

# 34 ESSENTIAL HIRING TIPS

Build a Winning Team for  
Today and Tomorrow



**BY TIM WIELINSKI**

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# Introduction

Over the past 25 years of experience with thousands of professionals and hiring managers, I've developed unique recruiting methods, focusing on the recruitment of junior through senior-level professionals. We've seen what works, what doesn't, and why. We've placed professionals at all levels, helping companies increase productivity and deliver higher performance faster.

In this book, I've compiled our methods and the lessons we've learned into 34 actionable Hiring Tips that all hiring managers can use to build a winning team for their companies. Even if you're very experienced, I think that you'll benefit from the third-party perspective on our profession and processes.

Follow the tips and ideas presented here – or start out by implementing just a few. The result will be a more competitive hiring process that can land the best candidates, and a team better prepared to meet the challenges of today's fast-moving and hyper-competitive business climate.

*Tim Wielinski*

Founder and president, Horizon Search, Inc.

# Recruiting

## ***Fan the Spark of Interest***

The applications stacked on your desk may look about the same, but the people they represent are very different.

### **Their motivation levels vary greatly.**

Unemployed candidates may be willing to jump through any hoop put before them, complete assessments, and patiently sit through any interviewing process. But, candidates who are relatively happy with their jobs may not be so willing. Something sparked their initial interest in the new opportunity but that spark could be in danger of being snuffed out if the interviewing process is handled poorly.



The cavalier, but common, question – *Why do you want to work here?* – might throw enough water on the process to extinguish those small sparks of interest. Do the opposite: *Fan the spark so the candidate's interest will grow.*

Discover what is motivating each candidate. With that information, you're in a position to nurture their interest and highlight aspects of the opportunity that may motivate your candidates to want to join your team.

**Fanning the spark is what recruiting top talent is all about.**

## ***Hesitant Candidates***

Great candidates often see job postings but don't apply. They're interested in the opportunity, but they hesitate to take the next step.



I often hear from these reluctant professionals: *"I would absolutely be interested in this role. I had actually been looking at this opening a few days ago, but had not yet applied"* or, *"I was about to apply and might do so within the next week or so."*

Why don't they act? Why do they procrastinate?

- They don't want word to get around that they're "looking."
- They know people at the company and fear that applying for a position might create awkwardness.
- Their skills aren't perfectly aligned with the job description which is often more flexible than they know.
- They want to avoid possible rejection.
- The most common. They don't want to invest time and hassle with application forms when there's no guarantee of an interview.

Excellent candidates are often open to change, but they're only going to expend a limited amount of energy exploring new options. Follow these guidelines:

- Avoid a hiring process that contributes to their hesitance.
- Keep their application confidential.

- Make the application process simple, fast, and easy.
- Consider setting aside the formalities of the application process until after mutual interest has been established.



## ***Consider Giving the Unemployed Candidate a Second Look***

Almost all professionals, at some point in their careers quit their job, get fired, or are laid off without having their next position in place.



Here are a few reasons to give an unemployed candidate a second look:

1. Your number one choice, who is employed, may not want the job! It can be a challenge to hire someone away from stable employment.
2. The unemployed candidate is often available to start immediately.
3. When they were employed, they might not have considered your company, but now they're more flexible and receptive.
4. You don't have to worry about counter offers.
5. They will often be more open to relocating.
6. They are often more flexible in salary negotiations.
7. They might accept a contract or contract-to-hire arrangement so you can have time to see how everything works out.

Professionals tend to stay with one employer for about four to five years, so if you do cross paths with an unemployed candidate who's

had a hiccup in their career, they'll likely stay with their next job for a while.

## *How to Prevent Candidates from ‘Going Dark’*

Have you experienced any candidates “going dark” or “ghosting” you in recent years or months?

Unfortunately, it has become part of our culture. You’ll know it when it happens. Candidates who were once engaged just seem to drop off the planet. They stop responding to emails and calls. It can happen for a variety of reasons, such as:



- Their situation has changed,
- They don’t want to say no,
- They can’t make a decision, or
- They have a question, but stew on it instead of asking.

### **How to prevent this problem**

Urge your candidates to contact you if they have any questions, if they are hesitant, or if they feel there are issues that need to be resolved. Let them know that the lines of communication are always open.

Keep the tone positive, but tell them that **if they don’t respond to any communication from your side within 24 hours, you’ll assume they are no longer interested and you’ll move on to other candidates.** In a world with mobile phones, email and texting, there are few excuses not to respond in a timely manner.

Open and honest communication not only helps during recruitment, it's also the best way to start the relationship between a new hire and your company.

## ***Two Tips to Attract Top Candidates***

In a competitive job market, top professionals have many options for employment. If they decide to test the waters, multiple offers are common. Companies are doing a good job of retaining their employees, so it can be attractive to stay with their current employer too. Remember that not all candidates are “looking.” Many are simply exploring new options, and are open to better opportunities.



Two things virtually every top candidate wants:

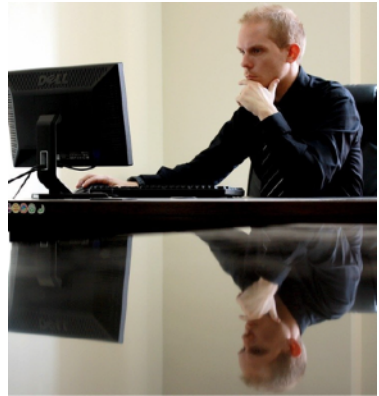
**A conversation with the hiring manager.** Talented and experienced professionals want to “cut to the chase” to determine if there’s a mutual fit. That means a one-on-one with the hiring manager. Companies that set this up quickly will have greater success.

**A fast and simple application process.** These professionals don’t want to start the interviewing process with application forms and tests. Some individuals will merely send out their resumes to see what kind of options are available. Don’t consider these to be “applicants” who need a job, but instead as “interested professionals” looking for information about your company’s opportunity.

Don’t require them to do too much too early or your best candidates may disappear. After establishing a good fit and sincere interest, they will be more agreeable to additional steps in the hiring process.

## ***The Perils of Assumptions***

Don't assume that a candidate wants a job just because they have applied for it. When offers are declined, the reasons are often similar to these:



- “I just wanted to explore my options.”
- “I want to work here a few more years before retiring.”
- “Personal issues have come up.”
- “I’ll lose my bonus if I leave now.”
- “I wanted some leverage for a salary increase.”
- “The family doesn’t want to move.”

Many times, you’ll never know the exact reason behind a turn-down.

Professionals often apply for jobs out of curiosity, so take the time to qualify candidates over the phone before inviting them in for interviews. Get them talking about themselves. Explore their career goals. Identify the professional or career problem they’re trying to solve. You’ll sometimes find that the “ideal” job they want is the one they currently have.

By the time you get to an in-person interview, the goal should be to confirm that there is a strong fit for both parties. If you assume that someone wants the job because they applied, you’ll be sorely surprised far too often.

## ***Keep Candidates Engaged***

It's easier to **maintain** the interest of your candidates than it is to re-energize them about working for your company.

The timing of recruiting and hiring efforts is unpredictable. Strong candidates surface at random times. While the first candidate you talk with may be your strongest, you may still want to talk to a

few more people, and of course, there are many other issues that delay a hiring decision.



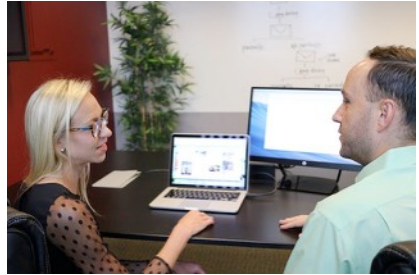
Nurture and maintain your top candidates' interest level while you work through the process. Keep in touch. Let them feel **forward momentum**:

1. Have them submit references.
2. Set up additional phone conversations with team members.
3. Send them company benefits to review.
4. Tell them if there have been changes on your side.
5. Set expectations as to the timing of a decision.
6. Reach out by email occasionally.
7. Instruct them to let you know if a competing offer is imminent.

When professionals interview with a company and then the company goes dark on them for a few weeks, they write off the opportunity. With just a little effort, you can maintain their interest until you're ready to move forward.

## ***Personal Connections***

If you talk to the best venture capitalists, they'll tell you that they invest in people – not just in ideas or companies. To them, the most important attribute is to have trust and confidence in the people behind the businesses they back.



It's the same situation when you want to bring talented individuals on to your team. They aren't investing their professional lives in a company, they're investing it in a *group of people*. It's important not to lose sight of this.

During the interviewing process, and especially during the offer stage, it is important to establish and maintain a strong connection between the candidate and future supervisor.

Once you've decided who you want to hire, don't assume that *everything got covered in the interview*. The candidate likely has additional questions that they just haven't asked yet. Appreciate that changing employers is a **huge** decision and they should not be presented with a cold "here's our offer – take it or leave it" attitude. Stay in contact with the candidate, or the personal connection can erode, resulting in them losing interest.

To maintain this connection, make sure there are conversations about:

- General expectations,
- Schedule flexibility,
- Vacation issues,



- Raise and review procedures,
- Bonus potential,
- The general future of the company, and
- The candidate's potential career path within the company.

The main goal is to *instill confidence and generate some excitement* so that they feel they are making the right decision by accepting the offer.

It's critical, takes very little effort, and the results are rewarding.

## ***Every Day is Draft Day***

If you have a favorite professional sports team that you follow closely, you probably watch what the general manager does on draft day. No matter what the team's primary weakness is, they select the best athlete available when it's their team's turn to pick.



There's a lesson here. Even if you aren't actively recruiting for the next All-Star,

*always be ready to sign the best talent.* The top companies are on the lookout for great employees even when they don't have any current openings because it's virtually never wrong to add a valuable asset. Also, your highly desirable candidate may not be available when you finally have a particular opening.

A company usually can't anticipate when a key employee is going to leave. Bringing on a smart, talented and ambitious new team member may be just what your organization needs to push it in a new direction or finally pursue an expansion plan. Consider *creating* a position for this person.

You may already have an individual or two on your radar screen that you'd like to bring on board "if" you had an opening. Keep an open mind and consider pursuing this individual right now. If the candidate is that good, one of your competitors may be about to extend an offer.

Even if something prevents you from bringing this person on board right now, keep the communication channels open. Phone

conversations and emails are a smart investment. College recruiters develop relationships with young athletes *years* before they have them sign a letter of intent.

This will help keep your company first in line when your candidate decides it's time for a career move or when you're able to create a position. As you know, the competition is intense for high-impact professionals, and they don't stay on the market long. You need every edge you can get.

## ***Company Reputations***

Business leaders today are beginning to appreciate something recruiters have known for a long time: the importance of **reputation management**.

In recruiting, we sense the impact of a company's reputation when we qualify prospects. Candidates, often familiar with the company presented, have heard the opinions of friends and they've researched the company online.



When presented a job opportunity, candidates will often relate positive things they've heard about a company. However, candidates also share negative impressions they've heard, such as:

There are management problems,

- High turnover,
- The company is going through a major upheaval,
- Departments are understaffed,
- Excessive travel requirements,
- Employees are overworked, and more.

Frankly, these sorts of complaints can be made about all companies at different times. Candidates need to be reminded that *solving these problems* is often one reason the company is looking to bring new talented people on board.

A negative reputation creates two problems:

**1. Many professionals won't apply to a company they've heard bad things about. It's easier to avoid rather than explore.**

Publish and circulate positive news about your company. Social media, industry news channels, and press release services are useful. Actively engage professionals during industry events.

**2. Those who do apply won't ask about the negative issues that concern them.**

Be proactive and ask candidates if they've heard anything about your company that concerns them. Acknowledge any problems and explain how they have been addressed. Perhaps there's new management. Maybe a reorganization is now complete.

By addressing these issues, you have a better chance of bringing the best people on staff, and when they show up for their first day, they'll come in with the right attitude and expectations.

## ***Effective Ways to Attract Top Candidates***

Most things that are advertised as “one-size-fits-all,” *aren’t*. Freebie baseball caps are the exception, and that’s because they are adjustable.

That’s what companies need to do when they set out to attract **top candidates** – they need to adjust their tactics and procedures.



For example, professionals who are *actively seeking* a new job will be okay with many of the typical requests companies make of new job applicants, such as filling out job applications and psychological assessments. However, professionals who are *being recruited* will often not have as much patience – at least during the initial steps – for the standard screening process.

Here’s the major difference: Candidates who are looking for a new position are – in many ways – trying to sell themselves. Candidates who are approached by a recruiter (internal or third-party) are generally exploring – focusing on the right next step for themselves. And that’s the fact that needs to be accommodated when recruiting top candidates, *especially at the beginning* of the interviewing process.

To make those first steps comfortable:

Let your candidates break away from the standard screening process, and have them meet with people who are on the front lines, who can talk at their level of expertise. This should quickly give the candidates the information and insight they need to determine if it's a good fit.

Realize that a passive candidate may not have the most polished resume ready to share. So, give them a break if the format or content lacks information.

There's plenty of time to get additional information later when interest is expressed and there's an agreement to proceed with the interviewing process. You can then begin steering the procedure back to more traditional ground. Request references, assessments, writing samples, an updated resume and whatever else your company needs to make its decision.

Laying the right foundation in these cases helps you build stronger professional relationships and attract highly desirable passive candidates. When you handle top candidates in this manner, you're creating goodwill. And, even if things don't work out this time, there's always tomorrow.

## ***Recruiting High-Value Candidates***

One of the leading influencers in the HR industry is Dr. John Sullivan. He made an excellent observation in an article he wrote about NBA teams recruiting LeBron James. It's a good lesson for anyone recruiting high-value candidates. Sullivan said: "Power-they (game changers) fully understand their value and their importance and as a result, they expect to be treated differently than the average applicant. They know that they hold the power in any potential new relationship or recruiting opportunity, so they expect to be courted."



Let's look at some of the most important points Dr. Sullivan makes.

**Candidates understand their value.** We know that there is a lot of competition for strong candidates. The unemployment rate for professionals with a college degree is 3 to 5 percent.

And most of them know it.

Candidates are individuals, and no two situations are the same. When it's apparent that candidates you would like to recruit into your organization are aware of their value, your approach has to take that into account.

**Treat candidates who understand their high value differently.**

When members of this group begin to consider other companies, they have many options. *One of those will be to stay at their current*



*position*. Don't assume they're "looking". You can't handle them as you would an average recruit.

This group may object to testing and may prefer to initially speak to individuals who will be making the final hiring decision. You need to be flexible in your process and creative in your interviewing.

Take your discussions to a deeper professional level. Since they have put themselves in the market, find what they are looking for in a change and what kinds of opportunities would motivate them to move. Something prompted them to be sitting across from you; tactfully explore what that may be.

**Court these candidates.** What I'm beginning to describe above might be compared to a courting process. You must demonstrate an interest in these candidates that is genuine. They need to know that you're on their side in their quest to find a position that is going to satisfy their needs.

How can your company create a winning environment for the next high-powered candidate that enters your office?

## ***Interviewing: Have You Perfected Your Timing?***

The other day the local news did a story about “speed dating.” It seems some people are so busy, they need to cram a dozen mini-dates into one evening.

On the other hand – and I think this is more common – there are dates that never seem to end. Remember those?

You keep checking the time, hoping that you can bail out soon.



Both speed dating and dates that never end have the same problem: That magical “flow” is never established.

It's the same with interviewing. It's bad to rush the process, and it can be just as bad to draw it out too long. Let's take a quick look at three important points and share a couple of tips along the way. The points are:

- Pacing the interview process,
- The number of interviews, and
- Maintaining perspective during the process.

### **Pacing**

Just like Goldilocks found one bowl of porridge too hot, another too cold and finally one that was “just right,” the interview process must be designed and carried out so that it's not too fast and not too slow. Excessive speed and extreme slowness both carry dangers that could prevent you from hiring the best candidate.

When candidates begin to engage your company for a position, they go into a data gathering mode. They are checking out the hard facts as well

as the softer cultural and interpersonal attributes of the company. It takes some time to process all of this information and get comfortable with it.

The other extreme has its risks as well. When the process takes *too long*, candidates often lose interest. There can be a general souring.

Competing offers may come through, as well as a “sweetening of the pot” at the candidate’s current job.

## **Number of Interviews**

Indecisiveness should be avoided. It often leads to a quest to find the “perfect” candidate. Experience tells us that none of us are perfect, so stringing out the process to find that one elusive person leads to exasperation for everyone involved.

When you go through too many candidates, you may find that your best choice has already accepted another position by the time you’re ready to hire.

**TIP:** *Maintain contact with your second and third choices. Otherwise, you’ll have to “rekindle” the fire if your first choice becomes unavailable.*

## **Perspective**

Not only do you need to keep your firm’s best interests in mind as you conduct the interview process, try to see the situation from the perspective of the candidates. Remember that their interest is the highest immediately after the interview. Also, know that the more enthusiastic you are about a candidate, the more enthusiastic he or she will be about you.

To get everyone into the comfort zone, work hard to make sure the candidate is pleased with the company, the position itself and coworkers.

Don't shy away from having follow-up conversations after the initial interview.

**TIP:** *Often the last company to interview a candidate ends up making the hire. When you have strong candidates, see if you can get a sense of where they are in their job search. You might want to speed up your process.*

If you keep these ideas and tips in mind, you should have success out on the candidate "dating scene."

# Relocation

## *Avoid Relocation Surprises*

A professional was interested in a job change and relocating was his primary goal.

*“My wife and I desperately want out of Arizona.” One month later... “I’m sorry, but the family isn’t quite ready for a move yet...”*

Personal and professional preferences and goals change often and quickly.

When you receive resumes from candidates who would need to relocate, **don’t assume that they have completely thought through the logistics and implications of a move.** Engage them on the topic. Ask probing questions and be sure to keep the discussion free and open. As you move forward in the process, monitor closely for any changes.

People change their minds. Expect it and don’t be surprised when it happens. Sometimes what looks good from a distance, doesn’t have the same appeal when it becomes “real.”



## ***Relocation Challenges***

Whenever you're working with a candidate who will have to relocate, it adds a lot of wrinkles to the situation and it generally requires a bit of "slow play" on the hiring manager's part.



You need to establish mutual interest with a phone interview and that's when you gently plant the idea of moving and begin to see how it grows. Often a candidate – and the candidate's family – will indicate that they're open to relocating.

But it's still early in the process.

### **Ask questions**

Find out what kinds of recreational activities the candidate and family enjoy. You want to sell your city, but you also want to discover what type of city would be ideal for them, so you can get a feel for how good your match really is. This can give you an early indication of your ultimate success or failure.

I think we can all appreciate how big this decision is for the candidate, so you can't rush it.

Ultimately, relocation candidates will judge issues such as:

- The company itself,
- The chemistry with coworkers,
- The feelings of family,
- The distance to extended family members, and more.

### **Look for action**

As the process moves along, stay in close contact and be sure to ask, “Have there been any changes?” and “What does your family think about moving?” Further, be alert to actions...or *inactions*. For example, has the candidate contacted a real estate agent or explored housing options yet? On the other side of the coin, have you noticed a decline in communication? Has the email pipeline gone dark? People tend to avoid delivering bad news.

Lack of action is a big warning sign and sometimes candidates who initially say they will move, balk when they realize that selling the house, having their spouse find a new job, and taking the kids out of school can be overwhelming.

When you’re finessing an out-of-area candidate to make the move, it will require your best people skills. Be sensitive to candidates, their families, and the process because when all the pieces fall in place, the odds are very good that you will have an excellent new member of your team on board.

# Negotiations

## *Hiring Tip – Don't Hide the Bonus Plan*

In today's climate where it's difficult to attract and land top talent, you need to pull out all the stops when it comes to promoting your company.

Showcasing location, benefits, and company culture are common.

Less common, however, is sharing bonus potential. And, to the most confident and ambitious professionals, bonus potential can make a huge difference.

Some HR professionals and hiring managers are reluctant to discuss bonuses because they are not guaranteed – but keep in mind, employment itself is not guaranteed. Choosing to only discuss base salary may not be enough to win over the candidates at the top of your list.

This is especially true if your top candidates are looking for a base salary number higher than you're able to offer. Base salary plus bonus potential may exceed compensation expectations.

### **Be open and honest about bonuses:**

- Share what others in similar positions have historically earned as bonuses,
- Highlight what the company's stronger performing employees have earned, and





- Discuss the bonus potential for joining the league of strong performers.

You want to feature all of your company's strong points when recruiting: **Don't hide the bonus plan.**

## Desired Salary

Does your company's application have a place for the candidate to write in his or her "desired salary"?

It's common practice, but as innocent as it seems, it can cause problems. It's asking candidates what they want, wish, and crave for, *before* they know much about the job.



When candidates are required to enter a number for a desired salary, it can force them into playing subtle mind games. They may try to figure out how high they can push it without shoving themselves out of consideration for the position. Or, some might even lowball it a bit, thinking it makes them more attractive.

When the number comes in above where you might expect it, remember that the person might just have *high hopes*. As you progress in the process, you'll have the opportunity for further discussion, and you'll probably find that they're willing to be flexible, especially after they learn more about the opportunity.

Then, the appropriate question will be, "What level of compensation will you accept?"

Most of the time, you'll be able to agree on a compensation package that meets their desires as well as those of your company!

## Salary Requirements

“What is your salary requirement?”

The question is often asked early in the interviewing process, and on the job application. But in many cases a candidate is *not prepared to answer accurately* early in the process.

During the initial interviews, they will learn more about:

- The job responsibilities and duties
- Their new coworkers, supervisor, and management
- The potential for career growth and impact that the position might offer
- The community – if relocation is required – and cost-of-living differences
- Their family's reaction to making a job change

Candidates are often caught by surprise by the question, and may state a salary figure that they believe “safe” or that “sounds good.” Alternately, they may throw out a *high* number, thinking that they’re setting the anchor for future negotiations. Candidates often view salary discussions as *theoretical* since they’re early in the process. They might not even want the job!

They will be better prepared to give an accurate answer once they’re fully educated about the opportunity, and they know that there’s *real interest* in extending an offer.



Once the candidate knows there's real interest, they may disclose additional details such as:

- A bonus plan
- A raise coming up
- An opportunity for a promotion
- A 15 percent retirement contribution
- Six weeks of vacation
- A contracting assignment that pays \$20k a year
- Other offers they're considering

So, if you *do* approach salary issues early in the discussion, ask again later. There's a good chance that the salary requirement has changed!

## Changes to the Offer

Whenever you've extended an offer, and your top candidate requests changes to the offer, it's important to maintain control of the situation and manage it in a very deliberate and thoughtful manner.



First, make sure that you know and understand all of the requested changes. Confirm with the candidate that this list of requests is **complete**. Then, verify that *if* the changes to the offer are made, the offer *will be accepted*.

This commitment should be backed up with concrete actions, such as:

- Agreeing on a start date,
- Allowing a public announcement,
- Refusing to consider a counteroffer,
- Canceling interviews with other companies, and/or
- Allowing you to tell other candidates that the position is filled.

Failing to achieve closure and commitment at this point can lead to endless rounds of changes. e.g. After granting a requested salary increase, the candidate comes back asking for more vacation time.

Sometimes, people are unable to make a decision, or they *don't want the job*. If your concessions are met with, "Great, thanks, I'll *think* about it," there's probably something else going on that you need to know about.

Get the commitment to accept the job up front, *before* agreeing to any changes to the offer.

## Competitive Offers

Determining the amount of an offer that 1) is attractive to your top candidate, 2) maintains internal equity, and 3) doesn't break the bank, can be challenging. But, to increase your chances of attracting a talented individual, **offers must be competitive.**



Not many professionals accept lateral moves, but sometimes it doesn't take much to tip the scales in your favor. Just sweetening the pot by \$5-10k can often make a huge difference. Let's look at some of the benefits you enjoy when you make a competitive offer, as well as the risks you take when you err on the low side.

- A lot of indecisiveness is eliminated when you make a solid offer.
- Positions get filled faster, resulting in less downtime.
- Candidates are more likely to stop looking at additional job options.
- Counteroffers are less likely to be a problem, resulting in fewer repeat searches.

Coming in at the right salary level shows your candidates *how much you value them*. That will enhance the relationship with your company throughout their tenure, improving your ability to retain top talent.

Further, offering competitive salaries enhances your company's reputation within the industry. The talent you recruit *will discuss their*

*experience* and you'll receive excellent PR. If candidates think they have wasted their time by interviewing with your firm, that news will be spread as well.

Finally, a competitive offer starts your relationship on the best possible footing. It lets your candidates join your team with the confidence that they are making the right decision. It's often said that you only have one chance to make a first impression, so get their attention, and make the right impression with your initial salary offer.



## Competing Offers

### *Your Top Prospect Got Another Offer!*

Sometimes a funny thing happens on the way to hiring top prospects – they receive a competing offer. It's not time to panic, although it *is* time to move quickly.



So, what can you do? **Concentrate on what you are able to control.**

**Work fast and smart.** Communicate the verbal and written offers as soon as you can. Trying to time the offer to gain advantage rarely works. I've found that candidates are usually most attracted to the first offer.

**Communicate at a high level.** Have the direct supervisor make the verbal offer and arrange contact from higher level management. You want these candidates to realize that your company is genuinely interested in them. Personal, higher level connections communicate that.

**Discover the differences.** Ask questions and see if you can get a sense for the differences between the opportunities. New topics and issues might be uncovered that make your opportunity more attractive to the candidate.

**Improve the offer!** Do what you can to make the offer more attractive. This could be compensation, vacation time, flexibility about working from home, and other perks. It may not take much. Sometimes people are most attracted to companies that show that *they want them more*.

In all cases, these in-demand professionals will do what is best for their careers, families and personal lives, and unfortunately they are unlikely to

let you in on all the dimensions of their decision making process. In other words, you're going to be somewhat in the dark about how to lead them into accepting your offer.

**Have contingency plans in place.** Although you have identified your first choice, don't abandon the relationship with other strong candidates. If your top prospect isn't available, all is not lost.

## ***Accommodate Vacation Needs***

When you're working hard to attract top talent to your company, it's important to understand the various career and employment attributes that motivate these individuals to make a move.



In general, these talented professionals are exploring job changes to *improve their lives*. That improvement could concern their careers or their personal lives. Typically, it's a combination of both.

### **No one likes to lose perks**

One thing that is generally true across-the-board is that professionals do not want to go backward in vacation time. The company policy is irrelevant to them. They know the dues they have paid throughout their careers and feel they have earned a certain amount of flexibility with regards to being away from the office.

If they have earned three or four weeks (or more) of vacation time, it has become part of the lifestyle that they – and their families – have come to enjoy. They may have regular getaways at certain times of the year, trips to visit family and other important events that pull them away from work.

Many professionals will leave a job that *doesn't* have flexibility for a position that gives them greater control over how they schedule their lives. Allowing more freedom and independence shows great respect

to the employee, which is a valuable commodity and useful for building loyalty.

### **Create goodwill**

You may find that your talented recruits end up not using all their vacation time. But, they appreciate the ability to take personal days when needed, to get away for doctors' appointments and healthcare issues, and to stay at home with loved ones.

Do your best to accommodate the needs and desires of these candidates. Here are some ideas:

- Allow additional vacation time on an *informal* basis,
- Let employees take time off without pay,
- Recognize some vacations are "working" vacations and treat them as such, and
- Give employees comp time for the time they put in on weekends and in the evenings.

Certainly, some candidates can be hired without any special concessions. But, extending trust and flexibility on vacation time and personal days will often help you attract the top talent you need, and make them loyal, hard-working members of your team.

# Offer Stage

## *Wait to Release Backups*

It's been a long process, and your top candidate has accepted your offer. The next step is to move on and let the other candidates know they weren't chosen, right?

Not so fast. Wait to communicate that information.



Sometimes the unexpected occurs. For many reasons – counter offers, competing offers, or a change of mind – your candidate may not start as planned. You may have to reach out to one or more of your other prospects. But, if you've already rejected them, it will cast a shadow on their interest. No one wants to be the second choice. It's much better for the process to be viewed as lengthy and be named the eventual choice.

Remember, it's not over until your top candidate starts. Keep your hiring options open. Wait to release your backups until your top candidate has started.

## ***References Create Competition***

When references are requested from your top candidate, it can set off a chain of events.



- Candidates know that your interest is serious. If they are interviewing with other companies – and they probably are – they will likely let those companies know that they're on the homestretch with you. That information often raises the perceived value of your candidate. Additional offers may be extended.
- When the candidate tells their references to expect a call from you, it may spark new additional interest from them too. Knowing that their colleague is available and scouting out new options, the reference may try to find an opportunity for them at their own company.
- It's not long before word of your candidate's interest in changing jobs hits the street and then it's anyone's guess how many other companies will show interest.

The job market is extremely competitive.

**Request and check references when your candidate's interest is peaking and be fully prepared to move quickly with your offer.**

## ***Offer Stage – Bond with Candidates***

We're operating in a candidate-driven market. The best candidates have three options:

- Stay with their current employer,
- Accept your offer, or
- Accept a competing offer.



Realistically, your company's offer and any competing offers are probably very similar. And, while the candidate's current position might not be ideal, at least it's a known commodity and presumably a work environment that's reasonably comfortable.

How can you differentiate your company and land the top candidates?

**Develop strong relationships with the professionals you want to bring on board.**

It's certainly important to cultivate those relationships during the interviewing stage, but it becomes critical during the offer stage, and here's why:

**The recruiting process often turns into a sterile, legal, business transaction when companies make offers.**

During the interview process, your top candidate had the opportunity to make personal connections and experience some warm fuzzies with his or her supervisor-to-be, and perhaps others on the team. Suddenly that evaporates when there's an offer on the table!

The offer stage isn't the time to stop cultivating the relationship; it's the time to make those warm fuzzies sizzle! Have the supervisor call the

candidate. Have the CEO call. Remember: We don't work *for* companies as much as we work *with* people.

If you can nurture these relationships during the offer stage, not only will you have an advantage over competing offers, you'll lessen the importance of comfort at your candidate's current job.

Bond with them, and ultimately, you'll land more of the best candidates.



## ***Trial Balloon Offer***

You can sometimes save yourself a lot of time by floating a trial balloon to see if your number one candidate really wants the job and would accept your offer.

A formal offer can often require multiple approvals and signatures, reference and background checks, and other time-consuming

paperwork. But why put in all of this effort if you're uncertain that the candidate will even accept the job?

Floating a trial balloon can prevent a lot of unproductive work: For example, communicate to your candidate that, "We're very interested in you, and think that your skills would be a great fit for our company. We believe it would be a great opportunity for you. What would your reaction be to a \$100k offer?"

This will get the conversation started. Now it's time for you to sit back and listen. You've just made it a little more "real" for them. Not only will you find out what they think about a \$100k salary, you'll also discover what's important to them, if they'll really relocate, and their thoughts about how they'll fit into your company.

With these revelations, you'll know if you should start working your offer through the formal channels...or not.



## Getting Acceptance

When you're recruiting and have found your ideal candidate, remember, extending an offer isn't the goal – *getting acceptance is the goal*.



Rushing an offer out the door, hoping for acceptance, isn't a winning strategy. It's understandable though. Sometimes hard-to-fill positions stay open for months. Once a top candidate is identified, you don't want to lose them.

Candidates may say they're interested in the job, but are they? After having more time to think about it? Find out. It takes very little time. Here are some questions to ask *before* extending an offer.

**Job:** Do they understand the job? Can they do the job? Does the job interest them? How does it compare to their current position – favorably, we hope – and others they may be considering?

**People:** Make sure that the candidate knows who they'll be working with, who they'll report to, and that there's good chemistry.

**Company:** Is the company and the culture a good fit for the candidate? Does it harmonize with the candidate's background and experience?

**Location:** This is a big one! If relocation is required, is the candidate ready to move? Is their family also ready to move? Have they thought it through?

**Motivation:** Be sure the candidate has a clear reason for making a change. What is attractive about the position you're offering? Does it fit into their future career goals? Do they have other offers?

Be attentive to the answers and the discussions you have around these topics. Consider what is said – or not said – and any issues that might be avoided.

If any red flags go up, be sure to resolve them before the offer is extended.

## ***Offer Letters: Get Your Offers Sent, Signed Quickly***

A watershed moment in the process of bringing on new members to your company's team is when candidates resign from their jobs. Typically, that doesn't happen until they have received and signed a formal offer letter. So, it's crucial to tighten up the interval between extending the verbal offer and getting the offer letter signed.



You may view the signed offer letter as merely a formal requirement, but often to the candidate, *it's much more* – especially if there's a perceived delay in receiving it. Your candidates may begin to doubt their decisions. They may wonder what's causing the delay:

- *Has top management balked at my vacation requirement?*
- *Has something at the company changed?*
- *Has my need for an occasional telecommuting day hit a roadblock?*

These are real and common concerns that candidates have. For these reasons:

- Have an efficient system for compiling and sending offer letters.
- Be certain that they accurately reflect your verbal agreements.
- Get offer letters into the candidates' hands as quickly as possible. If you can do it via email, great. If you need to send it by an overnight service, that works too.

- You should also check out e-signature services. The offer letter can be sent and signed in seconds.

Let your candidates know they need to get the signed copy back to you as soon as possible. After all, they've been considering this decision for weeks. If they need "more time to think about it" something else is happening, and the two of you need to talk about it.

Finally, if you'd like to take a little verbal "step ahead" in the process, instead of framing your written correspondence as an "offer letter," start out with something like, "This letter is to *confirm your acceptance*...."

It will underscore the verbal commitment that the candidate made, *and may help prevent a counteroffer*.

# Reference Checking

## Reference Checking Ideas

While the actual value of checking references can be debated, it's been a fundamental part of the employment vetting process forever.

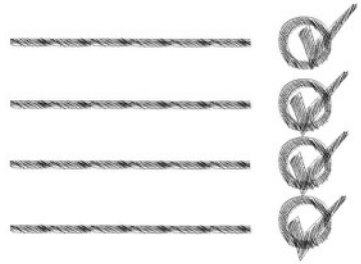
Ideally, if time permits, hiring managers should check references, especially if insight into a candidate's ability to do the job is being sought.

However, it's important to put reference checking in the right light by understanding both its shortcomings and how the process can often be put to better use.

First, understand that references only want to relay *positive* information about the candidate. The candidate under consideration has offered these references, so they will be inclined to have a positive attitude about the candidate, and that's fine.

It's best not to go on a fishing expedition looking for negatives. That causes undue discomfort for the reference and might cast your organization in a bad light. We've all made mistakes that we regret, so it's safe to assume that if you dig deep enough, you'll find something negative on everyone. A black mark in a person's past doesn't necessarily disqualify the candidate from becoming a standout in your company.

It's better to invest your time – and the references' time – more productively.



Use your reference checking as a way to learn more about the candidate, but from another person's perspective.

See what unique skills and talents the candidate contributed to previous positions. Maybe they were the “go-to” person in certain situations.

Try to discover how the candidate would complement your team if hired.

Engage references in a *conversation* instead of presenting them with a list of pointed questions.

Also, be sure your “reference checking etiquette” is beyond reproach. Get a candidate's permission before checking references formally *or informally* through your connections. Give the candidate time to notify their references that they'll be contacted. Also, be timely about the process. Try to reach out to references within a few days of notifying the candidate.

Finally, consider *emailing* a short questionnaire to references instead of conducting a phone interview. This could prove more convenient for the references – it eliminates phone tag – and they may offer longer, and more considered answers to your questions. It can also save you a considerable amount of time.

When conducted properly, reference checking should be both painless and productive.

*For your convenience, I've including my reference checking form in the appendix.*

# Onboarding

## *After the Offer is Accepted*

After spending weeks, maybe months, investing countless hours in reviewing resumes and interviewing candidates, you'll want to make sure that the number one candidate who's accepted the position doesn't *change their mind*.



While most professionals who sign an offer letter follow through on their commitment, don't assume that everything will go smoothly. Things happen.

Once the resignation has been tendered, your new hire is suddenly in limbo, a "Man without a country." It can be an uncomfortable position for them:

- Workplace "friends" may no longer be so friendly.
- Everyone begins to ask, "Why are you leaving?"
- The workday seems to never end.
- They're no longer invited to meetings, nor involved with future projects.
- Family members may resist change such as relocating, causing stress for your hire.

You want to make sure that your new hires don't feel like they're stuck "between a rock and a hard place."



## Paving the way:

- Find out when a candidate will tender the resignation and follow up to make sure that it happened. Share personal experiences you may have had when resigning.
- Stay in contact. Encourage company leadership and new coworkers to make contact via personal calls and emails. Crank up the neighborhood welcoming committee.
- Be ready with a plan if the current employer makes a counteroffer. Counteroffers come in the form of more money, promises of a better future, and appeals to one's emotions of guilt and loyalty.
- Invite your new hires to company functions that may be scheduled prior to their start date.
- Announce their addition to your team through a press release and on the website – with their permission, of course.

Remember, maintaining contact during the transition period is cheap insurance against repeating a search.

## ***New Hires – Fast Transitions***

When you've successfully recruited a new professional, the golden rule of start dates is:

**“Get your candidate on board as soon as possible!”**

By shortening the transition period, you decrease the opportunity for problems to arise, such as:



- Buyer's remorse.
- Counteroffers from the current employer.
- Competing offers from other companies.

Understand that people don't resign very often so they are unfamiliar with the process and don't always understand what is acceptable, expected, or the best way to proceed.

They often need a little coaching.

While everyone wants to leave on good terms, explain that there's never really a "good" time to leave an employer, and while it may be "nice" to give 30 days of notice, two weeks is generally accepted. Further, when they give notice, warn them that their old environment *may change*. There may even be hostility.

Help them refocus, stressing that your company has exciting projects waiting and that you would like them on board as soon as possible. Keep in contact with them. You want to replace any regrets they may

have about leaving their old position with enthusiasm about the new challenges and opportunities that await them.

Sometimes, their employer will release them the same day as the resignation, so let your new hire know that if they want to bump up their starting date to an earlier time, you can get it done for them.

Delaying a start date has its risks! Always try to compress the time frame of acceptance to start.

# Turndowns

## *Inevitable Turndowns*

When recruiting highly sought-after candidates, you're going to "lose a few." Assuming there's a strong recruiting process in place, and the company is solid, you should have many more wins than losses. However, the losses still sometimes occur.



You have probably experienced a few losses that were real heart breakers. It can be a frustrating experience, wondering what went wrong, and why someone turned down the offer. Sometimes, you never learn the *true* reasons behind a person's refusal. People will always do what they believe is in *their* best interests. Unfortunately, at the end of the day, accepting your job isn't always in a candidate's best interests.

A professional's career path crosses virtually every area of his or her life – financial, family, personal, and professional – and there are some things about themselves that people *won't share*. When you find yourself at a loss for answers, assess the hiring process:

- Was anything obviously wrong with the offer or the position?
- Would this have been a positive move *for the candidate*?
- Did it take too long or was contact lost along the way?

You can probably think of other salient questions you need to consider. Once you've touched bases with all the areas that you have control over, make corrections as required, but then let it go and move on.

There are always positions to be filled and more great candidates that will be considered. Continue putting your company's best foot forward and take pride in how the folks you've brought on board have helped propel the success of your company.

# Retention

## *Retention: Keeping Your Key Employees*

Breaking up is hard to do, and in business, when the breakup occurs with a key employee, it's also very expensive – in both recruiting costs and lost opportunities.



Replacing a key employee can take months. Reviewing even the “best” candidate often proves that there is no one who can just step in and hit the ground running. For these reasons, it's valuable to understand a few main motives that cause key employees to leave and then take proactive steps to prevent those painful losses.

- 1. Lack of upward mobility.** If your top employees recognize that the only way to move up is to move on, you have a problem. With communication and creativity, there may be ways to solve this problem. People often avoid change, but they do want variety.
- 2. Differences with management.** Some issues are fixable; some are not. Be aware of how well your key employees are satisfied with your company's management, culture, and environment. If problems fester, it may be too late to repair the situation.
- 3. Lack of appreciation.** This is one of the top employee complaints and easily fixed.
- 4. Lack of flexibility.** Just as companies change over time, your employee's lives will change over time. They may want to relocate to a different part of the country or work from home. They may want to

work part-time or flex-hours. The more that these changes can be accommodated, the higher the likelihood is for retaining them.

**5. Money.** Everyone wants more money, but unless the employee is underpaid, money is typically not a major factor in being dissatisfied with current employment. They may want more money, but it's not usually their prime motivator to change employers. However, if you are proactively generous with your compensation package and pay a bit higher than the marketplace might offer your key employees, you make it more difficult for them to leave. "Golden Handcuffs" can be very effective in retaining your top employees.

# Appendix

## Reference Check Form

Name:

Position/Title:

Company:

Working Relationship:

Phone Number:

Email:

1. What is your professional relationship to the candidate?
2. What was the candidate's job title and period of employment with your company?
3. What were the main job duties or responsibilities of the candidate's position with your company?
4. How would you describe the quality of their work?
5. How well does the candidate anticipate and solve problems?
6. How well does the candidate plan, organize, and accomplish their daily work?
7. How would you describe the candidate's written and verbal communication skills?
8. Is the candidate more of an individual contributor or team oriented? Why do you think this and can you comment on their interpersonal skills?
9. What are his/her strongest skills as an employee?
10. Did the candidate demonstrate good judgment and professional behavior?
11. What was the reason the candidate left your organization?
12. Would you rehire the candidate?
13. Is there any additional information that you would like to share about the candidate?