue, no false perceptions or spin but motivating enough to ensure that some of these individuals wanted to apply for the role.

Firstly, working with RBG Kew's Senior HR Manager for Learning & Development, we conducted our own research into the culture and values of RBS Kew and the strategic aims of the Restoration Ecology Team. We also met with many people in the scientific community to understand the field and disciplines of restoration ecology. Once the job requirements were clearly understood we mounted a truly worldwide search programme to find good quality candidates to present to Kew. These candidates generally speaking could not be found using the normal search techniques. As many of the target experts get involved with field based research, they work in far flung corners of the world. TAL soon discovered that the candidates were more likely to be found in forests and wild habitats than in an office. The consequence of this was that behavioural habits of our target list made e-mail or voicemail communications unreliable and normal job portals or advertising had limited effect. This to some extent explained why Kew's normal recruitment search activities had not produced expected results. Couple this with having to deal with different time zones around the world and you can imagine that this was no nine to five search project. So the TAL team had to be very creative with search activities to ensure we sourced and communicated with the best in the world wherever in the world they happened to be.

The results

TAL's approach produced an increase in the quality and quantity of applicants for the role. The pool of candidates came from all over the world including Australia and the US. From this pool a short list of four candidates was agreed with Kew. The four short-listed candidates were invited to Kew to complete a comprehensive selection process which included a competitive presentation to Kew staff. The selection process was designed to ensure job candidates got to know Kew, its people and its culture. Candidates get to decide if there is a good fit between their own values and career aspirations with Kew's job requirements and culture. A job offer is currently being negotiated with the successful candidate. As part of their normal process, TAL will provide the HR team at Kew a debriefing workshop to build on lessons learnt during this project and capture any insight from constructive feedback.

More information

Kew has an interesting status as a Non Departmental Public Body (NDPB) with exempt charitable status, governed by a Board of Trustees, under the terms of the National Heritage Act, 1983. The Trustees are appointed by the Government Department DEFRA (Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs), except for one who is appointed by the Crown. The Director and the Corporate Executive Team are responsible for day to day control of RBG, Kew. As a body set up under statute, RBG Kew's sponsoring Government Department; DEFRA has a role in ensuring that Kew is adequately resourced, through grant in aid to fulfil its statutory obligations. Funding also comes from visitor income and fundraising. There is never enough money to complete all the work that needs to be done so if anyone would like to make a donation, volunteer for work or just understand more about the work of RGB Kew and the Restoration Ecology Team click on the following links below

www.kew.org/restoration-ecology/index.html

www.kew.org

For more information about TAL's approach to this assignment or its other services contact TAL's Associate Director Ingrid Blades who lead this project for Kew.

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