

## Hunt for talent should always be a priority

*In-depth interviews, thorough background checks, pre-offer period key parts of process*

BY JEFF APLIN

Recruiting top talent should always be a priority for an organization, regardless of the economic climate, industry or company size. While there are countless ways to recruit talented candidates, there are some basic rules HR and hiring managers should follow that can boost the quality, effectiveness and efficiency of an organization's hiring process each step of the way.

### First interview

Give candidates the opportunity to ask questions about the organization, the team and the position in question as part of the first or second interview. To improve the efficacy of this exercise, give the interviewee some advance notice about this element of the interview so she has a chance to prepare.

The quality of the questions posed is an excellent indicator of a person's cognitive ability, street smarts and ability to learn — the hiring manager will gain valuable insight into how the candidate thinks and what direction she needs by the questions she asks.

If the candidate asks questions with "yes" or "no" answers, she likely needs specific direction at the task and activity level. If she asks broad, open-ended questions, she is more likely to see the bigger picture.

### Second interview

Once a short list of two to three finalist candidates has been compiled, ask each of them to write a short letter answering the question: "Why do you feel you are the right person for the job?"

This writing exercise not only provides a first-hand view into their written communication skills but also gives the candi-

dates the opportunity to reflect upon their prior experiences, natural strengths and education so they can determine how these important components will link to their potential new role.

The letter-writing exercise is also a great candidate equalizer and provides a more in-depth look into their character and skills. Many people who interview well in person may fall flat in writing. Others, with their creativity, passion and communication skills, will be a pleasant surprise.

The letter should be a brief one to two pages, not a dissertation. When reviewing the submissions, it is helpful to have a clear picture of the most effective, predictive candidate characteristics for the job opening.

### Background check

Checking references is an essential part of the recruiting process. The search consultant, human resources professional or hiring manager should connect with three different categories of referees: manager or supervisor; customer or client (internal or external to the organization); and peer, colleague or team member.

Ideally, two references in each category should be interviewed. This allows HR to compare and contrast the feedback. It's important to clarify the nature of the relationship between the candidate and reference. A reference from a manager who is also a friend may differ from a reference given by a supervisor who does not have a personal relationship with the candidate.

### Pre-offer period

Watching a candidate in action can provide more insights into her skills and whether or not she will fit in with the team. A half day on the job (or longer if possible) at the pre-offer stage can provide some peace of mind by reducing an organization's risk of hiring the wrong person

for the position. Job shadowing also allows the candidate to assess her suitability for the position and the company by taking a deeper look at the organizational culture and the team.

It's important to identify a high performer in a similar job category within the organization upon which to model expectations. Not only will this demonstrate to the future employee the organization is looking for excellence from every member of the business but it will also give recognition to the current high performer.

### Ongoing hiring

The most successful hiring managers and entrepreneurs do not view recruiting talent to their team as a periodic process but as an ongoing priority for their leadership team.

The importance of ongoing recruiting is highlighted in the current economic situation, as managers take a hard look at their teams to determine the best use of their reduced HR budgets. In many cases, cutting back or reorganizing is a natural consequence.

While, at first glance, reducing staff may appear negative, strong managers should look at it as an opportunity to improve the team by bringing on even stronger players, which has a highly positive impact on organizational performance, even in a downturn economy.

Strategic hiring can also include recruiting more than one person at one time in certain job categories, such as sales or customer service, to decrease onboarding investment while doubling capacity and bench strength.

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