

Marketing Instincts

Human resources fundamentals for selection and recruiting (Lessons I have learned over the years some the hard way)

Over the last 28 years, I have been involved both directly and indirectly in virtually hundreds of hiring decisions, including many for executive positions. These human resources selection missions were for companies under my direct management and for client companies who needed my assistance in recruitment of key players. In this issue of *Marketing Instincts*, I am sharing hands-on practical advice for selection and recruiting. The essential points have been outlined below in a powerful list of ten fundamental principles. Applying them to your human resources recruitment missions should significantly improve your ability to hire the right candidates.

(1) Do you have a job description?

This does not need to be an elaborate document. A single page including job title, who the position reports to, simple overview of the position, and main responsibilities is enough. For senior positions the job description can be relatively general, but for junior positions it must have specific information on duties and tasks. Whether for a senior or a junior position, however, the job description document must give a clear understanding of what the job entails in plain English.

(2) Do you have an applicant profile?

This is a one page document that includes the key qualifications you are looking for in the ideal applicant: years of experience, specific skills required, level of education, job requirements, etc. The document may also contain the salary range and a brief description of the benefits and incentives (if any).

Most often, matching applicant skills with the job requirements will require some tradeoffs, so write down in a descending priority order the ideal candidate qualifications and personality characteristics. Specify what criteria are absolutely essential from your list of priorities.

(3) Who are you hiring? Is it a Managerial or non-Managerial position?

If you are hiring for a **Managerial position** (supervisor/executive/director), you must be particularly careful. Never rush. Always search for the right person.

Even if you are under pressure to fill a vacant Managerial position, resist the temptation to hire just to get it over with. If the “small voice” inside of you is not comfortable, DO NOT hire the applicant. Continue the search until you find the right applicant. As an interim solution, you can

always appoint an “Acting Manager”. Of course this “band aid” solution is not ideal, but years of experience have shown me that it is far better than appointing the wrong candidate.

If you are hiring for a **non-Managerial** position, you may occasionally cut corners. It is with reluctance that I make that statement, but I know that sometimes the pressure and demands of the “day-to-day” do not make for ideal conditions.

I differentiate between a Managerial position and a non-Managerial position because a manager will influence a department or a team, while an employee will more or less affect only the position he/she was hired for.

Example: If you have one weak player in a soccer team (11 players), you still have 10 strong players. If you have a weak coach or weak captain, the performance of the entire team will almost certainly suffer.

In summary, be very careful when hiring for a position of authority and leadership.

(4) What is the first priority?

The first priority is **integrity and ethics**. Never hire a candidate that you believe has questionable integrity and ethics. No matter how qualified and experienced the candidate appears to be, integrity and ethics are a must. This rule applies to the most junior position in the company just as much as it does to the President or General Manager. Do not cut corners in this critical area. You can train a person for the duties and tasks of the position, but you will have a very hard time changing that person’s integrity and ethics.

(5) Leadership ability or technical skills?

If you are hiring for a managerial position, **leadership ability and people skills** should be your second priority. [If you have already forgotten the first priority, go back to (4).] Technical knowledge is indeed important, but it is secondary to leadership skills. The main requirement is a strong ability to manage people and resources to achieve set objectives.

You can teach a person the “ins and outs” of your business (or industry or market) in due time, but you will find it very difficult to upgrade his/her people skills and natural leadership abilities.

(6) Consider the “stretch factor”

What is the “stretch factor”? This is the degree of “stretching” the applicant needs to do to get the job done. Perhaps the applicant is overqualified and can perform well without much effort. In this case, the very low stretch level may cause the applicant to be very comfortable with the new position. This quickly leads to loss of interest and may end with a rapid turnover. A very high stretch factor may cause you to destroy the applicant if his/her skills must be stretched too far to do the job. Try to strike a good balance between the two.

Here are some examples:

The manager of a team of 50 (directly and indirectly) may stretch successfully to manage 100 to 200 people, i.e. operations 2x to 4x larger, but may have difficulties adjusting to 500 or 1000 people.

Similarly, a manager that was responsible for a \$10M business unit may find it OK to manage a \$50M business unit (5x larger). A \$100M or more business unit (10x larger) may be too much of a stretch.

There is no rule of thumb for the right formula, but you should keep the stretch factor in mind when estimating the applicant's ability to perform for you.

(7) The five key areas to cover in selection and recruiting

These are:

- a) **Applicant details.** This includes the facts about what the applicant has done, in detail. For example, what were the positions held? Who did the applicant report to? Dates, responsibilities, span of management, etc. Look for stability, professional growth, promotions etc.
- b) **Applicant qualifications.** Assignments held, achievements, missions, challenges, setbacks, etc.
- c) **Applicant character.** This covers personality traits. Is the applicant an introvert, an extrovert, an analytical person, or a people person? Does he/she possess leadership skills, etc.?
- d) **Applicant fit.** Does the applicant seem to be a good fit with the existing team, with the company, with the immediate boss? How is the chemistry?
- e) **Others:** These include references, remuneration, career path and a three year plan. A thorough reference check is a MUST. Is the remuneration package motivating or is it a downward or a lateral move? Remuneration for a new position should always be higher. Does the position offered represent a forward step in the applicant's career or does it seem like a regressive move? Can the applicant continue to learn and grow for at least three years in the new position?

(8) Initial screening of candidates

An initial screening of candidates can be done through a review of the resumes and a quick **preliminary telephone interview**. Spend time with the resumes you have received and read between the lines. Make sure you check for gaps of employment, the style used, the presentation and the overall feel. This initial screening should allow you to organize the candidates into three categories. Category A contains the "must see", i.e. applicants who look qualified on paper and who meet your requirements. Category B consists of the back-up applicants for those in Category A. Category C is reserved for those whose qualifications are simply not adequate to meet the requirements of the position.

The telephone interview helps you refine your preliminary selection. This telephone interview should not last more than 10 to 15 minutes.

(9) The personal interview

- Prepare for the interview by making notes, jotting down the questions you want to ask, points of discussion, and so on.

- Prepare a favorable setting for the interview. You can do this by blocking your telephone calls and any interruptions. Put the applicant at ease and do your best to provide an atmosphere in which your candidate can relax and put his/her best forward.
- Do not talk too much during the interview. Take few minutes to put the candidate at ease, describing a quick overview of the job and the company and then concentrate on getting your questions answered. Get the candidates to talk about themselves. Resist the tendency to talk on and on during the interview.
- Ask all the candidates the same questions so that you can compare their answers. Use your checklist and make notes as you go along.
- Don't ask useless questions. Instead, ask closed questions such as why this and why that. For example, which company did you like working for? Why? What did you do in such a situation? And so on. Ask questions that can give you deeper insights into a candidate's thinking, probable behavior, and a feeling for how they act on their feet.
- Don't lose focus. Don't get into off-topic discussions that will not further your understanding of the candidate. Keep control over the interview process. While you want the interview to flow rather than become an interrogation, you must seek a balance and stay focused.
- Do not forget that Canadian laws prohibit discrimination in employment on the grounds of a number of criteria such as race, color, ethnic origin, sex, age, marital status etc. the list is long and keeps on getting longer. Check for updates on the HRDC website (Human Resources Canada). Be careful not to ask questions that might lead to discrimination. Employment decisions should be based on the applicant's ability to do the job and not on factors that are unrelated to the job.

(10) Make up your mind

Do not take too long to make up your mind. You can lose good candidates if you procrastinate. After you have taken the time to do your homework, decide promptly.

Selecting the right applicant is not easy. It is neither an art nor a science but a combination of both. The ten fundamental points that I have provided in this issue of *Marketing Instincts* will not instantly make you a star recruiter, but following them will certainly improve your success rate.

Hugh Latif & Associates
 Management Consultants and Corporate Governance
 135 Park Home Avenue,
 Toronto, Ontario, M2N 1W7 Canada
 Tel. 416.229.0520 Fax. 416.223 8849.
www.hughlatif.com

For past issues of Marketing Instincts please visit www.hughlatif.com