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WHITE PAPER

> Hiring Smart

How to avoid the top ten mistakes

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What is your company's most valuable asset? Most recruiters know that the answer is employees. While we all appreciate the value of good talent, however, hiring is often treated as a secondary responsibility for executives that only occasionally have to serve as hiring managers. Unfortunately, when the hiring process isn't executed properly, mistakes are made – mistakes that can create extraordinary losses of time, capital, human resources, customers, and even your competitive advantage.

So, how do you stack the odds in your favor and make the right hiring choices? By putting an organized process in place that assures you avoid the common hiring pitfalls. Here are the top ten most frequent (and costly) hiring errors and some practical suggestions to help you avoid them.

Hiring Not Viewed Strategically

Most companies regard their hiring process merely as the means to the end of filling job openings; yet staffing is really a strategic issue that can significantly affect your bottom line. As with other key issues, when it comes to hiring, it's not enough to simply be reactive. If employers want to become employers of choice, they need to be proactive and take responsibility for planning for organizational needs and anticipating attrition.

There are two other important factors of proactive recruiting that many companies neglect. One is fostering – and advertising – corporate culture. Potential candidates don't just want to know what their specific job would entail, they want to know the general atmosphere, what it's like to be an employee at your company. Make sure you have developed a healthy, positive working environment, and find a way to give potential applicants a sneak peek of what that environment is like.

Second, you should be pipelining applicants. Always be accepting applications, not just when you need to hire. When you find someone who would be a great fit for your company that you don't have a position for right now, file them somewhere that you can find them when the right opportunity does open up.

Outdated or Inadequate Position Profiles

It's very hard to take aim when you can't see the target. The same is true in recruiting: to target qualified candidates, accurate job descriptions are essential. Key information included in a complete profile includes:

- **Hard skills** (Necessary experience, skills, and talent)
- **Soft skills** (Desired personality traits)
- **Key selling points of the position**
- **Measurable objectives and performance expectations**

You want to make sure that your position description is going to help you attract the right candidates; too many descriptions today are dry and formal. Simply using the second person rather than the third ('you' instead of 'the ideal candidate') can personalize your description and increase the volume of quality applications you receive.

Too Much Reliance on Traditional Recruiting Methods

The search for top talent is tough, and it's no longer sufficient to craft a job posting then sit back and wait for the applications to come in. Recruiters and hiring managers must challenge themselves to be more creative in their efforts. Techniques may include maintaining and nurturing a pipeline of prospective candidates, creating in-house referral bonus programs, developing external recruiting networks, learning to conduct advanced Internet searches, and utilizing professional search consultants.

Even before you post your open position on your company Careers page, you should be looking at your developed pipeline and calling qualified candidates who have previ-

ously expressed interest in working for your organization. (Bonus points for including current employees in this pipeline – it is much easier to train new employees to fill the lower rungs of the ladder as you move current employees up in the hierarchy than it is to bring in brand new people at the top.)

You should also strengthen your relationship with your executive search partner – or formulate such a relationship if you haven't already. An established industry recruiter will have their own pipeline of hard-to-find talent, invaluable insight into the current hiring market, and a knowledge of current recruitment trends, which all combine to make a huge difference in your level of hiring success.

Candidates Not Properly Prepared

It is often informal company policy not to provide applicants with information prior to the interview, leaving it up to them to have self-educated on the position and the company itself. The fact is, though, it's in your best interest to help promising candidates prepare for an interview.

By providing information about products, services, technologies, competitors, and challenges, you enable the candidate to be prepared to discuss specific ways they can help make the organization more profitable and successful. As an added benefit, if you provide the tools to do well on the interview and the candidate utilizes them, then chances are good they will do the same on the job. On the other hand, if the candidate doesn't take advantage of provided information, you've learned something equally important without wasting time in a lengthy, fruitless interview.

Too Much Concern over Credentials

Many leaders lack the appropriate training to lead a structured interview that is centered on determining whether or not the candidate possesses the critical elements for success in the position. However, statistics show that a poor interview is hardly better than no interview at all: the likelihood of hiring the best candidate after a round of bad interviews increases by less than 2%.

Interviewers must know not only what skills and behaviors they are looking for, but they must know how to uncover those traits in candidates. Asking the right questions is critical. Questions should be specific and focused on the skills, experience, and traits being sought, and they should be open-ended to allow candidates to provide examples of past accomplishments and behavior. Often, these questions will begin with starters such as:

- “Describe a time when...”
- “Tell me about a specific situation in which...”
- “Give me an example of...”

Certainly, many of the questions you ask in a structured interview will be the same for each candidate. However, I urge you to take some time to craft some candidate-specific questions, as well. You should also allow yourself some flexibility during the interview to include some follow-up questions that will help you probe deeper into the candidate's responses.



Inadequate Reference Checks

As I noted before, past accomplishments are one of the truest indicators of future performance. Unfortunately, though, most companies don't require reference checks as a condition of employment – even if they ask candidates to provide references, they don't actually take the time to follow up on them. This is a critical mistake!

Like the structured interview, reference checks should be carefully planned. To get the information needed, ask the following types of probing questions:

- **Situational questions**, which focus on the candidate's ability to perform on the job
- **Relational questions**, which reveal how a candidate handles interpersonal situations
- **Behavioral questions**, which provide examples of behaviors that a candidate has demonstrated

When checking references, follow similar guidelines as when developing interview questions. Ask open-ended questions that will confirm the impressions you formed during the interview.

Decision Making Process is Either Too Short or Too Long

Both extremes here yield poor results. Some companies make hasty decisions based on superficial information or, worse yet, gut instincts. Others run candidates through exhaustive interviewing and testing schedules, and/or when it's time to hire, they hesitate too long and lose good people.

Both of these issues can be avoided by establishing a defined decision-making process which includes a reasonable timeframe – and communicating that process to candidates. After all, even if the process is a bit longer than average, many candidates will be willing to hang in there as long as they know what the timeline looks like.

A little honesty goes a long way in the hiring process. Stringing candidates along will only damage your reputation. For example, I once applied for several positions within an organization in early November. Although the postings had a closing date in mid-November, it wasn't until after the New Year that someone from the hiring committee

called to schedule a phone interview. It was February or March before a face-to-face interview was scheduled. Then... nothing. I did finally receive a letter indicating that they had chosen another candidate – in October. All told, the whole process had taken nearly a year, and by then I had long moved on. You can be certain I never applied with that organization again. Even I wasn't successfully running my own business, I wouldn't accept a position with them to this day and I wouldn't recommend them as an employer to any friends who were looking for a new job.

Selections Made Without Input from Your Team

In the words of a famous poet, no man is an island. In the workplace, employees are expected to work alongside a number of coworkers, supervisors, and subordinates; yet during the hiring process they may only interact with a couple of people. (How many of you have ever had a job where you met only the person who interviewed you before you were hired, and then never saw that particular person again?)

The team that the potential new hire will work with knows best what is needed to succeed on the job, as they do it day in and day out. Neglecting to include critical team members in the hiring process can result in a bad hire and unnecessary disruption to the workplace balance, while the more employees are involved, the greater the chance that the new hire will be a good fit for both the position and the culture.

Unclear Expectations and Weak Orientations

Congratulations, you've welcomed aboard the successful candidate! However, if the job isn't what the person expected, chances are good he or she won't remain your employee for long. Make sure that the new hire has a thorough understanding of his or her responsibilities from the start, and be sure to explain how performance is measured.

You never get a second chance to make a first impression, and new employee orientations are vital to getting the work relationship off on the right foot. In order to ensure the new employee feels like a valued part of the organization from the beginning, the orientation process should be a gradual one which aims to provide specific information at appropriate points on the job learning curve.

> Perseverance **is the Key**

Recognizing the hiring mistakes you may currently be making is the first step. Now it's time to work on correcting each mistake one at a time. Focus on action plans that can incrementally move you in the right direction. It may take more than a little effort to fix the hiring process, but ultimately you'll see the results in the form of a well-functioning, higher performing, and more stable company. And in today's competitive corporate marketplace, there's no better investment you can make.



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