

## Secrets of Hiring 'A' Players for Your Company

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I'm looking at adding staff to both my office and field. How do I go about hiring the most qualified people? This question comes to us from a company that has been in business since 1939, doing heating and air conditioning service and installation. It is based in Mt. Vernon, NY.

How often I hear, "I had to get someone in, just to fill the spot". Very few business owners understand, or are willing to hold out for, the payoff of hiring well. I call a top notch candidate an "A" player. Typically an "A" player will do significantly more to help your business grow, prosper, and succeed, as compared to "B", "C", or "D" level players, for not a lot of difference in salary and benefits.

When looking for "A" players, look for attributes, first. Overall characteristics probably include: smart, motivated, plans and organizes, quick paced, thinks things through, driven to excel, honest, makes decisions, takes action, communicates up down and across the organization, customer oriented, acts independently, productive, positive team member, leader, analyzes problems, understands and drives profits, integrity, accountability.

You also need to define what an "A" player means for the position you are seeking to fill. Sales is very different from operations, which is different from finance.

Here is an example of a classic mistake I see all the time: "Wanted, bookkeeper. Handle bills, payroll, and answer phones." Wrong! Bookkeeping is very detailed, accurate work. Phone interruptions cut into accuracy and productivity. Bookkeepers are often better at numbers and documentation than they are at verbal communication. Put down on paper what you believe the job entails. Depending what you can afford, look for candidates who have at least some experience doing that job.

Finally, look for candidates who have experience in your industry, or who have demonstrated a desire to get into your industry. It doesn't have to be years of experience, it could be an internship, or selling to, or servicing your industry. That way the candidate knows something about what they are getting into, which will likely contribute to longevity, and cut down on their ramp-up time.

If you have limited funds, as most of us do, go for attributes first, depth of experience second. Someone who is smart, hungry, and motivated will often out-perform someone with a lot of experience who takes their performance for granted.

Expect that, starting from scratch, it could take 3 – 6 months to fill a position with exactly the right "A" player for that specific job in your company. In my experience, most

hiring errors stem from not looking at enough candidates. Use advertisements, word of mouth, search firms, on-line bulletin boards, and your website, whatever you can think of, to let the world know you are always looking for good people.

To hire one "A" player, be prepared to look at 100+ resumes, conduct phone screens on 10% - 15% of the resumes, and have first interviews with 5-10 candidates. Teach someone on your staff to review resumes, and conduct brief (5-15 minute) phone screens, making recommendations on who you, as the owner, should meet for a first interview. This will save a lot of your time, and keep you focused on the essential task – holding out for the right candidate.

After you've done 5 interviews, you'll find candidates start to blend together. Take detailed notes. Use a standard questionnaire for both phone screens and interviews, to be sure you ask each candidate the same questions, and to compare answers. Have others interview candidates you like, to give you their perspective. Conduct at least 2 interviews, and reference checks, with 1-3 finalists. Do at least 2 employer reference checks. If a candidate says you can't talk to anyone they've reported to in the past several years, be very wary. I've been caught a couple times, buying into a candidate's story about

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company closings and not having anyone around who can vouch for their work. "A" players aren't afraid to have you talk to people they've worked for, and they have many people willing to sing their praises.

Be patient, keep at it. Don't settle for anything less than an "A" player, for any position you plan to fill. Too many business owners settle for less than they could have, then invest weeks or months of training, only to realize limited benefit for their investment. Be willing to hold out for a great candidate.

Often I hear owners say that they knew for awhile they might need someone new, they just put off looking for as long as possible. Why? Foremost reason is fear of failure. The cure is practice interviewing. Think of interviewing and hiring as a way to re-new the life-blood of your company. Recognize that as you get better at hiring great employees, your work life gets easier.

You can reduce the time needed to fill a position by continuously sourcing and interviewing new candidates. One business owner recently observed, "If I invest an hour a week to interview 1 new candidate a week, in a year I will have seen nearly 50 people – more than enough to fill the 3 - 7 openings I expect to have this year. I will also have a good understanding of what's going on in the market, in terms of salaries

and other compensation, so that when I get ready to make an offer, I'll be confident that I'm pricing my offer fairly. Finally, when it comes time to fill an opening, I'll have a backlog of people I've looked at – I won't be starting from scratch." Smart owner!

Looking for a good book? Try Kevin Klinvex's, *Hiring Great People*. Or, take a look at Martin Yate's, *Hiring the Best, A Manager's Guide to Effective Interviewing*. Both are great tools to help you build your skill at finding "A" players. Happy hunting!

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