

How to Find the Best Employee

06/06/05

The question seems to always come up, what to look for in a resume, and how to decide who to hire. It is tempting to follow Murphy's Law of hiring: hire the last resume you look at, or otherwise stated: look until you find one good candidate and then hire that person. Ideally, you want to have several good candidates to compare, just like candidates want to have several good offers to choose from.

By comparing options, each party increases the likelihood of making the best possible choice. Unfortunately, for many of us, putting in the extra time and effort to search for more than one great candidate seems like a lot of work. Candidates, too, can be tempted to cave in early, taking an opportunity that wasn't exactly what they wanted. What we all forget is that, while we might take months to fill an opening or find a job, we will spend years living with the consequences, up to, and including, having to start the search over from scratch, if it doesn't work out. So, a word to the wise, hang in there and hold out for what you want!

This brings us back to the early stage of the search process. What do you look for in a resume? There are lots of opinions on the subject. Personally, I focus first on:

- longevity and follow through
- overall content
- accuracy and quality in presentation

- work experience, skills and attributes to fit the job you're looking to fill
- education level and special training appropriate for the job

First thing to do when you get in a resume is scan it for job history. Is there a pattern of how long the candidate stays in a job? Figure out how long you'd need someone to stay in a job, in order to produce a reasonable return on your hiring investment. Look on the resume for evidence they have done this before. Some people switch jobs every 2-3 years, some more frequently. Some have recently switched a couple times, but earlier in their career they stuck it out for significantly longer. Be careful if you're looking to hire someone to stay in your job for longer than they typically do – don't expect miracles. If you have questions about how often they have switched jobs, call and ask the candidates about work history. Look for solid answers, not excuses.

Next, scan the resume for content. Check for down to earth language in the resume. Does it get to the point, and are the points worth noting. Is the person fact and numbers comfortable, demonstrated by citing numerous facts and numbers regarding results produced. Or, is the resume flowery, and vague as to what was actually produced. I've seen resumes make great promises, by implying

responsibility – led a team that . . . , consulted with others on . . . , member of a group that . . . , consistent producer-solid performer-reliable worker – and no facts to back it up.

Think of a resume as a person's best work product. Look for brief statements, using good grammar, properly spelled. Given that this may be the best a candidate can do, is the quality presented good enough to meet your standards for excellence. Mis-spellings are inappropriate, with today's spell-checking programs. Problems with grammar are hard to eliminate, in day to day work situations, so if grammar really matters on the job, use that as a rule-in/rule-out factor on the resume review. Set a high standard – you're looking for high quality candidates.

Try to define your ideal candidate in terms of skills and attributes. Use adjectives and adverbs. Make a list of words you think best describe the job and the person. Try statements like, "fast learner", "quick to take action", "consistent performer", "drives results". Ask you staff to help you build the list. Then look through resumes to find candidates who describe themselves as in words similar to your attribute list. If the job is "fast paced", you may want to avoid candidate descriptions like, "think things through completely before taking action". If the job requires learning new things, you want candidates who

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demonstrate a history of learning new things, and who talk about learning as an attribute.

Define your requirements for background. How much does this candidate need to know about this job in particular, and the world of work, in general. Do you care if your candidates have any work experience at all, or can they be right out of school? Do summer work and internships count? If you want candidates with a lot of experience, how much of it needs to be general work experience, how much specific to the type of job you're trying to fill. Once you've defined your parameters, look for them on resumes, and don't settle for resumes that provide less than what you require.

Finally, never take the resume or cover letter as gospel. Candidates have a lot of options when it comes to writing resumes and cover letters. There is no guarantee that what is presented is original work. Watch out for a resume that over-promises for the likely experience of the candidate – one usually doesn't make it to Senior VP of sales, or Plant Manager, or head of a department with full P&L responsibility, within the first 2-3 years of employment.

A good phone screen can help you see if the resume matches the candidate, and can save you a lot of wasted effort interviewing face to face. Check if the

candidate speaks like the resume is written. Verify the facts in the resume and watch out if the candidate is hazy on details. Ask for business references and watch out if the candidate keeps giving you personal contacts or peers at work, instead of people they directly reported to. Someone who has done a good job and earned a boss' respect is likely to get a good reference in the future.

I've often heard entrepreneurs despair, saying they don't believe they are any good at hiring, or their results have been too uneven – some good ones, and some real mistakes. Or, things just worked out, and they have no confidence they could repeat the experience. Actually, in my experience, the real problem is most entrepreneurs don't do enough hiring – for most of us, if we're lucky, we'll only hire a few people each year. Some of us may go a whole year without having to hire anyone. That translates into not enough practice to up our batting average, combined with an expectation that we should be batting somewhere around 1000, if we're any good at all. A 1000 batting average is unrealistic – get used to the idea that you will make mistakes, and have to move on. Improve your batting average through practice, by looking at lots of good candidates, whenever you do have an opening.

Looking for a good book? Try 96 Great Questions to Ask Before You Hire, by Paul Falcone, a bargain at under \$13. Practical examples of questions to ask, and what to look for in response. Happy hunting!

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