

Maurice Fuller

Hi everyone. I'm Maurice Fuller—and thanks for joining us. Today I'm with Jeff Staats, the CMO with Haley Marketing. Jeff is one of the top experts on staffing automation. Today we'll be focusing on automation which is one of the top most important technology trends in staffing today, along with digital transformation. Jeff—welcome and thanks for joining me today.

Jeff Staats

Thanks, Maurice. Happy to be here. I appreciate it.

MF

Perhaps you can start by giving us a snapshot of your background and tell us a bit about your experience with automation.

JS

Yeah. I'm ashamed to admit I've been doing automation since 2004—actually in the credit union industry. I've been doing this a long time, when there were only four players in the market. There was Unica, the old IBM... I think there was maybe Eloqua, and a couple other ones. I've been doing it in multiple industries for a long time, so I really understand marketing automation, which then got into process automation. You see that going on a lot right now.

My entrance into staffing was about six years ago, where I started with a company called Able—it was EmployStream at the time. So I entered the staffing industry through EmployStream/Able, then I moved on to the staffing side with TalentLaunch. I was head of marketing for TalentLaunch, which was a nationwide network of staffing firms of all sizes. I think they're up to maybe ten brands right now. So we actually instituted Sense with them and the whole marketing automation journey system. Then I've recently come over as CMO for Haley Marketing.

Really, the focus of me joining Haley Marketing—other than Haley being a well known brand and staffing agency partner—is that I think there is a lot of opportunity with helping staffing firms streamline and create efficiencies around their marketing automation or their candidate engagement. I wanted to do that and build that consultancy up.

MF

Well, it's a much needed service, and I was thrilled when I heard that you had joined Haley to focus on automation. Let's talk about changes that have happened in our industry. Automation, not that long ago, was viewed as something that was distant and not really in the mainstream. Now post-pandemic, that has really changed. There's a lot of focus on automation. Could you walk us through what's happened in just the last eighteen months?

JS

Well, you hear “digital transformation” in the Bullhorn reports, in all of the different industry reports... I think StaffingHub puts out a report. All you hear is “digital transformation, digital transformation, digital trans—” and people are like, “what? Okay, great. Uh huh.” You saw automation happen. Both of the platforms Herefish and Sense have been around for about five years or so. Again, just like anything, it’s slow to adopt.

I think the pandemic has made good changes; accelerating the need for automation and digital transformation is one of those good changes. I think you’re seeing staffing firms that had to cut their internal employee count, or now you’re seeing candidates just not wanting to apply. There are not enough people to do all these roles and functions. I think what’s great is that there’s always been a need for automation, but now they’re seeing the material, hard dollar results of “man, maybe I should put an automation platform into place right now.” It’s been interesting. You’re seeing the nice to have switching to the need to have, and I think that’s been awesome.

For me I love it, just because I’m such an automation nerd, that you’re seeing staffing firms of all shapes and sizes saying, “We need to get a platform. We need to do something. Here are our problems.” I think that has been a great thing to see in the industry. I think it would have taken another five years to get companies onboard, and I’ve got to believe there’s at least a thousand companies using one of the two platforms, maybe even HubSpot when you throw that in there. It has really accelerated the adoption, which has been great.

MF

Well, we’ve had automation for a long time, but I think one of the shifts in the last few years has really been that we have tools now—we have Herefish, we have Sense and other tools—which have dramatically lowered the cost of performing and creating automations, whereas before we could do automations but it was much more expensive to implement. A question for you is, where should a staffing firm start with their automation journey, and what are some of the obvious automations that should be their point of departure?

JS

If I’m a staffing firm and I’m looking at where to start, I always think about my gaps: my gaps in process, my gaps in engagement. I think those are the two areas that I always tell clients or other staffing leaders where they have to look at their gaps. There are two different kinds. There is the process side: how are we doing things? How are our recruiters performing? What are their daily functions like, their daily routine? And then on the other side there’s the: how are we staying in touch with our candidates? With our clients? And are there gaps there? Because what you’ll see is, just like in marketing, we do so much to convert a prospect into a customer, and then we forget about them. We move onto the next prospect and try to do that, and that’s always been an issue with marketing. We do so much on the acquisition side that retention always takes a back seat.

If I'm a staffing firm, I'm looking at gaps in process, and I think you can find some easy ones there. There's simple ones like the usual rant on LinkedIn where I'm a candidate and I apply, and nobody tells me thank you or actually just responds to my application. We see that one all the time. A simple automation where it's just a text, even, that says "thanks a lot for applying for this position. We're going to review your background and let you know if you're moving on in the next twenty-four hours"—that's huge. That creates engagement. That creates a nice journey.

Another one that I always tell staffing firms to start with is that no call no show issue, which is the first day. A simple start date reminder that can be a text or an email the day before... Typically there are Monday starts. I think seventy-five percent of the starts are usually Monday, so that's going to be a Sunday text or email. I think that does wonders to say, "hey, John Smith candidate. I hope you have a great first day tomorrow. Here's what you need. Here's what you need to wear. Here's where you need to go. If you need anything, let me know."

MF

I love that.

JS

That's a great one to start with as well, and then even just reengagement. The third one I would look at is that we spend so much money and time trying to get more people into the funnel through social media, job boards, all these different things. Well, if you look at your database, you probably have tens of hundreds of thousands of candidates. That would be a great one to start with: how do we re-engage that database to fill some of those job openings that have been hard to fill? I've got to believe that there are skill sets in there that you can find, and if not get *them* to apply, get somebody like them and start your referral process there. Those would be my top three that I would always recommend that clients look at.

MF

Those top three are very high ROI. You get immediate payback for doing those. We've talked about staffing firms that should be doing automations. Are there staffing firms that really shouldn't be doing any automation at all?

JS

I don't know if it's from a size perspective. Y'know, a mom and pop, a two-person shop—probably not. I think that the way marketing automation platforms are priced right now, there is a floor. You're talking about technology dealing with high volume transactions, so I think if you're doing one placement a month, it's probably not going to be your cup of tea right now. But I also think that, taking away the size aspect of it, if you don't have your processes down, automation is not going to be able to help you.

I remember being on a panel—maybe with you, Maurice—a couple of years ago where I said that “sounds cool” is not a reason to buy a marketing automation platform. If you don’t understand where your process gaps are, if you don’t even have documented processes, how do you find the gaps? I’ve seen that before where companies have put in automation and they just do it because they should, but they don’t really know what they’re covering or what they’re helping. They can’t really measure that ROI from it. So I do think that’s another segment of the industry that I would say get your processes right first, and then start looking at tech stacks to start creating efficiency.

MF

I think that’s a really great perspective. You mention ROI; let’s talk a little bit about ROI because it is such an important part of the automation process. There are so many opportunities for automation. How do you work with your senior leadership team to justify the investment in automation, and how do you demonstrate value? How do you communicate the value of your automations and the investment to the leadership team?

JS

There’s a two step process to this, and I’d say this when I talk to other staffing firms. There is the cost savings, the time savings, and I think that’s really important. In automation, that typically takes a recruiter two minutes to make a call, and they have to make a hundred calls a day. You’re saving two hundred minutes. Round that up to three hours. You can extrapolate that out; alright, I’ve saved fifteen hours this week in work. That’s great. That’s called savings, and you can definitely look at that from what is the price point of that FTE—okay, we’ve saved this much in terms of work.

Then there’s also what you are going to do with that fifteen hours of savings. That’s where the ROI comes in. From activities. So when recruiters are measured on activities, are they making more contacts? Are they submitting candidates to clients? Are they finding more candidates through any sort of social media? That’s where you want to look and say, we’re saving this time, and here’s how we’re putting it to use and driving more revenue. Also, are we creating more placements out of that?

Sense has something called a Sense Influenced Placement. You send something out—maybe it’s an re-engagement and there is an open job order for an accounting manager. We go and find the accounting manager based on skill sets and we can send that out. We find maybe ten applicants, and we place one. Well, that is a Sense Influenced Placement that you wouldn’t be able to find anywhere else because you’re probably paying for job advertising or getting yourself on Indeed. Measuring how quickly as well as—what are the ratios around that? What is the applicant to placement ratio?—we can really show value in that platform because, again, you are doing things that are more manual tasks versus let’s put the platform to work. I think there’s a lot of opportunity in terms of showing ROI. You have to buy in from the top, too. That’s part of it. The whole leadership team needs to be bought in.

MF

Into the strategy and also as you implement individual automations, everybody needs to be bought into the process changes, not just at the leadership level but also at the operating level. We'll talk about that in a little bit. You mentioned your top three automations that are the first ones that should go in. There's a lot of different categories for automations, from ensuring that your data is clean, legal compliance, process compliance, making sure that processes are completed properly, ensuring that processes are done proactively. When you look at all these different opportunities, which ones are the first ones that you typically consider in the automation process?

JS

I look at reporting and when staffing firms need to report. The first one I look at is open job orders. I think that, both from a cost saving perspective as well as just keeping the date clean, I think that's really important to say that if we have a job order that's open for more than thirty days, automatically close it, especially when it's a lower level or entry level position. Most likely you are paying for those applicants and not even talking to them.

When you take that a little bit further, from a process perspective, I talk to so many firms that have candidates as new leads that have never been talked to. They apply, they put a job order out—a lot of recruiters do their own job postings. They take the first ten, or they review maybe the first twenty, and they take five of those and say alright, I'm going to stick with those five. We're going to interview them and go through the process, but then others are applying. If we don't have any sort of process in place to either put a notification, an internal notification out to the team to say take a look at these other people that have applied that are still in this new lead status, I think that we're missing a huge opportunity. Maybe they're not right for this position, but they could be right for other positions. What we typically find is recruiters saying people aren't applying. Well, they are. I've seen that almost every staffing firm has new leads in there that haven't been talked to.

I think the other one is around redeployment. I personally think from a process perspective, if it's internal notifications for redeployment versus telling the candidate that they're going to be done in two weeks, keep it internal. Let the recruiter know, hey, this person's assignment is over in two weeks, so either extend them, maybe convert them into a direct hire, or be done with them and look for the next assignment. I would definitely say internal notifications are important, because that helps on the reporting side. How many job orders do we really have open? How many candidates do we really have that can be placed? Raising your hand for available candidates—right now we have a ton of them, but we don't know who's actually available or not. Then there's cleaning up the data from there, making sure that they are available. Also, is this the right email? Is this the right phone? What jobs are you interested in? I could go on and on.

MF

One of the interesting aspects of automation for me are the communications that go out and that the communications and how you express things is an extension of your brand. I was wondering if you could talk a little about the importance of language and how we communicate in the context of automation.

JS

I think that it's huge. There are operational texts where you don't care what they sound like. But when it comes to engagement, you need to make sure that you're aligning to your brand. Maybe your brand is witty. Maybe your brand is direct. Maybe your brand is gruff because it's heavy construction or something like that. You don't have to go to the actual recruiter, but you do need to align with your brand. The synergy with Haley and coming on board is great because we do so much from a messaging perspective.

I think that the biggest fail when I look at those that have automation right now is that everyone sounds the same. Every journey sounds the same, and everything is robotic. It's a learning period. It's a learning curve where you *have* to align to your brand, because it is an extension of that communication from the recruiter, and if you're off, candidates will figure it out. You'll see it in the responses. They'll be like, I don't know who that is.

MF

You have so many great points there. That's why I think marketing needs to be involved in the automation process. It brings really important value and ensures that the automation strategy and the automations themselves are going to be successful and bring value to the stakeholders and constituents.

Let's talk about scaling up your automation. How should a staffing firm think about scaling up their utilization of automation?

JS

I think they have to start at "I don't know what I don't know." What we see are companies that have a couple of automations running here and there, and maybe they're working and maybe they're not. I think there's a lot of opportunity, like the one I mentioned around internal notifications. That is a great way to scale up because that's a missing piece in automation. They talk so much around candidate automation, but how do we run faster? Running faster means keeping the recruiters aligned to the process and making sure that they're following the process. There's so much turnover that if you don't have your process set out and have your recruiters following it, the engagements won't even make sense in terms of creating those automations.

I think there also has to be a look at expanding to the client side. There needs to be scaling up on that. We talk so much around the candidate that we miss the client because either they're not using the CRM properly or they don't think that automation

fits. I do think that there are opportunities whether it's a prospect drip campaign or whether it's a client touchpoint that's always going out based on status. There are so many opportunities to really use automation on the client side.

MF

That's a fantastic point that you make, that we think about candidate and employee retention, but there's a big value in supporting our clients better. I want to talk a little about change management. Let's say you start your automation journey. You have very little automation, and you start adding automations. People within the organization are going to deal with the changes and the impact of those changes on their jobs. How do you manage that as you add dozens and dozens of journeys and automations to your staffing firm that start changing things—in a positive way. Generally, these create positive changes that make peoples' jobs easier. Walk us through what it feels like within a firm that's highly automated; how do you keep everyone in sync and aware of all the changes that are happening and how they will impact their jobs?

JS

It has to be done in the implementation, I think. We had a very funny incident where we said as a group, for one of our companies, we're going to do a no call no show start date reminder. We did it, and we had 75, maybe 80 starts on average per week on a Monday. We were saying, this is great. We're going to be saving time and saving money—this is going to be a wonderful thing. Then we get everyone ready and tell them what's going to happen. We tell them, alright guys, a text is going to go out Sunday afternoon. And it does. On Monday, I get several calls that say, hey, the person texted me back that they're not going to show up. Instead of no call no show, now it's call and no show.

We've got to fix our internal processes. I think the sooner you can do that at automation one, and I recommend this to all staffing firms that are implementing one of these platforms, the easier it is as you go to the other automations because you get into the mindset of thinking about how your internal process changes. That's the problem: companies don't think about that. We even got into activities. "Hey, because our automation platform was sending out a touch point, does that count as my activity?" No it doesn't, because you still have to make human touch points. Even getting into something like that, you have to train them early before you get into ten, twenty, fifty automations. Otherwise, it's going to be hard to revert back and start looking at the process and start to institute any changes.

MF

So many great points there. Let's move on to one of my favorite topics, which is the future of automation. Where is all of this headed in terms of staffing firms that are becoming highly automated? We have staffing firms already, what I call born in the cloud firms, that are highly automated, but now we have staffing firms that are using automation to streamline their operations. What does that future look like, based on everything that you've seen?

JS

I think staffing firms are going to become technology firms. Humans are going to be the owner-operators, but the tech stack is going to be the core of what we do. How does that affect automation? Right now, based on the fact that automation costs money, you're seeing it confined to fifty million, maybe forty million and up. You're going to see that expand to where companies, even the mom and pops, are going to see the value in automation.

That whole platform is going to move down to where the entire industry is going to adopt automation in some sense, and I honestly think that a staffing firm could have multiple automation platforms. Maybe it's a client based one, and this one is data hygiene. I don't think two platforms is going to be the end; I think there's going to be more. I think you're going to see specialties come out from these companies, and you're going to see that you may need to work with two, three, or four of them to satisfy what you need.

MF

I completely agree with that. I think the future is multiple platforms. Each automation platform has advantages that enable you to perform certain kinds of automations, and we're going to see so much automation in the future. I would like to say that automations are one of the highest ROI investments you can make right now in your staffing firm. The returns are just tremendous in terms of increasing efficiencies and increasing the competitive advantages that your firm brings to market. It's really one of the most important things that your staffing firm needs to focus on.

JS

Definitely. You've got to find a way to look at how you do that. There's so much opportunity with automation, and you're going to see more information coming out all the time about the benefits. It's such a great investment, and I would have every staffing firm take a look at it.

MF

Absolutely. Well, thank you very much, Jeff. This has been an insightful conversation. If you need help with your automation strategy to streamline your staffing business, I definitely recommend that you talk to Jeff. He's one of the most experienced experts in our industry, and he's a great resource.

So long everyone, and we'll see you on the next Staffing Technology Podcast.