How Campus Bookstore Hiring Thrived for a Collegiate Retailer Even In Uncertainty

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Introduction

When COVID-19 hit in March 2020, many colleges and universities were severely impacted. Classrooms were closed, many services were shut down, and traditional brick-and-mortar models for supporting students were affected.

On-campus retailers providing educational products to students and faculty were no exception. With bookstores closed across a majority of campuses nationwide, preparations for the coming term were also placed on hold.

During this time, an established collegiate retailer faced an uncertain environment, with no clear timeline on when its stores would reopen and no playbook on how to handle the potential rush for the fall term if classes resumed in person.

Prior to the pandemic, the company had enabled each of its 1,100 campus retail bookstores to manage hiring individually. Yet the uncertain hiring environment presented a major challenge for the organization as it was unsure it could find and hire enough talent to support its campus retail business, especially in a disparate, location-by-location market.

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The Decision to Partner with an Outsourced Recruiting Expert

As the company reviewed its existing hiring strategy, it realized that recruiting at individual bookstores across the country was not an optimal solution. The challenge of hiring in the chaotic COVID-19 labor market meant that the retailer needed to centralize its recruiting approach for all locations. And even though each location had its own unique needs, the company identified three primary challenges it wanted to tackle:

- Managing fluctuating staff volume that corresponds with year-end and bi-annual seasonal temporary hiring
- Creating a more predictable recruiting approach that took the burden off individual hiring managers
- Enhancing the candidate, recruiter, and hiring manager experience across each of its locations

> "The collegiate retailer was looking for a partner that could scale recruiting based on need and timing for individual locations, and handle the complexity of hiring during peak seasons."

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It recognized that a seasoned [recruitment process outsourcing (RPO) provider](#) would offer the right combination of technology, innovation, and human connection to quickly find the right volume of talent for its more than 1,100 stores. The company knew it needed a provider that could find the thousands of seasonal workers needed across college campuses, especially as the timing of store openings continued to change and push back in the summer of 2020.

From a business perspective, the retailer also wanted to find an RPO partner that could take the burden of hiring away from store managers, creating both a local approach and a model that would report up into the global corporate level. The organization found its ideal partner in NXTThing RPO, an [Employ Inc.](#) brand, known for offering differentiated recruitment services that change how companies hire talent into their organization.

During the evaluation process, the retailer recognized that NXTThing RPO had a track record of deeply embedding itself into the culture of each client organization. NXTThing builds long-term relationships based on trust and works as a representative of the employer brand itself. In addition, the practical, active communication style practiced by NXTThing RPO appealed to the collegiate retailer, ensuring that a transparent, collaborative hiring strategy would be prioritized.

NXTThing was ultimately selected to handle seasonal hiring for the collegiate retailer because of its ability to tackle the complexity of hiring, no matter the location or market, and for its capabilities in scaling recruitment up or down as quickly as needed. NXTThing RPO even provided NXTDay Launch capabilities, which provide dedicated resources within just a 24-hour implementation period.

Because of the efficiency NXTThing RPO provides, the retailer understood the relationship could save millions of dollars in headcount costs. This also meant better forecasting hiring needs, and ensuring individual stores were not hiring too few or too many resources for each seasonal period. NXTThing's capability for understanding hiring based on benchmark trends and data could deliver the right amount of talent needed and create a faster return on investment for the collegiate retailer.
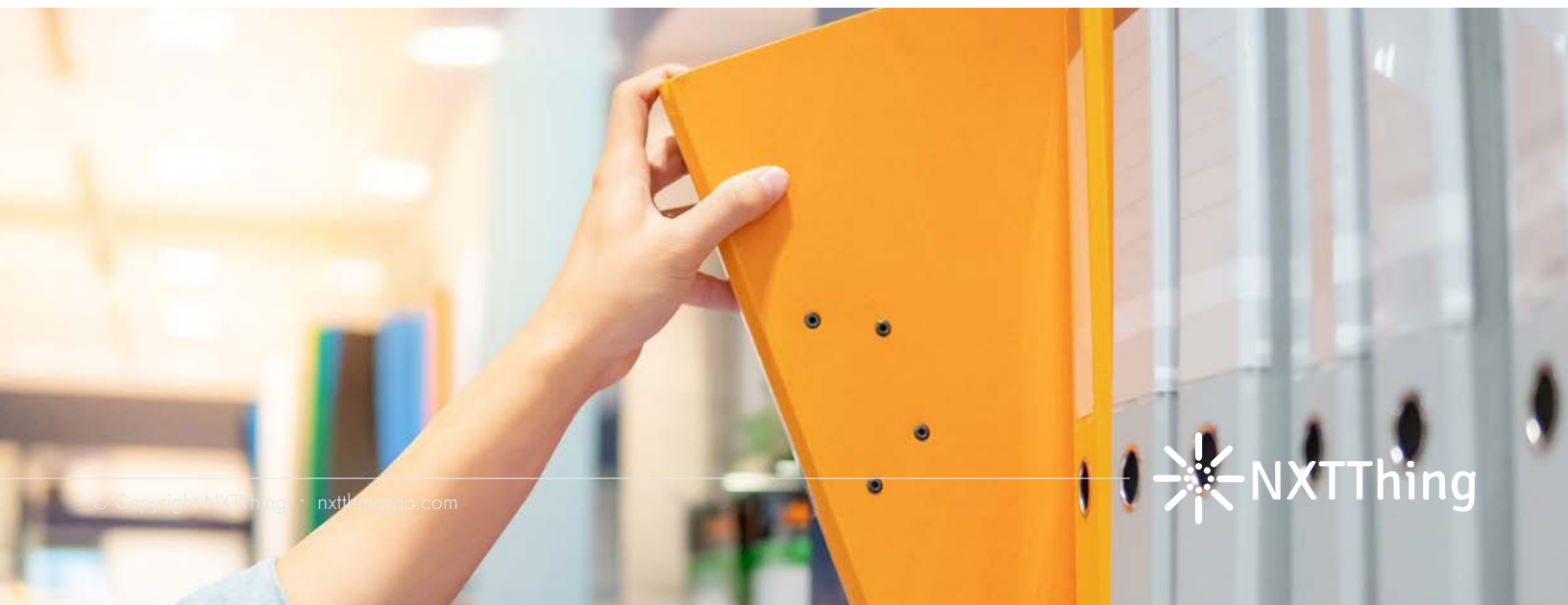
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RPO In Action: The Unique Combination of Technology, Innovation, & Personal Connection

The RPO approach offered by NXTThing precisely aligned with the needs of the retailer to find a high volume of temporary seasonal workers for the coming fall rush across its campus bookstores nationwide, despite the uncertainties in timing based on the COVID-era environment.

Even in a challenging atmosphere, and the shifting timeline in June and July 2020 based on pandemic precautions, NXTThing RPO began gearing up to deliver thousands of seasonal employees needed within just eight weeks. Because the demand for talent was so great, with thousands of workers needed to fill positions in its campus retail bookstores nationwide, NXTThing RPO applied its hands-on approach of working with local teams and hiring managers, who in July 2020 may or may not have been back in stores fully.

This was the first time an RPO provider had been introduced within the company, and clearly communicating the recruitment approach was a tremendous priority. NXTThing RPO directly communicated with all 1,100 campus retail stores, spoke with managers, and then worked to forecast hiring needs. Prior to NXTThing's introduction, local hiring managers had conducted all of their own hiring for their own seasonal workforce. But in the challenging COVID-19 environment, the recruiting landscape became very complex, very quickly.

NXTThing's recruiting approach involved a customized candidate experience strategy for finding seasonal retail store hires. This ensured a shared vision with the company for success in terms of quantity and quality of hires, and configured solutions to meet the current and long-term hiring needs of the business.

NXTThing also brought in leading recruitment technology to manage applicant intake, which was important for sourcing candidates across the 1,100 campus retail locations. With efficient job posting, grassroots recruiting, and candidate mining, NXTThing was able to leverage leading technology to begin finding a large number of seasonal hires quickly.

To make the application process easier, NXTThing provided candidates the option to apply via mobile or through more traditional online applications. NXTThing also set up candidate screening that aligned to the criteria provided by retailer and local store managers.

A unique portal was built for the retailer, providing a matrix of relevant hiring data for each store, including the number of candidates screened, interviewed, offered a position, background checked, or onboarded. This enabled NXTThing to manage the complexity of hiring overall — and ensure the company could drill-down into hiring data at the local level.

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> "Managing this volume of information for each store at both the global and local level has been an incredible resource for speeding time-to-hire and ensuring that all hiring managers know the status of their recruiting initiatives and outcomes at any given time."

Another major technology issue NXTThing addressed was the number of hiring systems previously used. The company had relied on three or four separate systems for applicant intake, onboarding, and workforce solutions. But with one centralized recruitment software solution integrated fully with its talent and payroll system, the company now had a fully integrated tech stack that maximizes visibility of talent information.

Beyond technology, NXTThing RPO also deeply relied on personal connection as part of its RPO approach. From passive candidate exploration, driving high relationship value with unique talent niches, providing a deep network of existing talent, the ability to sell job opportunities, and direct recruiting to specific audiences, NXTThing offered the retailer deep domain expertise in leveraging human connection with the seasonal workers needed to fill the thousands of positions across campus retail stores in the summer of 2020 and beyond.

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Incredible Hiring Outcomes: 6,000 Seasonal Employees in Just Eight Weeks

Once individual stores across the country identified that their associated colleges and universities had a clear path to re-opening, NXTThing got to work at the local level. In most bookstores, NXTThing had to deploy an entire team that leveraged technology and processes to start filling open positions within just two weeks.

These positions were entry-level, and many were minimum wage. And in the COVID-era, these were some of the most difficult, front-line roles that were hardest to recruit. On top of this, each store had unique needs, ranging from between one to 150 seasonal employees.

With hiring requirements changing almost daily — from shifting re-opening dates to changing store hours to a fluctuating number of new hires — NXTThing was responsive and flexible to develop local sourcing efforts and relationships to start filling these critical roles.

Specifically, NXTThing deployed more than 60 team members and formed regional teams of sourcers, recruiters, phone interviewers, and administrative support to execute an incredibly robust and fast hiring process. Urgent needs were prioritized on a daily basis and activity was managed through the real-time portal, including employees hired, remaining positions, escalations, and other areas.

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During the fall hiring campaign, NXTThing sourced more than 92,341 applicants, conducted 30,642 phone interviews, and hired more than 6,000 seasonal employees within just eight weeks.

By engaging with NXTThing RPO, the collegiate retailer saved millions in recruiting costs based on the time required previously of store managers and the significant variability of hiring too many seasonal hires or too few to keep up with demand. Now, the company has a predictable model for hiring at each individual campus retail store, and has expanded its relationship with NXTThing RPO to include both its spring and fall program, warehouse hiring, and even some of its corporate roles.

While it was uncertain at the time, the lessons learned since 2020 have continued to show the company the impact that a successful recruiting partnership can have on the organization. The initial hiring partnership that centered on filling immediate needs for campus retail stores in the fall of 2020 has expanded into an even greater partnership that continues to flourish.

The organization recognized its limitations in hiring, and the COVID-era hiring environment accelerated the need to transition to an expert RPO provider to mature in its recruiting approach. The retailer now understands the keys to its own hiring success based on the innovation, human connection, and customized technology that NXTThing RPO has brought to the relationship.

By taking the burden of hiring off store managers and empowering them to focus on building their business rather than estimating the number of hires they need to be successful, the company created an environment where openness, transparency, and data are the top priorities for recruiting and hiring.

NXTThing RPO has brought predictability to hiring and demonstrated that an RPO provider with a strategic approach not only impacts talent acquisition, but also business outcomes. Looking to the future, the collegiate retailer will continue to work with NXTThing to forecast hiring across the organization. And because so much customizable talent data has been established, the organizations are in a position to drill down even further on how to optimize hiring strategies for the established retailer.

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Partner with NXTThing RPO to Transform Your Recruiting

Ready to transform hiring with recruitment process outsourcing? Discover how the scalable approach and blended service model of innovation, technology, and personal connections can improve your hiring outcomes. Read about NXTThing's [uniquely positioned recruitment services here](#).

About NXTThing RPO

NXTThing RPO, an [Employ Inc. brand](#), is a leading recruitment process outsourcing (RPO) company with the right resources and technology to source and hire candidates that other people can't find. We design and improve the HR processes of our clients, collaborating and drawing on a range of flexible RPO and talent acquisition programs and services to build the right solution for each company's unique needs.

Learn more at [nxtthingrpo.com](#).

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