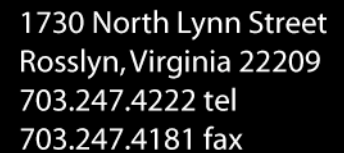


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Recruiting, Interviewing & Hiring

Possibly the most tiresome, time-consuming, yet critical job function that must be performed as an HR professional is recruiting, interviewing and hiring – but there’s no getting around it. When I started in the recruiting business 20 years ago, I set forth to learn as many “tricks” as I could from my clients as well as peers in my industry. Here are a few.

REFERRALS/NETWORKING

First, you must find qualified candidates to interview... not an easy task with unemployment as low as it is today. You need as many “painless” sources as possible.

Many firms have very successful employee-referral systems, whereby an employee receives a bonus on successfully referred hires. The bonus can vary in dollar amount and generally has some sort of guarantee period built in to ensure the person will stay.

In your spare time, develop some of your own sources, such as peer groups and professional affiliations. One of my clients teaches a legal secretarial course one night a week at a local business school. It keeps her up-to-date and provides a constant source of good candidates.

It’s also smart to keep in touch with ex-employees who were excellent. Good people know other good people.

ADVERTISING

Another good idea is an occasional ad. The operative word here is “occasional.” You don’t want your organization’s name to appear in the want ads too often, or the firm may be perceived as having a turnover problem. I advocate a directed ad for a specific position. Pick a “grabber” for a title – something a superior candidate will find enticing. Make the body of the ad succinct, highlighting unique qualities of the position (prestige, exposure, responsibility, special benefits, such as stock options, tuition, flexible hours, health spa, etc.) and finish with pointed qualifiers. Include your company name. A professional candidate will generally not respond to a “blind ad,” that is, one with only a P.O. box number.

THE PHONE INTERVIEW

Both referrals and ads will enable you to use one important tool – the phone interview. These calls can be made at either the beginning or the end of the workday, so they don’t cut into your prime work time.

You can get an idea of the applicant’s special skills, experience, job tenure, reasons for leaving, salary requirement, poise and savvy... in a matter of minutes.

If after your conversation, you want to meet with the candidate in person, “sell” them a little on the organization and the position (helps prevent cancellations and “no-shows”) and schedule an interview.

If the individual is not right for the position, explain in such a way as to maintain their self-esteem, and use the call as an opportunity to network for a more qualified candidate. For example, “I’m sorry, but this position requires at least three years’ legislative experience, however if you’ll send me a copy of your resume, I’d like to contact you when we have another opening. Do you know anyone who might be right for this position”?

CHOOSE QUALITY PERSONNEL AGENCIES

Don’t forget personnel agencies. If you’re fortunate enough to have a special working relationship with one agency and they’re able to handle your needs, that is fabulous – there’s something to be said for loyalty.

If you’re not that lucky, I suggest choosing and cultivating two favorites. This can be a task in itself, but it will prove well worth the effort. Don’t sign any exclusivity contracts and avoid any agency anxious to discount their fee. You really do get what you pay for. Make sure you meet any consultants you plan to do business with in person. Invite them to your office.

Find consultants you respect and develop a strong communication system up front. Be direct. Be responsive. Insist upon the same from them. Feel free to change agencies if you’re not getting proper service.

When you find a good agency or two, you may be able to spare yourself some of the really time-consuming tasks such as checking work and academic references. This will leave more time for thorough interviews with you and anyone else involved in the hiring process.

Move swiftly! In today’s competitive market, expediency is mandatory. A true “waste of time” is interviewing an outstanding candidate and losing them to another firm before you are able to introduce them to the next person in the process. Have as many people as possible on standby to meet with the candidates after you’re finished. Talk to your staff before hand about what the market is like and what they are looking for in this hire. Educate them as to the hiring process and impress upon them the urgency of immediate feedback. In other words, think ahead and do everything you can to minimize frustrations.

THE INTERVIEW

Most importantly, rely on your “gut” – don’t fight it. Lou Hipp, one of the most respected people in our industry, put it best when he said about hiring “if you have to talk yourself into it, don’t do it. If you can’t talk yourself out of it, do it.” His theory has served us and our clients well.

Prior to sitting down with the candidate, look quickly but carefully over the paperwork for general points of interest you want to cover and any “red flags” you want to clarify. Some common “red flags” are:

- Gaps in work/academic back ground
- Unacceptable reasons for leaving past employers (money, personality conflicts, etc.)
- Unstable job tenure pattern (If someone switches jobs every year or two, don't fool yourself into thinking you'll keep them any longer. Leopards don't change their spots.)
- Spelling and grammatical errors on the resume/application/cover letter.

First, eliminate the “standard interview questions” and put the interview on a conversational level. You'll find out far more about the person if she or he is comfortable. Every candidate with half a brain has a “pat” answer to what their strong/weak points are and where they want to be in 3-5 years. Dig for important things, such as what they like, what they don't like, what they've accomplished and what they want to accomplish. What job did they like most, and why? What job did they like the least, and why? What boss did they like most, and why? Why do they want to leave? What could their current employer do to keep them?

The last question is very important today. Firms that have let good employees go underpaid and without proper recognition for years suddenly present lovely counter-offer packages upon receipt of a resignation letter. You owe it to yourself to do everything you can to save yourself the disappointment of losing a good person to a counter-offer.

Always remember every candidate must come out of their interview confident and with a great impression of your firm. If you want to pursue hiring him/her, let them know what's great about the organization, the position and the people. It's good to have an informational packet (annual report, newsletters, etc.) prepared to let them take home.

If you're ready to conclude the interview and feel good about the candidate, ask a committal question. What would he/she do if you were to extend an offer? If you like the answer, don't waste time. Excuse yourself and confer with others holding approval power to extend an offer. Before introducing the potential hire to them, ask the candidate to return to your office before leaving so you can get their feedback. If the feedback remains positive, again ask a committal question. See if they have anything else in the works. Are they waiting for any offers? Find out where they stand and make sure you know where you can reach them in the next 24 hours.

BE GENEROUS

Finally, make the candidate a fair offer – the more generous, the better. The approach of offering low then negotiating up is frustrating, time-consuming and archaic. Offer them a good package, and start your working relationship on solid, positive footing.