

Coffee is for Screeners

SCREENING IN GOOD AND BAD TIMES TO BRING THE TOP TALENT ONBOARD.

As Alec Baldwin says in his famous Glengarry Glen Ross monologue, the ABC's of selling are "Always Be Closing." There are plenty of recruiters who believe this principle applies to their jobs as well. These recruiters push people, right or wrong, into open positions like pegs into holes of all different sizes. *I couldn't disagree more with this approach.*

The appropriate recruiting mantra is quite different from what works in the sales arena. In my opinion, a recruiter's number one job involves something I call "ABS" vs. ABC: **"Always Be Screening."**

While every IT manager I've talked with values a high-quality employee, it takes time to screen for one. Interestingly, this fact poses an issue no matter what the status of the economy. In a white-hot market, hiring managers feel pressured to accelerate the screening process and cut some screening corners for fear that the best professionals will be stolen out from under them.

In a down economy, hiring managers feel more exhausted than pressured when it comes to screening — but the outcome of diluting the screening process is the same. As the unemployment rate rises, each open position attracts an abundance of applicants. For example, when the IT unemployment rate climbed to 3.3% in Q4 2008, TEKsystems received 24 times the number of applicants to every open position compared to a year prior when the unemployment rate was 2.3%. The FBI recently cited a similar phenomenon in USA Today. For approximately 3,000 open staffer positions, the Bureau received 227,000 applications.

To find the perfect professionals, from a mass of potentially hundreds of resumes, requires time — a luxury that is not abundant in most of the IT shops I've consulted. As a result, even when the pressure to move quickly is dulled, many hiring managers still skimp on screening stages just to complete an already lengthy recruiting process.

So, the drivers behind a lackluster screening process are understandable: It makes perfect sense to move quickly when you feel you've found a great candidate; and, it's logical to recruit as efficiently as possible when you have a ton of applicants to consider. But, when dealing with high-urgency or applicant-overload, the solution to these issues is not to cut screening out of the recruiting equation. Instead, the best way to deal with these challenges is to make sure the screening process is as solid and workable as possible — in hot or cold economies alike.

You may be wondering, "what's the big deal in cutting a few screening corners?" The answer is: the less you screen, the more you assume the risk of hiring a poor performer that just so happens to have a great resume and the right interviewing skills. This type of candidate is more common than you may realize, especially in the current market.

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One reason for this unfortunate prevalence involves who is actually seeking employment in today's market. The reports I've seen indicate that the majority of layoffs affect less than 5% of company workforces. This percentage indicates that most layoffs, thus far, are the result of top-grading (Veritude). While there may be more talent to choose from, there is also more talent you don't necessarily want to choose.

Another reason unqualified candidates who "talk the talk" are so common these days involves human nature in hard situations. According to a June 2008 CareerBuilder survey, nearly half (49%) of employers said they caught outright lies on resumes. As the economy weakens, those in the job market (as well as those employees worried about job security) often feel a sense of desperation when looking for another position. The realistic consequence of this dynamic is that resumes submitted to openings tend to be more inflated than normal. As Peter LeVine, professional background checker in Delray Beach, FL told the WallStreet Journal in a November 2008 article, "...When the employment market tightens, falsifications, elaborations [and] expansions tend to increase."

Ensure your recruiting partners and hiring managers screen judiciously.

So here are a few tips I recommend my clients follow when designing and implementing a screening process:

1. Avoid sending out job descriptions to get resumes. Align yourself with recruiters who can gather insight about your open position via direct dialogue and then, leverage their network of relationships to source candidates. Sending out job descriptions to solicit resumes raises the risk of receiving applicants who inflate their resumes to match the requirements outlined rather than describing their actual experiences. Furthermore, recruiting via networking and referrals is known to be 54 times more likely to result in a job placement compared to finding candidates by posting job descriptions on job boards (CareerXroads).
2. Align with a recruiter that is willing to not only provide two supervisory references, but also broker a conversation between you and the candidate's references. Most recruiters say they include reference checks as a part of standard procedure. But you'll know for sure that they performed this step, and performed it thoroughly, if they offer to have you speak to the references yourself. A recruiter who puts you in direct contact with a candidate's references, not only limits the number of applicants they ultimately submit to you, but they also provide you with the opportunity to learn first-hand how the candidate performed in previous roles.
3. Keep track of who works for you now and where they came from. You'd be surprised to see how few degrees separate you from your candidates. If you are considering a candidate that used to work at company ABC, you likely have an employee who also worked there — or knows someone who did / does — and could look into that candidate's qualifications on your behalf.

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4. Screen across multiple dimensions. Any recruiter you align with should assess their candidates over all three of the following dimensions:
 - Cultural Fit. Obtained through face-to-face interviews focused on behavioral questions and / or realistic work simulations.
 - Technical Fit. Obtained through technology-specific examinations and/or technical interviews.
 - Past Experience. Obtained through direct dialogue with previous managers — not peers — who oversaw the candidate perform roles and responsibilities similar to those the position requires. It can sometimes be difficult to secure a reference due to rising concerns over legal issues. However, if your candidate is as amazing as his resumes and interviews indicate, his previous managers will likely speak on his behalf, as a personal favor if nothing more.

Without screening, making a wise hiring decision becomes increasingly difficult. I encourage you to ensure your recruiting partners and hiring managers screen judiciously. The recruiters who follow an ABC philosophy can't set you up for success. Great recruiters know they must **Always Be Screening.**



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