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Executive Search & Placement

Ten Recruiting Commandments

Recruiting the quality candidate that an insurer or other company requires often is complicated needlessly because the company ignores some fundamental rules. By following them, the time, effort and expense of the recruiting process can be greatly reduced, and the success of the end product – the person hired – can be greatly improved. These rules can be described as the 10 commandments of the hiring process.

1. Define the job. Too often the job to be done is either never defined or is finalized as the last step in the recruiting process. The reason for this is simple: Positions are not viewed in the abstract, but in conjunction with the person filling them. So we think in terms of replacing Harry, or hiring another Mary, rather than specifying exactly what needs to be done, and what it would be nice to have done in addition. Harry or Mary, the hiring manager either is frustrated because “Mr./Ms. Perfect” never appears, or dissatisfied because the person finally hired is a compromise.

The job definition needs to consist of (1) what activities must take place (the job description), (2) what the results must be (standard of performance) and (3) desirable, but not necessary, auxiliary functions (to choose between two or more candidates who meet all the basic requirements).

2. Define the candidate attributes. What characteristics are essential for the person to have in order to perform the functions of the job? This seems rather obvious, but managers tend to focus on characteristics they would like a candidate to have as a person (brave, honest, just, courteous, etc.) rather than the characteristics a candidate must have to do the job (ability to program in Cobol, to sell integrated circuits to consumer products companies, and to audit financial reports).

Is it, for example, imperative for the candidate to have an advanced degree? Why? Is it necessary that a candidate have X years of experience performing an activity or is it important only to have the ability to perform the activity? The more confusion that exists on necessary attributes, the fewer candidates will qualify and the more difficult it will be to identify the best person qualified to do the job in question.

3. Be realistic about compensation. Notwithstanding the salary ranges of the personnel department and the budget requirements of the accounting department, the real world functions on a competitive, open market basis. If the salary range established for the position is inadequate to attract the caliber of person required, the result will be bungled interviews, rejected job offers and either the hiring of a candidate without the necessary qualifications or an increase in the starting salary and a new round of interviews.

Unrealistic salary offers can be the result of several situations:

- A departing employee was paid a below market salary and the new salary is predicated on the old.
- The personnel department supplies survey information based on “averages” and the person required is not an “average” position.
- The accounting or finance department establishes the range with the objective of holding down costs.
- A range is hypothesized based upon newspaper ads.
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- An attempt is made to maintain parity between this position and another in the company which is underpaid because the incumbent has occupied it for a lengthy period.

This problem can be solved by letting the marketplace determine salaries. If this indicates that a company’s entire compensation program is in need of an overhaul, then that problem must be resolved before the one of recruiting can be addressed.

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4. Use the right recruiting sources. Getting the best person is possible only if a manager uses the right recruiting tool. A good day laborer can be obtained from the state unemployment office; a Fortune 500 chief executive officer probably cannot. Conversely, the use of a retained executive search firm to recruit a day laborer makes no sense, but it is the way most top management positions are filled.

Newspapers, employment agencies, employee referrals, recruiting firms, personnel departments and executive search firms can all be the best solution, depending on the specific objective. Each can also be the least costly and most timely depending, again, on the exact requirements.

5. Conduct interviews professionally and promptly. Employment interviewing is a subject unto itself, but some observations are relevant here: Interview the candidate/application as soon as possible after initial contact with him/her is made. Don't let an individual wait weeks for an interview. Too many things can happen to change his/her mind and the delay raises the question of how important the position really is.

Treat the candidate/applicant courteously, even graciously, during the interview process. Don't interrogate candidates; don't keep them waiting in lobbies for unreasonable periods of time; don't ask them to fill out pages and pages of forms before they even know whether they are candidates or not; don't view the interview as a forum to show them how important you are or to exhibit your ego.

Do remember that how you treat an individual will be a permanent reflection upon your company's reputation. It also will affect the attitude of the individual for the duration of his/her employment with you.

6. Make decisions quickly. Far too often good candidates are lost because of delays in the decision-making process. One company estimated that it lost from 25% to 30% of all individuals to whom it made job offers to because of a cumbersome approval process.

There are many reasons why job offer delays lose candidates. Candidates find other, more attractive offers; they change their minds about leaving their present employer; they receive an unexpected raise or promotion; they forget the positive things they say in your company; but, most important, they feel you are not interested if it takes such a long time to make up your mind. And they are right; you've forgotten that employment is a two-way street and that a candidate wants you to be as interested as you want him/her to be. If you have found the right candidate, make an offer of employment promptly.

7. Check references. Obtain three professional references and speak with them about the person and position you have. If you are using an executive search firm on retainer, ask for their write-up on references. You can increase the probability of successful hiring by at least 20% by checking references.

8. Don't over-negotiate the job offer. Most job candidates in our society aren't comfortable haggling over their worth. They want you to make an offer that both of you consider fair and reasonable. They don't want to feel that you are trying to hire them for the lowest possible dollar, for the fewest possible stock options or the least attractive perks. They would rather work for someone else.

Moreover, although it is theoretically impossible in a free market economy to hire someone at too low a salary, it does happen. It happens because of candidates' ignorance of their economic worth, because they have been oversold on the benefits of working for your company. And what happens when they find they have been taken advantage of? They leave.

9. Stay in touch with the candidate after the offer has been accepted (but before the starting date). All of us have a tendency to rethink our decisions. Your candidate does too, and there is always the possibility of counteroffers from the other employer or another offer resulting from additional interviews the candidate has been to. By staying in touch during this two-to four-week period, you begin to cement the relationship.

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10. Get the first days and weeks of employment off to a positive start. This is the time when the candidate asks, “Did I really make the right decision?” When it’s the easiest to pick up the phone and call his/her prior employer to see if the old position has been filled yet (it probably wasn’t). When the candidate’s interviewing “network” is still intact. Don’t be premature in ending the honeymoon.

These are the kinds of remarks new employees hear all too frequently:

“Well, I guess we’ll have to find a place for you to sit.”

“Take these manuals and procedures and read them for the rest of the week.”

“We will have to order a phone for you.”

“Didn’t your boss tell you? She will be on vacation this week.”

Make sure everything is ready for the person to begin working. That’s what you hired the person for.

Finally, when the honeymoon is really over, have an informal, mutual performance appraisal discussion to clear up any misunderstandings, to ensure that the orientation process has been completed and to reinforce in both of your minds that this is now a permanent relationship. That is when the recruiting process is really over.