

Good Recruiting for Every Economic Season

HOW TO ENSURE YOUR TALENT MANAGEMENT STRATEGY REMAINS HEALTHY.

Having been in the workforce for over 20 years, I've seen my share of market ups and downs. I was fresh out of college in 1990 during the first Gulf War, a thirty-something in 2000 for the technology bubble bust, and now a father of four as Wall Street melts down. Based on my perspective at each life-stage, my reactions to the economic situation differed.

I want to share some "perceptions" my IT clients have in today's market. As the economy and employment market change, IT managers naturally develop perceptions that affect their talent attraction and retention activities. Interestingly, while their perceptions shift in strong versus weak economies, their behaviors often remain the same. What I find even more ironic is that these unchanging behaviors rarely enhance the effectiveness of talent management in either economic situation. Frequently, they do just the opposite.

Here are a few tips to ensure your talent management strategy remains healthy despite the economy's fluctuations:

1. When to look for top IT talent:

In a strong economy, managers' perceptions of the market being "too tight" can deter them from an assertive recruiting strategy. In these times, IT managers tend to believe they are at the mercy of the market, thereby playing right into the, "pay more to attract talent" trap. IT managers feel they need to pay more for new employees that are no more qualified than their current, fully-qualified staff. As a result, they may shy away from

bringing new hires on staff. Likewise, when the economy is weak, managers tend to avoid hiring due to fear of a hiring freeze or pending layoffs. The charge to "do more with less" doesn't seem to jive so well with on-boarding throngs of new hires.

Naturally, I understand where these behaviors originate, but managers should always be hiring — regardless of market health. My opinion is based on the simple fact that highly talented people do not disappear in good times or bad — they exist in both facets.

The question a forward-thinking manager must then ask herself is: **"Do I have the best people possible on my team?"** In good times, when companies make technology investments and teams are busy, managers need great people to help them juggle multiple priorities and get the job done. Similarly, in bad times, when staff is lean, having the right people can make or break an IT organization's success. Doing more with less is far easier if you have the best professionals working hard in your corner.

So, if there are a few players on your team that aren't performing at optimal capacity, it makes sense to top-grade no matter the economic condition. To do so,

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however, you will need a pool of good talent to backfill. Make sure you are periodically stack-ranking your staff and constantly recruiting potential candidates. If you don't feel comfortable conducting formal interviews without a currently available position open, take an informal approach by meeting with candidates over informational lunches / coffees.

To sum up this point, reacting to resource gaps is unpleasant in good and bad times alike. To avoid it, proactively and aggressively build your talent pipeline.

2. How to attract top IT talent

When the economy is strong and IT staffs are up to their eyeballs in projects, most managers feel they are too busy to meet with their recruiters. In contrast, when the economy is weak and hiring is thought to be off limits, many managers believe they have no need to align with their recruiters.

If we acknowledge proactive recruiting is valuable to IT organizations no matter what the status of the economy, then the error of not aligning with a recruiter based on the economic situation becomes clear.

As I've written in other articles, avoiding direct dialogue with your recruiter handicaps their ability to **"tell your story,"** and ultimately, to attract talent that's going to help you knock your projects out of the park. Research

tells us that 85% of the IT workforce is willing to listen to new opportunities (CareerBuilder, 2008). It also reveals that technical professionals receive an average of 12.5 recruiting calls a week (TEKsystems Segmentation Study, 2008). The best and brightest technical professionals are always seeking opportunities to advance their careers in challenging positions at stable companies. They are willing to listen to recruiting calls, but you need to stand out to be heard above the noise.

A good recruiter will ask for direct dialogue with you to go deeper than the job description and rate requirements. He will want to understand your business, the IT initiatives underway and upcoming, as well as the culture of your organization. This level of information allows him to craft an Employee Value Proposition (EVP) which he can share with prospective candidates. While most recruiting calls sound the same — "saw your resume, have a job, here's the description, here's the rate" — an EVP communicates compelling reasons why your positions deserve the best professionals' attention. In both good times and bad, top talent will align with organizations they see as offering the most opportunity and the most security. But, recruiters can only sell your positions to the degree they understand them, thus giving your recruiters more information sets you up for receiving higher quality candidates who won't respond to ill-informed recruiting solicitations.

3. How to ensure the right fit

Screening is another aspect of recruiting affected no matter the economic circumstances. When times are good, recruiters often cut screening corners to move quickly and avoid losing out on a seemingly sharp candidate. In economic downturns, when the number of unemployed increases, recruiters are inundated with dozens, if not hundreds, of resumes for every open position. As a result, they tend to skip screening steps out of sheer application-overload.

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Would you enter into a contract with someone you do not know at all? Skimping on screening produces an equally undesirable gamble. In a good or bad market, IT workers have little to lose by applying for a job they aren't 100% qualified to do. From the employer's standpoint however, hiring someone without ensuring they are who their resume says they are can have dire consequences on productivity, morale, etc. The only way to protect against making poor hiring decisions is to screen consistently and screen thoroughly. Before extending an offer, be certain you've screened, in depth, for a technical and cultural fit. You should also confirm the candidate's qualifications through multiple references that validated, in detail, the candidate's previous accomplishments and work history. Doing so will save you time and heartache in the long run.

4. How to keep your best talent yours

When you lose a strong team member, you inevitably feel the pain of their loss. Remaining employees are overwhelmed and your team just cannot operate as successfully as they once did until the member is replaced with someone equally as good or better. But finding and grooming replacements takes time.

Whether the loss of a top performer occurs during an economic boom or bust makes no difference. Your key players are critical to your success in both market conditions. Nonetheless, IT managers rarely seem to recognize the importance of executing an ongoing retention strategy.

When I say retention strategy, it may sound a bit more complex than it really needs to be. In short, to retain good people you need to build relationships with them based on two key dynamics: (1) they feel comfortable expressing their desires or concerns to you; and (2) you demonstrate commitment to addressing their needs.

Most people think about themselves a lot; most people are also insecure if you dig deep enough. Consequently, if you don't proactively pursue conversations with your top people about their stellar performance and bright future within your company, you leave their continued employment with you to chance. They are thinking about these things a great deal, if not constantly. Without information supplied from you to them, they will independently fill in the gaps about their situation on your team – and likely become more at risk of leaving for opportunities they believe lie within brighter horizons.

Thus, to combat both fright and flight of your 'A' players, engage them in frequent, caring conversations. It can be as easy as a monthly brown bag lunch or semi-formal quarterly reviews. Your best people work hard for you – investing time into building their sense of pride and security while on your team benefits you as much as it does them.

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Summary:

- 1. Build your talent pipeline.** Great talent exists during strong and weak economies. IT managers need a “talent mindset” to build talent pipelines and stay competitive throughout all economic seasons. It’s easier to “do more with less” when you have the best workers on your team.
- 2. Communicate your Employee Value Proposition (EVP).** While top talent is willing to listen to recruiting calls, you’ll need a compelling message to attract them into your organization. An EVP will help your positions stand out in strong economies and communicate your company’s stability and opportunity during weak economies.
- 3. Always be screening.** In a good economy, recruiters may skimp on screening to quickly secure seemingly good candidates. In a poor economy, when applicants per posting substantially increase, recruiters can also skip screening steps due to sheer overload. However, cutting corners when it comes to screening will catch up to you. Stay disciplined to ensure you bring the best talent on board the first time.
- 4. Communicate to retain your top performers.** Make no mistake, your best people are being courted in good and bad times alike. Just a few months back, the unemployment rate was just 2.1%, which is close to zero when considering frictional unemployment (Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics). Furthermore, less than 1% of today’s college graduates are majoring in computer science or mathematics (Source: Census Bureau and CRA Taulbee Survey). Keeping your top performers is essential – and to do so, you need to keep the lines of communication open.



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