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How to Hire Great Talent – Three Critical Components and Traps to Avoid

Signs of economic recovery seem to be sprouting. Companies wishing to reinforce or grow their business must make smart and strategic hiring decisions today, in order to better position their companies to compete tomorrow. This is not an easy task. When Quorum surveyed Human Resource managers regarding the difficulty they have hiring quality executive talent, 92% said it was very difficult. So what must hiring managers do to make sure they are hiring quality talent? There are three critical components to consider, and a few traps to avoid.

The three critical components include: being very clear about why the position is important, and what it contributes to the future success of the company; direct involvement of the hiring manager, including leading the hiring process and being intimately involved throughout that process; and open and honest communication about the expectations and the challenges of the position among everyone involved in the process, especially the candidates.

Talented managers and executives have no interest in moving from a position where they are successful to one where continued success might be at risk. So why do talented executives change companies? In our experience, the single largest factor in an executive's decision to make a change from one company to another is what we call the "challenge/opportunity". Just as risk is associated with return, challenge is the flip side of opportunity. Over the last twelve years, the single most important factor affecting a candidate's decision to accept an offer from a client has been the significance of the challenges and the associated scale and scope of the opportunity.

Talented managers and executives are the kind of people who look for challenges to overcome and problems to be solved, and tend to have a deep desire to make an impact. To attract these executives, hiring managers need to begin by clearly explaining why the position exists within the company, as well as the positions' significance to the future success of that company. This responsibility falls squarely on the shoulders of hiring managers and executives. Human Resource partners can help frame this understanding, but they are not a substitute for the involvement of the hiring executive or manager. This leads to the second component of hiring quality talent.

To hire quality talent, the hiring manager must lead the process and be intimately involved throughout. Hiring direct reports is one of the most important responsibilities of executive management. However, once a decision to hire a position is made, hiring executives frequently turn the process over to human resources; effectively withdrawing from the process. It is common to hear HR professionals express frustration about the lack of involvement by their internal clients in the hiring process. It is just as common to hear line managers express frustration with the HR

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function for a lack of motivation, limited understanding, and mediocre results. HR professionals strive to provide quality service to their internal clients. That service can only be as good as the hiring executive's leadership of and involvement in the hiring process itself.

The candidate experience is directly influenced by the level of executive involvement in the hiring process. During the interview process, candidates frequently comment on receiving radically different explanations regarding the reasons, responsibilities, and requirements of a particular role. When hiring executives are intimately involved in the process, the reasons for the position are more likely to be clearly and consistently understood and communicated by everyone with whom the candidate comes in contact. Problems, contradictions, and inconsistencies must be identified and resolved quickly, making it clear to the candidate that the company speaks with one voice and everyone is in agreement about the importance of the position being hired. Most significantly, everyone the candidate meets during the interviewing process can discuss the position from their individual perspective. This is a clear signal to the candidate that the executive leading the process has taken the time to involve all interested parties and help them develop an understanding of how the position affects them.

The third critical component to hiring quality talent is communication. The hiring manager is the only individual who can make sure that everyone in the process is empowered to communicate clearly, openly, and honestly with the candidates. All candidates bring to the process an external view of the company and its challenges. Candidates often ask simple, direct questions about the company and its business, and get vague, evasive answers or worse yet, no answers at all. Opaque responses, evasiveness, or avoidance of the issues will leave the candidate with the impression that the problems are much worse than generally understood. Open and direct discussion of the challenges and issues helps to promote a better sense of the candidates' ability to address these critical needs. It also allows the candidate to formulate a deeper and fuller understanding of the challenges to be faced and evaluate the opportunities created by resolving those challenges. Most importantly, it conveys the company's desire and commitment to resolve the issues.

The hiring manager is also the only individual who can make sure that their HR partner has the information and background necessary to answer important questions from search consultants and candidates. It is the individual leading the process who sets and communicates the standards for the quality of talent to be hired. It is the hiring managers' responsibility to communicate this to everyone involved in the process, including the candidates.

There are a few traps hiring executives must try to avoid. The first trap is one of misunderstanding. The hiring executive must make sure that everyone involved with the hiring process, especially those developing and communicating with potential candidates, clearly understands what the hiring manager wants and why the manager wants it. To avoid the trap of misunderstanding, those

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involved in the process must be able to explain back to the manager his/her expectations in a way that confirms their clear understanding. The second trap to be avoided is the scarcity of time. All successful executives and managers have excessive demands on their time. As those demands change day by day, there is a pernicious tendency to delegate away tasks that can be “managed” by others, especially those softer, more indirect tasks that seem less directly associated with the “business.” Hiring executives need to remember that hiring their direct reports and the quality of those hires is one of their most significant responsibilities, and that precious time must be dedicated to that responsibility. The final trap involves compromise. Given that the position has real value to the future of the business then compromising on the quality of the candidate is not an option. If the hiring executive finds they are drifting towards compromise in an effort to fill a position, then the process must stop and one or more of the issues discussed above should be reviewed and corrected before continuing. Compromise on talent is like compromise on product quality; eventually you pay a price.

The war for talent is going to escalate. No computer, machine, or other asset has ever created a new product, opened a new market, solved an important customer problem, or started a new business. Leadership, innovation, and creativity fall exclusively in the human domain. This is why talented people are important; and why they are difficult to find and hire.