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Finding the sharpest needle in the stack Recruiting skills for managers

There should be a corollary to Murphy's Law to describe activities like recruiting new employees. It should read something like this: "The likelihood of successfully accomplishing a task is inversely proportional to the importance of successfully accomplishing it." Hiring the right people for your company is both the most difficult part of a manager's job and the most important to the future of your organization. A poor hire wastes the manager's time in their recruiting and training. Their salary and benefits package also consumes financial resources, not to mention the opportunity costs inherent in not properly serving your customers. The greatest potential danger in making a bad hiring decision lies in the damage that a poorly performing employee can do to your customer relationships. This is particularly true when hiring sales people, who by definition work independently without direct supervision and are in direct contact with customers.

Selecting quality employees is difficult for a number of reasons. You will encounter many people who are much more skilled at interviewing than they are at doing the job they are pursuing. There is an entire industry dedicated to teaching candidates how to interview and present themselves in the best possible light. Visit any bookstore and you will find an entire section on writing cover letters, preparing "Killer" resumes and "Aceing" job interviews. There are resume consultants and college placement offices offer classes and hold mock interviews to help their students land jobs. In many cases, the candidates are much better prepared for the "game" of interviewing than the hiring manager.

Many candidates are focused on getting a job by any means and give little thought to the consequences of failing to be honest with an interviewer. A study conducted by ADP and the Society of Human Resource Managers found that 53% of resumes contain blatant falsehoods and that 79% are at least somewhat misleading. All of these things make identifying the right candidate a significant challenge and make hiring decisions somewhat of a "roll of the dice." In the absence of a well polished crystal ball, it is impossible to take all of the risk out of the recruiting process, but by using good hiring skills you can greatly improve your odds.

Who and what do you need?

How do you define a "good hire?" I believe that a "good hire" involves finding a person who can effectively and consistently perform the duties assigned to them. I firmly believe that most people want to be productive and successful at work. The problems of turnover and poor performance stems from a poor job fit. For example, I am a reasonably successful sales person, sales manager and sales

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trainer, but I doubt that I would have been very successful as a cost accountant. My skill set and personality are suited to sales and creative endeavors. The key to hiring effective and reliable employees is proper job fit. Trying to fit a round peg into a square hole will invariably result in a bad outcome.

The first step to finding a person who is a good fit for your organization is understanding the shape of the hole you need to fill. When someone leaves your company or you decide you want to create a new position, take the time to think about what that position requires. What skills would your new employee need, do they possess specific computer skills, do they need to be a good writer etc. Think also about the character traits that you are looking for; does the person have to be detail oriented, outgoing, self-motivated etc. Before starting your search, you should have a clear picture of the type of person you are looking for. One word of warning about doing this, it is unlikely that you will find someone who will perfectly match your vision of the ideal candidate. I like to create a “matching form” which lists the traits I am looking for on the left and space to make notes about a candidate’s qualities on the right. This provides a visual aid to keep me focused on what I need and helps me to evaluate candidates against these criteria, as I go through the selection process.

Finding good candidates

Once you have a good idea of the qualities you are looking for, it’s time to begin your search. Smart business people are always looking for good people. Keep a file of people who you think may be a good fit for your company. This is a good starting point for your search. Use your network; ask trusted colleagues, vendors, customer’s etc. if they can suggest anyone who might be qualified for your position. For entry level positions, contact local college placement offices. This is also a good source of interns, which is an excellent way to “test drive” employees, without making a long term commitment. Of course, you can use electronic job boards and traditional classified ads. Be creative when composing ads or posts to make the position attractive to the best candidates.

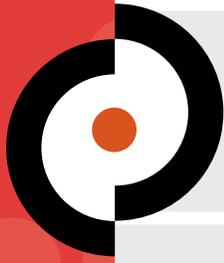
Be prepared to find the best candidate

Most managers I know hate interviewing. It eats enormous chunks of time and there is not a guarantee of success. There is also a psychological component to this, many people feel uncomfortable “judging” others. Much has been written about the stress of being interviewed, but it is also a stressful activity for the interviewer.

Many managers rush through the process. Given its importance to the long term success of your publication, it is important to allot the time and effort to recruitment that it deserves. The time you invest in finding an employee who is a good fit with your company will pay big dividends in reduced turnover.

Use a matching form with a list of your requirements; review the resumes you’ve received to determine who you want to talk to. Write out a list of questions you want

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to ask the candidate. These questions should cover job requirements and skills. Also, note any points on the resume which may require clarification.

I like to do a brief “pre-interview” over the phone. This gives me a chance to get a sense of the person and decide whether a face to face interview is justified. Sending a candidate an email listing the times when you are available to take their call, is a way to test their follow up and level of interest in the position.

Begin the interview by setting the candidate at ease. The more relaxed the candidate is, the more likely they are to let down their guard and reveal themselves to you. I prefer to sit next to the candidate, rather than talk to them across a desk, because this informality breaks down barriers to communication. After a bit of small talk, I describe the position again and then open the question phase of the interview.

Some interviewers use a “behavioral” interview (“Tell me about a time when...”) while others prefer a “hypothetical” approach (“What would you do if...”). I like to combine the two methods which permits me to ask the same question in two different ways. This allows me to determine if the candidate’s answers are consistent.

In addition to talking about the candidate’s skills and experience, it is important to gauge their emotional intelligence (EQ). Research indicates that EQ is a major predictor of career success. To determine EQ, I will ask questions about how they managed their emotions in a variety of situations. (“When you lost that account, how did that make you feel?” or “what would you do if you noticed that a coworker was noticeably upset at work?”). For additional EQ interview tips, I recommend The EQ Interview by Adele B. Lynn.

Once you have collected the information you need, encourage the candidate to ask questions. This will ensure that the candidate truly understands the position and helps you to know what aspects of the position either interests or concerns them.

After you have answered their questions, conclude the interview by thanking them and informing them of the next steps in the process and when you will be making a decision.

When the candidate leaves, take a few moments to review and complete your notes. Try to defer making a decision until you have completed all of your interviews. Try to think of the interview as the information gathering phase of the recruiting process. By reserving your decision until a later time, you are more likely to place all candidates on a level playing field.

During the interview, use good listening and observational skills. Pay attention to the candidate’s vocal intonations and body language. For example, if they perk up when discussing a particular incident or part of the job, you have an indication of the type of work they enjoy and what motivates them. I like to give the candidate a tour of the office, because this gives me a chance to watch them interact with others.

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Once you have completed all of your initial interviews, set up a round of second interviews with the best candidates. Use this interview to judge each individual's strengths versus the other finalists. You may want to give the finalists a small assignment to complete to test their abilities. It is wise to have several people review all the information for all of the people on your shortlist, before making a final decision.

Before making an offer, check the candidate's references and do all applicable background checks. Though the current legal environment makes reference checking difficult, it still is a worthwhile exercise.

Once you've hired a new employee be sure to have an "on boarding" plan in place. Research indicates that if a person does not feel "at home" in a new position within the first month, they are not likely to ever feel comfortable in their position and will be much more likely to leave. By making them feel welcome, providing them with mentors and giving them adequate training, you are protecting your investment in time and money in hiring them.

Developing good interviewing skills is critical to the long term success of any manager. Our hiring decisions will impact the bottom line and morale of our companies for years to come. There is no way to insure that every hire we make will become a "superstar," but by taking the time and making the effort to identify the best possible candidates, we will "stack the deck" in our favor and keep our companies strong far into the future.

This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver.

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