

module two: staff development

Finding and Keeping Good Staff

article:

You're Hired!

by Laurie Guest

Finding and hiring the right people is one of the toughest tasks we do in business. It can cost thousands of dollars to recruit, interview, hire, and orient a new employee. Start with the best possible tactics to find the right people to join your team.

Although I'm not a human resource expert, I did have years of experience trying to find good people to fill our open positions in the company where I worked. Along the way, I found a few simple tasks I could add to my hiring strategy to help the success rate of the new hires.

First comes the help wanted ad. To advertise a job vacancy, tell it like it is. Don't just include the things that make the job desirable to attract more people. List the things that are nonnegotiable. For example, if the position requires that the person work every Saturday, include that in the ad. No sense in having people apply who do not have the ability to commit to Saturdays. That's just wasting everyone's time. Once the applications and resumes start coming in, use "Laurie's Top 10 Tips to Hiring Right" as a tool for great questions to ask during the interview.

Phone interviews. When you reach out to an applicant, start with an email that tells the person you have received his or her resume and would like to begin the first step in your interview process, a phone interview. Agree on a date and a time, then ask the applicant to call you at the appointed time. Why? It's an easy check to see if he or she is prompt, pays attention to his or her calendar, and can follow a simple instruction.

You'll be amazed how many don't make it through the first hoop and either don't call as planned or call late. Listen more than you talk. I suspect a lot of interviewers spend a good amount of time telling the applicant about the job responsibilities, the history of the business, and maybe the good things about working in the business. Your time is better spent asking good questions and then being a great listener.



Over the phone, it's easier to make an assessment of the person's language skills because you're not distracted with appearance or other body language factors that influence you. That'll come later with the in-person interview. Certainly, if the job will include phone duties, such as a customer service representative or a frontline greeter, phone skills are critical to evaluate.

At the end of this call, you're at a fork in the road. If your gut knows that the applicant is not a match, then conclude by saying that you'll be deciding within 48 hours about those needing a second interview. If you know you want an in-person interview, then schedule it before disconnecting.

Observe applicants while they wait for an interview with you. On the day of the face-to-face interview, if possible, have someone else greet the applicants and ask them to have a seat until you're ready. Allow the applicants to wait three to four minutes and keep an eye out for what they do. The choice they make at this time says a lot about the person. Does he or she stay standing and look at the certificates on the wall or posted mission statements? Does the applicant pick up promotional materials in your waiting room, or does he or she sit down with the People Magazine and jump on their cell phone to text?

One time, I had an applicant help herself to coffee and muffins provided for our patients. When I came to the door to lead her to my office, she asked, “Can you hold on a sec while I finish up my breakfast?” That was a sign of how poorly the rest of the interview went.

Ask about something the applicant knows better than you do. If you’re having trouble connecting with an applicant who seems nervous, consider asking her about a topic she knows better than you do. The first time I tried this was with an applicant whose previous job was estimating steel for a construction job. I said, “Wow, that is something I don’t know anything about. Tell me how you do that?” As soon as she started to explain, her demeanor changed. I got to see a different side of this person, a warmer personality than the guarded, nervous person who talked to me for the first ten minutes. I ended up hiring her, and she was one of the most caring personalities I ever found. I would not have seen that side of her if not for this approach.

This can also work the other way. Once, I had an applicant I was just about ready to hire, and at the last minute, I digressed to a similar question. He opened up about his current job, badmouthing his employer and saying some really rude things that indicated he had the potential to be a big boat rocker if things didn’t go his way. Major red flag. You know what happened? We hired him anyway, and he lasted less than 90 days. I should have listened to my gut.

Know your laws. No one told me in the early days of my journey into hiring that there were questions I wasn’t allowed to ask. Lucky for me, I don’t think I broke any of those rules, but in my quest to educate myself on how to conduct better interviews, I found out what I can’t do. If you aren’t experienced or trained in HR, yet you’re expected to do the hiring, please do your homework.

Utilize the second interview process. When you’re lucky enough to have more than one applicant who’s a good match for your open position and it’s time to start the elimination round, invite them back for a second interview. This time, you can ask the applicants to perform tasks that are specific to the job and confirm that their skill level matches their claims.

For example, I had an applicant indicate on her resume that she could do a certain task specific to the healthcare field we were in. When I asked her to demonstrate on a particular piece of equipment she was unable to accurately complete the task. That showed me, of course, that she had embellished her resume. We would have made a big mistake if we had hired her assuming she was trained and ready to go in the most basic of skills for the position.

Ask co-workers to meet the applicant. Another way to make the right decision on an applicant is to allow time for a tour, if applicable, and a chance to spend a little time with their future coworkers if hired. This gives the applicant a chance to see what the work environment is like beyond your office and to meet the rest of the group. Leave the applicant with a trusted staff member to answer questions they might have or simply give them a chance to decide if this is the right place for them.

I clearly remember I had an applicant I was prepared to hire at the end of her second interview. While she was there, I asked her to stay for about an hour and watch our flow of patient care. I told her it was a typical day at our office, so she could get a sense of what her job would be like. Afterwards she informed me that she’d like to “revoke her résumé.” It turns out that the pace of our practice frightened her, and she doubted she had the stamina to work that fast. Wow! That would have been a bad hire.

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When in doubt, take them to lunch. This may sound like an awkward option, but it works. If you can't make a final decision on an applicant for any reason, maybe your gut is telling you to go slow. Invite him or her for a casual lunch with you. If possible, take one to two employees from the team with whom the applicant will work with if hired. This setup allows a much more casual and friendly conversation to take place. More importantly, it lets you see table manners, graciousness towards the server, and a common sense in social-business settings. If the new hire will be taking clients to dinners, sales meetings, or social gatherings, this step can be a huge deciding factor in his or her ability to get the job done right.

Give updates ASAP. As soon as you know that an applicant is not the right fit, let them know. A phone call is nice, a letter is good, an email is acceptable, but please don't leave them hanging. Remember, the applicant is now a walking billboard for your business, and you need to treat them with respect even if they didn't get the job. It's likely they're on pins and needles waiting to hear back from you.

There are many ways to tell someone they didn't get the job. My favorite is a kind sentence that thanks them, "However, we found someone else more suited for the position." I end it there. If really liked the applicant and wish we could have hired him or her, then I will add the sentence, "We'll keep your resume on file in case something else becomes available."

Cover any concerns in the "you're hired" call. For the lucky new hire, I always phone them and say, "Congratulations," and arrange for the start date. One more important step remains. If there's anything that I was concerned about in the interview, now is the time to firmly state my position.

For example, let's say the applicant had a lot of absences at a previous job. When you checked references, they said she was a great employee, but she missed a lot of work. During the second interview, I've talked to the applicant about it, and she assures me that she was going through something personal last year, but that is all done now. Getting to work on time will no longer be a problem. I may take her at her word, but on the hiring call, I may say, "Now, Rachel, I just want to emphasize again that accepting this job means that you'll arrive to work no later than 7:55 daily for an 8:00 o'clock start. We're clear about that, right?" Then, I will document in her personnel file that we agreed to her being prompt. If it proves to be a problem in the first 90 days, we have something to refer back to in the counseling conversation.

End the call by setting up the expectation of the onboarding process that awaits them. When explained properly, you should ease the first day jitters. It's really rewarding when you find a great person to join your team. However, the secret to finding good help is more than just luck. The secret is careful preparation in order to rock the interview.

Every hire is an important addition to your team. With the right interview strategy in place, better results will happen.