

HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR HIRING PRACTICES

Think you know what works when hiring a new employee? Experts say: think again. Most managers skimp on time and energy needed to find the best candidates for a job.

You run your own company. You've grown it from the ground-up, and things are going so smoothly you're ready to expand. That should be simple enough: You have a knack for finding the right people to help business thrive. Right?

Wrong, says Mark Clark, an associate professor at American University's Kosgod School of Business. "Managers say, oh, I know what I'm looking for," he says. "Fact is that's the worst way to hire."

What's so flawed about that way of thinking, Clark says, is that it doesn't leave time or space for the best practices of hiring that are proven to be conducive to finding employees who either become great for their company or stay with the company for the desired amount of time.

"Even though we know what works, which is putting more money up front in the form of more time from the managers, and that ends up resulting in better organizations, people don't do it because that up-front thing is hardest to manage on a time scale," Clark says.

Where to Start

Clark's other advice: think ahead. A new employee needs to be part of the long-term corporate strategy -and if you can visualize where you want to be in five years, or even by next quarter, it will be significantly more natural to see how a new employee fits into that matrix.

The cleanest way to plot that out is through a well crafted, future-oriented job description, which can be the single step that begins the hiring process -and makes it simpler, from start to finish.

Why? Once a thorough job description exists, you already have the foundation for the job listing. And down the road when the new hire shows up, they have clear-cut guidelines for what's expected. If the employee hits bumps along the way, you'll have it as a guide to whether letting them go is justified.

Some experts suggest defining everything you want in the new hire before necessarily assigning a title to the position. Of course, it might seem unfair to seek a senior Web developer who will also answer customer-service calls, but that's not necessarily unprecedented. Honing the list to acceptable professional standards that will work with the salary you can afford -and that's market-rate -may be necessary, but at least you'll give yourself a chance to find the deeper truth of what you need from the hire.

The basics of a solid job description include title, to whom they report and a summary of the position and bullet-pointed specific job duties. For a more thorough document, add names and positions of colleagues that position will work with closely and minimum qualifications.

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Be Competitive

In order to attract top candidates in their field, you'll need to offer a competitive salary. Searching competitors' job listings can be a useful means of finding that industry information if you aren't in the position to purchase salary study information or work with a firm that conducts compensation research. Other simple sources of information can be PayScale.com and Salary.com -and they adjust for geographical inequalities in pay.

Also, don't ignore the power of benefits to affect a great candidate's decision to join your company. In small companies, benefits send important signals about culture and stability. "If you're like Google and have incredible benefits, then you might not need to pay that much. But if you don't offer health insurance, you might need to pay more," says Roberta Chinsky Matuson, president of the Massachusetts-based HR consulting firm Human Resource Solutions.

That all said, if your company isn't in the position to offer top-tier salaries, consider what else your company has to offer, and which sorts candidates can benefit. If you have a particularly lighthearted work culture, that's an asset. Allow work-from-home days? That could also attract applicants. Do play up anything that makes your operation stand out, and make it known in the job listing, which is your next step to better practices.

Find Better Candidates

Crafting a great job listing is not dissimilar to writing the job description. The main difference is that you'll want to incorporate behavioral characteristics that you believe will be necessary for a new hire both shine in their position and mesh well with your existing office's culture.

If you're not sure about these temporal and experiential traits, human resources expert Jamie Resker, president of Employee Performance Solutions, suggests looking for characteristics that already exist in your thriving office.

"It's not an exact science, but getting a fit for whether this person is going to be a good fit culturally in the office is important," she said. "For that, you just need to tap into the best qualities your existing employees share."

So, in addition to a summary of the position, detailed bullet points describing the job's main tasks and the minimum education and experience requirements, great listings incorporate behavioral characteristics. For instance, instead of a bullet point reading "10+ years experience required," consider something along the lines of "Team player with strong leadership skills and 10 or more years of demonstrated ability to manage effectively."

If you think Craigslist.org is your one-stop-hiring-shop, think again. Sifting through a deluge of resumes from a large, general-interest job site can suck up unnecessary time. Yes, other listing sites do cost more, but honing your search to a particular industry can do a world of good, because you'll have the eyes of the job-searchers with standards -those who know what they're looking for. If you're searching for a public relations specialist, for instance, look to MediaBistro.com. For Web developers or IT specialists, you might want to turn to job boards such as 37signals.com or jobs.joelonsoftware.com.

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Step Up Your Interview Process

By the time you've sorted through resumes and are ready to bring in applicants, you'll want to make sure you allocate enough time to properly interview them -and invite back the best candidates a second, or even third, time.

In my opinion, one of the reasons people do such a poor job in hiring, is that they just want to get it over with," Matuson says. "Really take your time, do it right, and ask yourself the question, constantly, 'is this person good enough? Is this really the right person, or am I just trying to end my misery?'"

Key objectives are to find out: can this applicant truly do the job and will they fit into our work culture? Of course, these are just the basics. To this, add discovering whether the applicant possesses the desired behavioral traits you've already laid out.

"In an interview, there are job responsibilities and skills and then the other component is behavior," Resker says. "Especially at a start up -they want someone who is like moldable clay. They want to see if someone has the personality of a steel rod, or do they go with the flow? Because a small business works a lot different than a small company."

Crafting questions that elicit responses that easily display the answers to these questions might not be as easy as it seems. Asking a candidate whether they function well under pressure is likely to elicit simply a "yes." Asking her a question that directly applies pressure, such as "what makes you think you are better for this job than all the other candidates?" or "which co-worker at your last job did you not get along with well and how did you handle that situation?" is more effective, and will likely yield an answer that's deeply telling. Hypotheticals about their future employment at your company can be even more revealing.

When listening to the responses to these behavioral, open-ended questions, listen not only to the content of the response, but also to the tone and manner behind it.

"Listen then for their voice. Are they pretty lethargic? Are they being honest with you? Did they do the right thing?" Matuson says. "After a while it becomes really obvious this person is a go-getter, or they work hard, or they make good decisions."

If you're hiring for a technical position, it might be wise to not only ask whether the applicant possesses the necessary skills, but also to test them on it.

Lucas Biewald, founder and CEO of CrowdFlower, the San Francisco-based crowd sourcing start-up, recommends that when technical skills are involved, tagging on a quick example programming task to the interview process can show more about an applicant than answers to a dozen specific interview questions.

"In terms of interviews, we've found that there's no substitute for having someone complete a short programming task," he says. "We used to feel embarrassed to ask experienced developers to do a simple exercise, but we've found that enough of them can't complete it that it's necessary."

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A growing line of study in business academia is organizational culture and company social networking - and researchers in that field suggest considering social factors during the interview process as well.

"Find people whose values are the same as the values of the company," says Adam M. Kleinbaum, an assistant professor at Dartmouth University's Tuck School of Business. "When people's values differ, they might not be accepted as well or as happy."

Another subtle thing you'll want to consider in hiring certain positions -such as sales, marketing or public relations -is what social capital, whether within the field or the community, the candidate is bringing to the table.

"I think it's especially important for small companies, as they're thinking about what are the kind of resources a company would need as they move forward, to think about the potential hire's existing network," he says.

Mastering the Follow-Through

Great candidates should naturally follow-up on an interview with a call or e-mail, making it easy for you to invite them back for a second meeting. Do so, and allow other managers to meet with potential candidates on their second interview before making an offer. A second or third opinion is valuable.

Also, check references thoroughly -every time. This is the most overlooked part of the hiring practice, but experts say it is absolutely essential. Many employers also ask that applicants agree to credit-history checks and pre-employment drug screenings, but those are optional, and in certain states their legality can depend on vocation.

Of three references, have a phone conversation with at least two, and pay attention to the tone of their recommendation, not just its content. It's not necessarily legal to hamper future employment for a past employee, so savvy references won't say anything negative. As an out, they'll say very little at all. Some human resources experts recommend checking a reference that's not recommended: hunt down a person at the applicant's most recent workplace who knew them well, and ask their opinion as well.

Other Tips to Remember

Set up a program that rewards current employees for referring apt job candidates. People within the organization can recognize others who would fit in well, and are unlikely to choose someone who wouldn't pull their weight.

In both job listing and interview, pose only legal obligations and ask only legal questions. As an employer, you are not permitted to ask questions about a person's age, race, creed, sexual orientation or marital status. Do not hire on the spot. Take time to review all candidates interviewed.

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On-Boarding the New Hire

The buzz-word right now is "on-boarding" for making sure a new employee is up-to-speed and productive as quickly as possible.

"When you work in these small companies, you are always understaffed, you never have time," Rudnick says. "But it's really important to take the time you don't have to get a new employee up to speed."

One thing that helps is to have complete company policy, including employee guidelines and procedures in place. Even if you don't have an HR department, having solid human-resources policies is essential from day one, experts say. It will not only ease the transition into the new job for employees, who will know what's expected (it's never fun to have to ask a new boss "what's the vacation policy?" on the first day), but also protect your company from potential future legal trouble. Consider including expected work hours, presence in the office, and acceptable personal use of company electronics and space. Binding it in a guidebook, or having an online employee guide that's always available to staff is your best bet.

Especially if your company lacks an HR department or a formal training program, managers should make it a priority to schedule face-time with a new employee within the first day or two. Making it a point to give detailed instructions on tasks at hand, coupled with pointed questions about how the new hire is feeling and what they think would help them out in their job are keys to making them feel comfortable and useful.

Looking ahead, a company intent on keeping its new employees should schedule regular check-ins. Matuson suggests a manager checking in with a hire after 30,60 and 90 days, just to ask what changes they might suggest and allow them to ask any lingering questions in a pressure-free way.

If clear expectations are in place, the on-boarding process should be a painless adjustment to a great fit for both employer and employee. Moreover, do it right, and you'll retain your new hire for years to come, fulfilling both short-term and long-term goals for yourself and your company.