

Hiring? Make Sure the Fit Is Right

10 Things for Employers to Keep in Mind as They Pursue Top Talent

by Ralph Cutcher

Published: [February 25, 2009](#)

There's a popular myth that when unemployment is high and jobs are scarce, employers have their pick of talent. But reality is different, even in advertising, which is often on the bleeding edge of employment trends. Think about this: When times are tough, you want to keep your very best people, right? Well, so does everybody else. So the best of the best generally are not among those looking for new jobs.

And, of course, bringing in the best of the best is how smart businesspeople use a bad economy to build a competitive advantage. So even if you have your sights set on a few top performers, you can bet some other smart businesspeople do too.

This doesn't mean you can't get the best. You can -- if you focus on how you go about it.

The best people aren't just looking for jobs; they're looking for opportunities to exercise their talents in an environment where they feel they fit. We've all seen the statistics on where salary and compensation rank when choosing a job. What isn't as well-known is the importance of fit with an organization. In a recent survey, we found that executive-level candidates would not compromise at all on the issue.

The good news here is that you're not looking for just an employee, either. To build a competitive advantage, you need candidates who will make a real difference in your business, who will embrace the challenges and opportunities with enthusiasm and commitment. And if the fit is right, they are more likely to do just that. So it's important to get the fit right, both for your business and for the people you bring in to it. But how do you do that?

Here are 10 simple truths that can help. Pay attention to them, and your talent search can yield strong results even in a bad economy.

1. Talent is table stakes.

Look at the quality of the people and their fit with your company. More than ever, talent alone isn't enough to weather the storm. Marketing requires problem solvers, and the differences among candidates aren't as much in their skills as in their individual qualities.

2. The best experience is circumstantial.

Look for people who have been through the conditions that lay ahead of your business -- that's what is most important. Category experience and where candidates have worked is



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overrated. What's more important is how they have faced situations similar to what they will face with you.

3. You can tell a lot about a person from four simple attributes.

Look for courage, curiosity, thought leadership and persuasiveness -- they're the most important characteristics for marketing/advertising. People with natural curiosity are likely to show the leadership and passion needed for the early-adopter work common in this field. People with courage will not be tempted by opportunities to compromise on personal standards. And persuasiveness is a critical communication skill that cuts across all of the others.

4. Fit is everything.

Project candidates into your opportunity. Spend time envisioning how they would handle their responsibilities, their peers, your customers, your culture, and your processes and protocols. If you can't see them fitting, they probably won't.

5. Different solutions are right at different times.

Pause every time a role is open and evaluate whether it's a good time for something different. When people leave, inertia suggests that you replace them with someone similar. But maybe you don't need to. Maybe what you need is something completely different. So look at each position relative to your business, and don't hesitate to recalibrate your staffing.

6. Talent is attracted to talent.

Your current team defines the talent you can attract, so show candidates your best players. It's like building a football team: The best players want to know they can win with this team, and they'll look closely at their teammates and how they are treated to determine that. You may not have the team you want right now, but if you start with a few key pillars, you can build it.

7. Talent is attracted to authenticity.

Great talent wants to understand and internalize your values, humanness and realness, so let it show. Making a career move is risky. The best talent commit only when they feel a level of trust. That doesn't come from a job description and resume. It comes from understanding each other as people.

8. It's about selling.

It's never a buyer's market for the best talent, so you need an effective, well-rounded selling strategy for every search. Yes, it should include a well-written, compelling job description. And a plan for everything from how you reach out and choreograph the process to the content of communications.

9. Problems come in small packages.

Drill deep to find candidates' little deal breakers. As you do with any marketing challenge, understand the influencers in the candidate's decision making. Understand the unseen emotional issues. In the current real-estate market, for instance, relocation and heavy travel may be issues.

10. References are an often-overlooked gold mine.

Make references more than a routine. They can be key to helping you determine fit. Ask them to rate candidates against key dimensions and to project candidates into situations they will likely face in your opportunity. And by the way, you don't have to wait until the end of the process to do this. Sometimes engaging references early can create opportunities for deeper discussions with candidates.