

Bringing in the Talent:  
How an Innovating Company Can Get the Right People in the Door

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Despite the high levels of unemployment, many companies are constantly complaining that they can't find top talent. Since having great people on board is an integral part of being an innovative company, it is important to understand why it is so hard to recruit them. While it is easy to blame education, parenting, social milieu, and a host of other factors, the most obvious culprit, and the one that organizations can control, is the hiring process. Here are some of the best ways to get hot talent in the door.

***Describe the position using goals, not skills***

The first question to ask is: what are you looking for? Typically, job descriptions are based on the last person who did the job, and the hiring manager is looking for that person's clone. The list of skills and tasks can be very long, and hard to parse, which makes cover-letter and resume-writing very complex (and, in turn, hard for HR to parse). To make matters worse, required skills and tasks are sometimes vague (what does "good communication skills" mean, anyway?), which qualifies either everyone or no one. Granted, some positions require specialized software (e.g., R, CAD, Java), specific skills (e.g., hierarchical linear modeling, drafting), and deep experience (e.g., knowledge of the pharmaceutical industry). But, try to avoid making a long list of requirements, because that can box the role into a narrow space that can inhibit creativity, innovation, and (most importantly) initiative.

Though cloning may seem to be the most expedient way to find a new hire, it is actually the *least effective* way to find a new hire, if only because of how many applicants you will need to review before finding the right clone. Instead, scrap the old view of the position, and rebuild it, starting with the goals inherent in the position. Consider each of the following questions:

Questions for Designing a Job Description

- 1) What must the person in that job accomplish? What would constitute meaningful progress on a day-to-day basis in that job?<sup>1</sup>
- 2) How does that person's role integrate with the department/division, the company, the clients, and/or the mission/aims of the firm?
- 3) What constitutes doing a good job in that role? (Remember: do not start with the person who occupied it previously!)
- 4) How do you want/expect the person in that role to grow with respect to knowledge, skills, attitudes, and capabilities?
- 5) In what ways do you hope the person will expand his/her role, and what career trajectory(ies) would (s)he be able to take?

6) What freedoms can you afford the new hire for defining his/her role?<sup>2</sup>

7) What opportunities are there for the person to find meaning and fulfillment in the position?<sup>3</sup>

From there, write the job description in the least-restrictive way possible. Show the answers to the questions above, and include the essentials for the position. Rather than asking for a standard cover letter, ask applicants to describe: *a) their plans and vision for the position, b) how they intend to make a unique contribution to the company, and c) what excites them about the position, the company, and its mission.* While some might contend that such *is* the purpose of a cover letter, most organizations prevent that by posting laundry lists of skills and capabilities that need to be checked off using the resume and cover letter.

### ***Create a realistic vision of whom to hire and make sure the new employee can thrive***

In addition to having a clear, goal-oriented job description, it is important that the company be realistic about whether the job and employee *both* fit with the culture of the organization.

Companies frequently have unrealistic expectations of employees, the jobs they [can] do, and what kind of culture is necessary to support the roles and functions of the jobs. As such, they can end up using hiring and onboarding practices that send the talent packing.

One major pitfall to avoid is "unicorn hunting"<sup>4</sup>, which involves overloading the job [description] with so many items to check off that it will be next-to-impossible to find a suitable candidate. One company that wanted me to recommend a candidate sent me a job description, and my response was, "This is a human being you're looking for, right?" I know thousands of talented people (both employed and not), and not *one* of them was qualified to do this just-above-entry-level job -- the position required knowledge of accounting, marketing, graphic design, *and* web programming. Eight months after posting the position, the company still had not filled it, despite my immediately recommending a very talented and capable individual who could do everything but graphic design (and they really liked him, too!). They should have hired the guy I recommended (he got snatched up by another company) and contracted with a rising graphic designer, because the additional cost was probably far less than the eight months in which the job tasks went undone.

Another common example of unicorn hunting is requiring levels of experience and skill that are far beyond what the position requires. The result will be someone overqualified for the job with little room for growth and development, which is a recipe for disaster. As one example, a friend of mine was required to have project management experience for an entry-level position in a research group (and, according to him, they actually refused to hire many otherwise-qualified people who didn't have project management experience). The only problem, however, was that my friend took project management courses in grad school and knew way more than the people he worked for! He got increasingly frustrated with the poor project management decisions that were being forced on him by those above him and left the group fairly quickly.

A third cautionary example is a production group that did a lot of rote work that actually required little more than a high school degree. Despite this, they were looking for applicants from top universities with GPAs of 3.5 or higher, and couldn't figure out why no one stayed long and why their competitors kept stealing their talent (they also apparently never heard of a non-disclosure agreement, which also led to some of their secrets getting stolen!).

That said, there are plenty of ways to bring on an overqualified person, but the company needs to capitalize on their expertise and not try to pin them down. Moreover, that person's boss needs to have a strong ego (as the subordinate is likely to know more) and needs to give the employee more leeway to do his/her job. If possible, treat an overqualified employee as a highly-knowledgeable consultant instead of a subordinate, and give him/her opportunities to seek out challenges, develop, or go above and beyond the call of duty (with a minimum reward of high recognition). Give the person the resources and freedom to be creative and develop new processes, new ideas, and new ways to delight consumers of the company's product. In that sense, the person's boss can be a project manager (rather than a task master), and has the opportunity to look good for capitalizing on a great employee's capabilities (which is exactly what management should be doing!).

Along those lines, one of the most destructive forces in a company is "yesism," in which bosses must necessarily know more and be smarter than their employees, and their employees must say "yes" to all orders and assertions from the boss. The most insidious part is that bosses often deny that they are doing this, and do not want to realize that it is occurring. Here are two easy ways to identify "yesism": if a boss is constantly clashing with a well-qualified employee, or if an employee confidentially admits to not being allowed to do his/her best on the job<sup>5</sup>, the company likely has "yesism" going on.

### ***Select for the factors that cannot be acquired on the job***

While it is certainly great when companies can bring in a candidate who is ready-made for the job, this occurs far less frequently than one might expect. There is always a certain amount of on-the-job training required, be it the tacit knowledge of the company, the specific procedures used by the organization, and/or the avenues through which the hire should channel his/her specific capabilities.

These are common things to teach, and should be learned easily with proper guidance. There are also many relevant skills that might ideally be in-hand when a candidate arrives, but could be learned on the job without too much of a cost to the company (I define this as whatever can be learned to a sufficient level within 1-3 months). For some things, it might even be worthwhile for the company to hire a great candidate for slightly lower pay in the first year in exchange for the training that the candidate needs -- this can build loyalty without costing the company too much.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, select a candidate on the factors that *cannot* be taught quickly and easily, like deep experience and *required* knowledge/skills (again, keep that list as short as possible!). This includes factors like: a) interest in the work (do *not* judge by college major!), the company, and its mission; b) fit with the company's culture and people; c) a solid foundation in the [meta-skills](#) needed for the job. The latter item is the trickiest to define, and yet it is the most important. Meta-skills are the wherewithal to develop capabilities that fall under the same category as the meta-skill.

For example, many software companies used to pose computing problems to applicants without specifying which programming language (e.g., C++) to use. This tests the meta-skill of *algorithmic thinking*, which can be applied to computing problems through the use of a particular programming language (*skill*) -- that is, good algorithmic thinkers are able to learn programming languages easily.

By contrast, just because someone knows four programming languages does not mean (s)he is a good algorithmic thinker. It makes more sense for a company to hire someone who can think algorithmically and *then* teach the person the company's preferred programming language. Granted, if there is someone who does both, that is obviously a better candidate, but it is better to find a good fit on all three factors above than it is to focus on whether a candidate has the right mix of skills.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Recruit people from the places where they are likely to be***

While this sounds like plain-old common sense, I would point out that most companies place a generic posting on a general job board, which results in a flood of applications with a couple of gems buried in a mountain of silt. Other companies, looking for generically "smart" or "creative" people, tend to dig at the *US News and World Report's* supposed top schools, and those companies are riding on so many erroneous assumptions that they deserve the applicant pool that they get. Still others hunt for prey at their successful competitors, hoping for a crumb that falls off due to someone getting annoyed or having to move due to life circumstances.

The alternative version of this is trying to steal talent away with promises of higher pay and/or better benefits -- remember: if you can steal them using that strategy, they can be stolen from you using the *same* strategy!

Instead, target potential applicants in places where you are likely to find them. For example, figure out which universities are most represented by successful people in your company, and have them reach out to the alumni network of their *alma mater*. Alternately, figure out which university cultures (and yes, many of them are distinct!) fit the culture of your organization (might be worthwhile to take a good look at the founders and upper management here), and recruit at those universities.

If you are looking for a recent graduate, send notes to career centers, relevant student clubs, or even specific departments (keep it to 3-4 schools). Most especially, *use internal recommendations*. Successful people in your company may know other great people to hire, or may know others who are well-connected in a given field. While there are always concerns about nepotism and the like, they can be minimized by using the job description and cover letter strategies described above. Also make it known that people can build credibility, and perhaps get bonuses, for making good referrals, and may lose some trust and credence if they make bad recommendations.

Finally, if you want to steal talent, do it by offering a unique opportunity that the person will find exciting and that his/her current company cannot or will not provide.

### ***Use an open and communicative hiring process***

I am continually stunned by the stories I have heard from people in the hiring process. I know amazingly talented people who have been utterly dehumanized, and still others who were dismayed at the way they were treated. This is bad news for a company's reputation (these stories *do* get out, and sometimes in public forums like [Vault](#)), and it costs them talented applicants. In addition to preparing a helpful job description, consider the strategies below. While most, if not all, of them seem obvious, it is shocking to see how often they are not followed, even by companies who specialize in consulting for other firms on hiring processes! While some may dismiss the need for these suggestions, they have several benefits: (a) They keep the hiring process clear, organized, efficient, and manageable for the company, which saves time, money, and aggravation; (b) They

preserve the dignity of applicants, and the ethics/integrity of the hiring process, both which further preserve the reputation of the company; (c) They keep top talent interested, and even those who aren't hired may still hold the company in high esteem (and also recommend that good people apply). It is crucial to remember that any candidate who is good enough to get onto your radar is probably good enough to be recruited by your competitor(s), too, so following these guidelines will make your company more competitive in the talent market. If necessary, consider the time it takes to follow these suggestions to come from the marketing/branding budget, as they are all directly related to preserving your company's good name.

1) *Confirm receipt of materials.*

When you get someone's application, send a quick email, even an automated one, to confirm receipt of the application. A friend of mine sent an application by email, never heard back, and when he called the company he was "snidely" informed by a receptionist that they do not confirm receipt of applications and that he will be contacted if the company has any interest in him. Needless to say, when he hung up the phone he was done with that company.

2) *Create two short-lists of interviewees, and dismiss the others, in a timely fashion.*

If you want to interview an applicant, let him/her know *within 30 days* of receiving the application. If you do not wish to interview the candidate, make that known immediately. Most companies want to keep candidates on reserve "just in case," which is fine in principle, but tends to be applied to any candidate that isn't short-listed. Keep a second-string short list that matches the length of the primary short list, and tell the second-string candidates that the interview roster is full for the time being, but that they will be contacted if a slot opens up. Let all of the other potential interviewees go by informing them that the company is not ready to proceed with their application at this time.

And, for the candidates that are not of interest at all, just send them a note immediately that thanks them for the time and effort they put into the application and informs them that the company is pursuing other candidates. In all cases, these are fair, timely, and canned responses that simultaneously do not reject decent candidates, but also lets them know where they stand in the hiring process.

3) *Schedule interviews in advance and communicate changes.*

I can cite an inordinate number of instances in which a company asked someone to drop everything and run for an interview at a specific time on less than 48-hours' notice. People have lives, and asking them to rearrange their schedules without warning is inconsiderate, at best, and basically advertises that your company doesn't give two bits about things like work-life balance. Schedule interviews by asking people for convenient dates and times for the next 5-10 business days -- people are surprisingly flexible, but only when given the opportunity to be so. If you need to reschedule an interview, *apologize and inform the candidate* -- after all, if they were no-shows on an interview, that would end *their* candidacy. If you are trying to recruit talented people, standing them up is going to end *your* candidacy.

4) *Make the interview experience a good one.*

A good interview can both identify a solid candidate and cement his/her interest, so make sure that

the experience is a good one. Provide beverages (and food in any proceeding lasting more than two hours), give opportunities for breaks, and a friendly escort from place to place. Interview strategies abound, and are too varied relative to jobs to discuss here, but make sure that the person leaves each interview smiling. Even a "[stress interview](#)" can be turned into a good experience through a proper debriefing. One important way to help the process is to keep the candidate informed with information like directions, dress code, budget (if you are reimbursing), and phone numbers. It is also helpful to provide a dossier of each of the interviewers.

This should go without saying, but remember that certain questions are dangerous, and still others are illegal. Do not ask about marital status, ethnicity, religion, and the like, if only because rejecting a candidate afterward may suggest that the decision was due to a "wrong" answer on a demographics question, which is a lawsuit waiting to happen.<sup>8</sup>

Also, make sure that your interviewers are properly trained and represent the company well. I know someone who walked out of an interview at a top consulting firm utterly disgusted because the interviewer condescendingly noted that he wanted to ascertain if my acquaintance was smart enough to work at the company -- it's probably not the sort of thing one should say to a man with two doctorates (MD, PhD) from highly-esteemed programs.

5) *Follow up within a specified period.*

After the interview, inform the candidate of the next steps in the process, and give them a date (*no more than 4 weeks in the future, though it should be less than that*) by which you will send an update. Staying true to this builds your company's credibility, and even an update that informs applicants that interviewing has been stretched out due to candidates' schedules and will continue through [DATE], after which decisions will be rendered no later than [DATE + 2 weeks]. If this is too hard for your company, you need to do some additional hiring to pick up the slack, or you are going to miss out on talented candidates who will be snatched up by your faster-moving competition.

Remember: if they are good enough to get an interview with you, they are likely good enough to be interviewed by your competition! As soon as you have selected a candidate, inform your top three alternates that their candidacy is still under consideration, and that they will receive an update within three weeks. Dismiss the rest with a more-personal note -- remember that they put in a lot of time and effort to apply to your company, and you want them walking away with a good feeling so that they speak well of your firm. Also, your company may have future openings that may fit the rejected candidates, and if that happens you will have an easy hiring process if they walked away smiling. Another possibility is that a personal note can guide talented applicants toward developing in ways that will make them better fits for the firm, which enhances the talent pool and makes it more likely that a good candidate will be available later.

6) *When you have chosen the right candidate, proceed quickly and decisively.*

Once you have selected an applicant in a timely fashion, call the candidate with congratulations, and set up a time to discuss start date, salary, et cetera, in the near future. Within a week of the negotiations, and sooner is preferable, give the applicant the details *in writing*, with a reasonable time frame to turn it around with an acceptance (2 weeks should be more than sufficient). Inform the applicant of orientation procedures, background checks, and the like, and walk him/her through the process (I have actually seen a company fail to inform a hire where to report on the first day!). If

you take too long on this process, another company might steal the candidate right out from under you!

Now, in this economy, companies may feel that they can do what they want, and if candidates do not like it, there is always someone more desperate (but who may not be as talented). That may be true, but the company will develop a reputation among applicants and their acquaintances, and that could come back to bite firms in the rear when the market changes (*and it does change!*).

***There is plenty of talent; go get it (and keep it)!***

There is enough talent out there that companies should not need to compromise. It is important to remember, however, that talent is more related to meta-skills than actual skills, and this is why it is important to use a goal-directed job description. Since there is enough talent to go around, but fierce competition for recruiting it, companies *must* engage in fair, timely, and communicative hiring processes, recruit strategically, and give every applicant a positive (or at least non-negative) experience. Coupled with a goal-oriented job description, relevant application documents (like a targeted cover letter), and a sufficiently wide purview for seeing talent, companies should have no trouble getting great people in the door. What remains is for the company to keep them with a strong mission, high job meaning, engaging challenges, and a great culture.<sup>9</sup>

Footnotes

- 1) A very large study by [Teresa Amabile](#) has shown the extreme importance of meaningful progress. I highly recommend the book she wrote with Steve Kramer about the study: [The Progress Principle](#).
- 2) Remember that creativity flourishes only when there is room for it to do so! See research by [Keith Sawyer](#), among others.
- 3) Many researchers, especially [Dutton](#), [Wrzesniewski](#), and [Grant](#), have shown the importance of this matter in job performance and job satisfaction.
- 4) Great *Wall Street Journal* [article](#) on this.
- 5) Look also for bosses with bruised egos, or a well-qualified employee who confidentially admits that the boss knows less than [s]he (this holds double when the admission is highly derogatory but not said in anger).
- 6) Those who are afraid of the candidate leaving after training can provide a financial incentive to stay, if need be, but a good company should be able to keep the candidate without one!
- 7) Also, anyone you are interviewing does, or should, have the minimum capabilities necessary to do the job. Otherwise, why waste everyone's time? An interview should be about fit, and not about capabilities. Do the assessments beforehand!
- 8) I am kindly not embarrassing the HR consulting company that asked me my ethnicity, age, and marital status point blank without indicating that the questions were optional.
- 9) The author thanks [Scott Crabtree](#) for his thoughtful comments on earlier versions of this post.