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Effective recruiting requires selling by both sides

Mutual focus



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Even in the best of economic times, employers frequently botch the opportunity to recruit top-level executive talent when they either forget or ignore one of the cardinal rules of the recruiting -- both the candidate and the company have to "sell" each other on the available opportunity.

Now that the job market has cratered, and the supply/demand dysfunction has contributed to a surplus of available executive talent, many companies have foolishly adopted the "you're just lucky to be here" approach to recruiting. That is particularly true in big, highly visible organizations that have the distinction of finding themselves in a growth mode while everyone else is downsizing.

David Badders / P-I

Although a surplus of available talent exists in the marketplace, highly qualified, top performing executives are just as hard to find as they ever were, perhaps even more so.

The true stars are no doubt already employed in good positions, and their willingness to surrender those jobs during a volatile period in the business cycle is questionable. Even if they are out of work temporarily, "A level players," as they are sometimes called, have more than enough self-confidence to turn down companies that don't evidence in their recruiting practices a solid understanding and appreciation of the value of human capital.

Hence the need for mutual selling in the recruiting process.

Over 25 years of recruiting, we have repeatedly been on the receiving end of complaints from candidates who have interviewed with clients and experienced a variation of the following scenario.

Ushered into a conference room with from two to 20 grim-faced inquisitors arrayed like modern-day Torquemadas, the candidate is subjected to several hours of intense questioning on topics at once arcane, obscure and sometimes illegal, and then dismissed with the blithe assurance that should that particular candidate be deemed worthy, he or she will be so notified.

Of course, by the time the candidate gets to us, and it doesn't take long, he has worked up a full head of steam.

"Don't you ever again present me to a company like that. Those #%%!!& didn't allow me the time to ask questions, exchange ideas, or discuss expectations. I haven't accumulated 20 years of successful business experience to be treated that cavalierly. The hell with them!"

It is self-evident that should our client select this particular candidate as the one to lead them out of the wilderness and into fields of profit and glory, they are going to be very sorely disappointed.

Recruiting and selecting "A level" executive talent requires an understanding of the most basic rules of interviewing and selection dynamics.

- Remember the Groucho Marx comment that any country club that would accept him as a member, he wouldn't want to join. Any candidate who is smart enough to work for your organization will be smart enough to ask tough, penetrating questions. Anticipate what those questions might be and think about how to answer them honestly. Sugarcoating will be noticed and work against you. Overly negative comments, conversely, will signal that the opportunity isn't worth pursuing.

- Don't lose sight of the fact that although the candidate is clearly under scrutiny, so are you. Many of the same traits you are evaluating in him are the ones he is carefully assessing in you; so if "energy and enthusiasm" are important selection criteria, for example, you might not want to convey in your questions or conversational style that you have one foot firmly planted in the grave.

- Selection processes that are excessively formal and structured will typically elicit overly formal (read: scripted and stilted) responses that don't reveal the reality of what the candidate thinks or who he actually is as a person. At the same time, interviews that are too informal, chatty and discursive are apt not to get at the one thing you want -- a true picture of what the person has accomplished in previous positions and how that bears on your position. A combination of formal and informal questions is, therefore, what works best for both interviewer and interviewee.

- Beware of the "Grand Inquisition." Intense examining and questioning of candidates is a good thing, even mandatory; but particularly early in the process, hiring managers must allow time for the candidate to ask them questions, provide substantive answers and exchange information that will demonstrate a sense of thoughtfulness on the part of the hiring entity. Engage the candidate; allow him to feel you out on issues important to him. It will be surprising what you learn about the candidate based on what he chooses to focus on in the questioning.

- Finally, never forget the old marketing adage about "selling the sizzle." Whether the company is expanding or contracting, profitable or losing money, the hiring manager must be conscious of articulating the positive aspects of joining the company and filling the position. Describe an upbeat future, focusing on the things that all candidates care about: challenge, opportunity, rewards (financial or otherwise), lateral or vertical mobility or strong, supportive management.

The simple truth of the labor market is that the very best employees evaluate companies they are considering not just based on balance sheets or investment recommendations, but also on the enthusiasm, professionalism and humanity of the people they encounter in the recruiting and selection process.

If attractive candidates are consistently turning down your offers of employment, it may not be a problem with the candidates.

As harsh as it might seem, it may be nothing more than an inability or unwillingness to sell the opportunity and the organization as effectively as the candidate sells himself.