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Best Practices for Hiring & Interviewing:

Getting “the right stuff” in your new hires means taking the time to do things right

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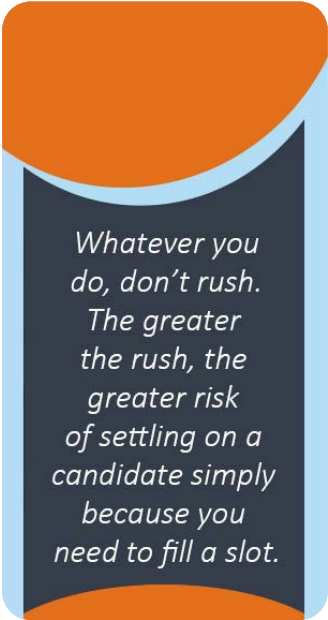
Getting *“the right stuff”* in your new hires means taking the time to do things right

If we’ve heard it once, we’ve heard it a million times: “Our people are our most important asset.” Business consultant and author Jim Collins would disagree. “People are not your most important asset,” he says. “The right people are.”

Getting the right people for your organization means that your hiring process must be right, too. Hiring should never be about just filling a job, but rather finding the best possible employee for the position. In working with thousands of employers over 30 years, ESI Employee Assistance Group has learned quite a bit about what works and what doesn’t when hiring employees. This paper will deal with some of the best practices that we’ve learned over the years.

First, a word of caution. Whatever you do, don’t rush. The greater the rush, the greater risk of settling on a candidate simply because you need to fill a slot. If you absolutely must have somebody quickly, find a temporary replacement or reallocate the work to current staff until you can find the right person – even sweetening the pot with a little overtime, if need be. A rushed hire can be expensive. The cost of a bad hire who must be replaced can range from 80 to 100% of that person’s salary, or higher.

But getting it right isn’t just about avoiding the potential negatives. If some of the most successful business people of our time are to be credited, it’s the key to excellence. Steve Jobs likened finding the right people to looking for needles in a haystack, and he attributed the secret of his success to hiring exceptional people. He’s not alone in this thinking. His rival Bill Gates said that hiring smart people has always been the number one key to Microsoft’s success. And Amazon’s Jeff Bezos says that setting the bar high when hiring has been, and will always continue to be, the single most important element of his company’s success.



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The Job Description – Prerequisite for Success

Before posting jobs or calling the recruiter, it all starts with the job description, the starting point for every open position. Creating the right job description isn’t a place to take shortcuts, even though it can be a tedious process. It sets the tone and target for what the right candidate must do to succeed. It’s the objective or goal; and without a clear goal, you won’t get the outcome you seek.

Here’s what NOT to do. Don’t just use an old job description that was used for a prior hire in a similar role. How long ago was that job description created? Your organizational needs and the required skills has likely changed since then. You can use former job descriptions as a base, but take the time to give them a fresh look, using these questions as a guide:

- Is the job as it’s been defined still needed?
- Are there responsibilities that should be added or removed?
- Does it fully describe all the job duties and requirements, in concrete terms?
- Does it clearly delineate responsibilities as well as desired competencies, traits and skills?
- Is the language clear and jargon-free?
- Is the description free from any potentially discriminatory language?

To ensure you get it right, share a draft of the job description with any staff members who will be involved in filling the position to assure that it fully reflects the job requirements. Get input on the role from the new hire’s team members, too.

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Recruit and Assess the Hiring Team

Once you have a job description, the next step is assembling the hiring team. We say “team” because we see more and more smart employers who have success with a team approach. Apple’s Steve Jobs swore by a collaborative hiring process.

Who should be on the team?

- You, the HR manager or recruiter.
- The candidate’s potential supervisor
- Two or three other people who are well versed in the job requirements

At least one of those hiring team members should be particularly adept at interviewing and identifying talent.

It’s also important to clarify the team members’ roles and responsibilities. Often, each member might be assigned a different goal during the interviewing process. For example, one might focus on skills and expertise, another might focus on probing for cultural fit.

Most successful teams also identify who has veto power. Include those who must work with your new employee on a regular basis along with the team member who has exceptional interview skills. And there shouldn’t be any exceptions to the veto power.

Once you have the team assembled and roles defined, you can plan for the interview process. But prior to any in-person interviews, phone screen candidates to narrow down to a short list. Sort and rank the short list resumes based on how closely they match up to the most important job criteria.

And before you conduct the interviews, do your homework. Make sure that everyone on the hiring team who will participate in interviews:

- Has thoroughly reviewed every candidate’s credentials
- Understands the “must haves” in job requirements and experience vs. the “nice to haves”
- Is well versed in the job and can discuss roles and responsibilities
- Can talk about your organization, your mission, and what it’s like to work there
- Knows how to avoid discriminatory or illegal questions and discussions
- Anticipates questions that candidates may ask

Avoiding Problems

The issue of compliance with legal requirements is vitally important. Employee rights legislation continues to grow, and the number of job candidate lawsuits continue to rise. Per a 2015 report on employment lawsuits by liability insurer Hiscox, a U.S. based company has an 11.7% chance of having an employment charge filed against them. In their study sample, Hiscox found that 19% of employment charges resulted in defense and settlement costs averaging a total of \$125,000, with an average duration of 275 days. Ouch.

Minimize your risk by ensuring that all candidates have a level playing field by using the same criteria and questions for all. Keep questions focused on the job and avoid any questions that might relate to any potential areas of discrimination.

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You’re probably aware of the need to avoid any hint of harassment or discrimination. You need to be very knowledgeable about federal fair hiring laws, as well as any laws in states where you operate. The overarching requirement is that you cannot ask any question that might lead to bias in the hiring process. Avoid asking questions about the following areas commonly protected by federal or state laws:

- Race, ethnicity or color
- Religion
- National origin
- Citizenship
- Age
- Marital or family status
- Disability
- Sex (including gender identity, sexual orientation, and pregnancy)

If the candidate volunteers any information related to these issues, acknowledge their comment but it is better not to probe further, simply move on. Stick to questions related to the job, the job responsibilities and the candidate’s ability to do the job.

You can’t ask about alcohol or drug use, but you can require a drug test as part to the background screening hiring process. You can’t ask about an arrest record, but the background search will indicate whether the candidate was convicted.

You may ask: if a candidate is legally permitted to work in the US; if a candidate can fulfill job responsibilities; if the candidate can work the required hours; and if they are of the minimum age to perform the job (usually 18).

The Interview

What are the key things to look for in a candidate? The hiring criteria that you’ve outlined in the job description should be your firm guide. Does the person have the experience necessary to do the job? If you decide to change the criteria, make sure that it’s because you have modified the job for business reasons...and that you’re not trying to fit the job to a candidate that some or all seem to like personally.

Greet the candidate professionally and warmly, but keep small talk very general so that you do not inadvertently venture into any protected areas. Tell the candidate about the process, let them know they will have an opportunity to ask questions, and briefly describe the job.

Ideally, you’ll have compiled a list of questions in advance. You should use the same questions for all candidates to avoid discrimination, but as we suggested earlier, each person on the interviewing team could cover different areas. Questions should be open-ended to get the candidate talking to reveal their thinking processes, personality, and expertise. Ask questions about how they solved problems, used humor, communicated well, and achieved something they were proud of.

Engage with the employee. Make eye contact and listen. Observe body language, tone, word choice, presence. Watch for positive signs that indicate flexibility, creativity and problem-solving, but be alert for red flags too, such as lateness, use of profanity, a tendency to blame others, or avoidance of eye contact. It’s okay to take notes, but it is courteous to let the candidate know you will be doing so.

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Make time at the end of the interview for the candidate to ask questions. What they ask or don't ask may give you a window on their priorities, their personality, and how they conduct themselves.

When the interview is over, thank them for their time, be positive, but don't tip your hand - it's very important not to make any statements that could be interpreted as an offer or a promise. Avoid any statements that could be construed as unsupportable promises or what is sometimes called a contract of employment. Don't make assurances about job security. Words like “this job is permanent or long term” could come back to bite you if there is ever a downsizing.

Picking your Candidate

When the interviews are over, the hiring team should debrief and share impressions about the candidates with a goal of narrowing down to the final candidate(s). In addition to talking about the interviews, be sure that resumes are reviewed again. And we can't say it too frequently - make sure that you use the same evaluation criteria for all candidates. For example, if you are hiring a writer and you've asked for a work sample from one candidate, you should be sure you've asked all candidates for a work sample.

In addition to assessing how well each candidate meets the job requirements, assess the “soft skills” and personal attributes. In the famous book about astronauts, “The Right Stuff,” author Tom Wolfe defined “the right stuff” as more than just the skills and prerequisites, but rather a sense of striving to exceed one's limits and to meet challenges.

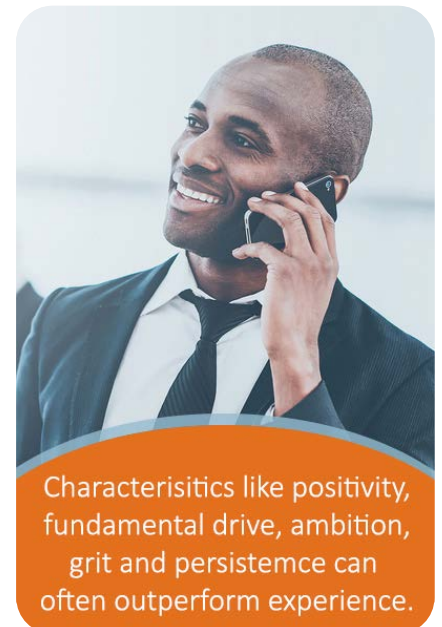
You'll likely find a circumstance where one candidate simply has more experience than another, but the less experienced candidate has more drive and dedication. Balance experience with these intangibles. Our experience suggests that characteristics like positivity, fundamental drive, ambition, grit and persistence can often outperform experience.

One other characteristic we like to evaluate is a sense of ownership. Is the candidate looking for just a job, a salary or benefits, or is he or she searching for a position where he or she can take ownership, grow, and succeed? A sense of ownership is often related to success.

Your process may or may not involve a second round, depending on the position and the number of finalists. Keep the process moving – you don't want to lose a good candidate to a drawn-out process.

When you have narrowed the field down to your desired candidate, you're ready to check references and conduct background checks. Don't skip this important step no matter how good you feel about your candidate. Be sure you comply with your state law in relation to timing of these checks. In the interests of privacy, some states require that you make a conditional offer before you conduct background checks or run any pre-employment tests.

Ensuring that the hiring process is planned, thorough, collaborative and well-executed will give you your best odds for securing the right fit. To ensure you hire the employees with “the right stuff,” it's important to take the time to do things right.



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