

Helping people see better through strategic talent acquisition.

3 tips for RPO partnership success.



Alcon, a division of Novartis, and Korn Ferry demonstrate what makes a successful RPO partnership.

In 1945 pharmacists Robert Alexander and William Conner founded Alcon, a small ophthalmic shop in Fort Worth, Texas. The pair soon went from filling prescriptions to developing products that alleviated the symptoms of their customers' most common eye problems. Over the next seven decades, Alcon would grow its business organically as well as through strategic acquisitions and the development of its own research centers.

In the mid-1980s, in a move that supported the company's global growth and manufacturing expansion, Alcon was acquired by Swiss food company Nestlé. Then, in 2010, Alcon joined the Novartis family of companies and, in a merger agreement that joined Alcon with CIBA Vision and Novartis Ophthalmics, the stage was set for Alcon to become a world leader in eye care.

Throughout its history, Alcon has remained true to its commitment to develop new and innovative products and technologies to address unmet eye care needs around the world. The company's dedication to philanthropic sight-saving missions and ongoing partnership with international non-profits, such as Orbis International, serve as a testament to the organization's mission to discover new ways to enhance sight and improve people's lives.

As Alcon evolved from a single storefront to the global leader in eye care, so too did the company's approach to talent acquisition and talent management.

First forays into outsourced recruitment.

Alcon understood early on that to secure its position, it would need to attract the best and brightest talent in the industry. The company also recognized the many facets and intricacies of talent acquisition. "In our case the decision was made to go with an outsourced provider because our talent acquisition function was not able to adequately serve the business. Consequently we were overspending on talent acquisition services by using a myriad of agencies all across the world," says Alcon Vice President and Global Head of Talent Management and Organizational Development Jeff Bettinger.

The company wanted to leverage the scalability and expertise in sourcing and recruitment technology of a RPO provider to support its growth in a cost effective way. As Alcon continued to invest in outsourced recruitment, the potential of an outsourced recruitment partner to provide more than just cost savings became apparent. Jeff and the rest of the leadership team saw an opportunity to improve their employer brand and the experiences of their customers, candidates and hiring managers.

However these opportunities were going unrealized with the company's then-current provider. Key performance indicators were not being met, business leader satisfaction was at an all-time low, cost per hire was high, and there was a lack of cultural alignment between the two organizations. The decision was made to look elsewhere.

Partnering with Korn Ferry.

Novartis has a long history with Korn Ferry. While the company has sought executive search and talent consulting services over the years, its GenMeds division had recently partnered with Korn Ferry to deliver outsourced recruitment. Given the success of the engagement, as well as Korn Ferry's ability to scale and flex in response to product launches, Alcon reached out to begin discussions about a potential RPO partnership.

Korn Ferry's ability to bring an integrated suite of talent services and solutions to the table and its focus on cultural alignment were deciding factors in Alcon's selection process.

The scope of the original engagement included the end-to-end recruitment of 850 hires a year for five years in roles across research and development, manufacturing, quality, sales, and corporate functions. A dedicated delivery team, led by a project director, was built out onsite at Alcon headquarters in Fort Worth. The team includes a social media, diversity and inclusion manager; a compliance manager; and a data and analytics manager, roles that are not typically found on an RPO team. It was Jeff's decision to include these roles. He was at the time Alcon's Global Head of Talent Acquisition and he recognized the value of leveraging social platforms and diversity recruitment to reach candidates and the important role data analytics could play in connecting recruitment initiatives to the top line.

From the outset, the partnership was a strategic one. Korn Ferry was willing to build their team structure in a way that mirrored that of Alcon's to better align with the business and foster feelings of a connection to it. They were willing to overstaff in the beginning to help alleviate some of the pressure from quality of service that Alcon had been experiencing and to then roll off resources as the situation became more manageable. To reverse some of the lingering dissatisfaction among hiring managers, Korn Ferry worked quickly to implement a standardized recruitment process and engaged Alcon stakeholders in workforce planning initiatives.

Within the first six months of the engagement, cost savings had been demonstrated and beyond that, more strategic milestones were being met. Three years earlier, Alcon's agency usage ranged between 60 and 80 percent; now it was below five percent. When Korn Ferry came in, they identified an eight-day savings in the company's recruitment process.

"In every conversation with Korn Ferry, whether it was with the CEO or our account rep or the support team behind the account rep, the person or people across the table from us were completely engaged and listening to ensure that what they designed would be a match for both our culture and our business need."

Jeff Bettinger, Vice President and Global Head of Talent Management and Organizational Development

"When you multiply that by several hundred [sales] reps over the course of a year in hiring, you're talking about a seven-figure addition you can make to the top line because of process improvements," Jeff notes. He was quick to add that didn't even take into account the differences in time to fill and quality of hire that Korn Ferry has realized over the course of the engagement.

Hiring manager satisfaction rebounded to 89 percent from where it stood before Korn Ferry came in at 40 percent. That score has been holding strong and Jeff admits, "I just can't tell you how dramatically different that feels to a leadership team." The onsite team has increased the number of diverse candidate slates by 100 percent and enabled Alcon's HR Business Partners to make better decisions with metrics tracked through Korn Ferry's Foresight tool.

Over the course of the engagement, which continues today, Alcon and Korn Ferry have demonstrated what it takes to make a successful RPO partnership. Both parties have embraced a commitment to transparency, immersion and continuous improvement which has made all the difference.

Create an open dialogue.

First and foremost for an RPO partnership to thrive, the client and the vendor need to be transparent about their current hiring practices and plans and honest about their vision and goals moving forward.

Clients need to have a reasonable workforce plan and understand how those plans can be affected by unexpected market fluctuations. They need to communicate hiring volumes and timelines. Vendors need to be upfront about the way their team is structured, letting the client know how many resources will be dedicated resources and how many will be part-time resources. Clients and vendors need to understand how these resources will be aligned to support the goals of the business.

An open dialogue will facilitate the recruitment process and help to manage expectations of client and vendor. It will allow trust to build. Jeff called out those initial conversations with Korn Ferry because it was during those talks that both sides demonstrated their commitment to shared responsibility by being open and honest with one another.

“Korn Ferry from the very beginning has been so transparent with how they are trying to build our relationship so that it is profitable enough for them to engage with us, yet demonstrates significant cost savings for our business,” Jeff says. Transparency resonates with Alcon as it’s a value espoused by the entire Novartis organization.

In this way Korn Ferry has established itself as a trusted partner to the business. The team is fully integrated and always involved in major hiring initiatives or actions.



Go Native.

For Alcon, a company that believes so strongly in face-to-face interaction, the presence of onsite recruiters is a game-changer. One of the things Alcon needed to do was better engage hiring managers, something that was hard to do with their previous vendor whose recruiters operated remotely. With a team onsite, hiring managers and recruiters can resolve a problem or work with an HR Business Partner to develop a solution in real time. It’s enabled Alcon to better hold hiring managers accountable. Furthermore, it’s not unusual to see a recruiter greet a candidate in the lobby and give them a tour around Alcon’s campus. Interactions like these help drive a great candidate experience.

To build a successful RPO partnership, client and vendor teams must be integrated. Introduce the RPO leader as a member of the business. If the client begins thinking of the RPO as its own recruitment function, the foundation for better communication and integration is in place. Adhere to the company dress code and engage with other employees. Onsite recruiters should embrace the client company culture and culture immersion training be made available for recruiters who haven't yet honed this skill.

In addition to putting a team onsite, Korn Ferry negotiated a contract with Alcon that allowed some of the recruiters to ride along with the company's district managers so they could really learn about the business and understand it more completely. It's creating opportunities like this that have helped Alcon feel like Korn Ferry recruiters are a part of their business, even if their paychecks come from somewhere else.

Strive for better.

Don't get complacent. To realize continued success, the stakeholders in an RPO partnership must continue to seek ways to improve. The onus is on the vendor stay up to date with the latest recruitment technologies and best practices, constantly coming up with innovative ways to find candidates.

With an open dialogue in place, client and vendor can talk about what's working, what's not, and what needs to be happening. Both parties need to be open to critique and responsive to feedback; eager for new ideas and accepting of change.

As the partnership with Alcon has evolved, Korn Ferry launched a virtual interviewing program using Montage video interviewing technologies which has improved the candidate experience and reduced time to hire. Korn Ferry and Alcon together have implemented the Best Start program to improve the new hire experience through an intensive onboarding process; speeding time to productivity and giving new hires the best chance to thrive in their new environment.

"There's just a constant desire from Korn Ferry to find ways to meet the needs that we have and adjust their model in how they support us as our business adjusts," says Jeff. "I wish we would have engaged Korn Ferry much earlier."

By embracing the tenets of a successful RPO partnership the relationship between Korn Ferry and Alcon has evolved to the benefit of both businesses. Korn Ferry delivers the talent Alcon needs, so Alcon can focus on doing what it does best: helping people see better.

"By having a recruiter, a recruiting manager, or our program director be able to go and connect very quickly to a manager, time to resolution, or closure on feedback issues, is much shorter and that's helping with some of our time to fill as we move things forward."

Jeff Bettinger, Vice President and Global Head of Talent Management and Organizational Development

About Korn Ferry

Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We help clients synchronize strategy and talent to drive superior performance. We work with organizations to design their structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people to bring their strategy to life. And we advise them on how to reward, develop, and motivate their people.