

Recruiting and interviewing new team members - a guide

Introduction

From time to time, you may be called upon to help your client recruit new team members. This is a simple guide to interviewing and screening technical candidates.

Recruiting staff is a lot like selling a product. You have to market the role to encourage the right people to apply. Then you have to qualify the prospective employees by screening out the least suitable. Finally, you have to close the deal by selecting the best and offering them the job.

Marketing the Role

You need to think of recruitment as a **marketing campaign**.

Job advertisements have a profound impact on the kind of people who will apply. If you're looking for star Java developers, but your ad screams "cheap and cheerful", you could end up wasting a lot of time screening unsuitable candidates. Likewise, if your ad says "we need a star", but you actually need someone cheap and cheerful, a lot of candidates will end up disappointed.

Marketing a job is a lot like marketing a product. You need to know *what you're selling*. You need to *set the right price*. You need to target the *right audience*. And you need to *track your results*.

- o **Product** – What skills and qualities do they need to do the job? What kind of environment will they be working in? Be clear about what it is you're selling, and ask yourself "who would want this job, and why?"
- o **Price** – what is the market price for this kind of role? Do we want to attract better than average applicants? Should we pay more than average?
- o **Audience** – where will we find the right kind of people? What job sites do they use? What agencies specialise in their skills? What industry magazines do they read? What conferences do they attend?
- o **Results** – if your full-page ad in Computer Widgets magazine generated 4,000 totally unsuitable applications, you need to make a note of that so you can fine tune future recruitment campaigns.

Product marketing generates *leads* that sales people can follow up and – for a percentage of them – convert into real income. Job marketing generates *applications*, which recruiters must follow up and eventually try to convert into real placements. As a technical consultant, your expertise will be invaluable in wording the job spec. After all, it could be aimed at someone like you.

Screening the Applicants

Your marketing campaign may have generated dozens or hundreds of applications. You need to screen out the 99% that are least suitable.

To do this quickly, we suggest making a number of passes of all the applications, cutting out about 50% of the pile with each pass.

Start by scanning the front page of each CV for 2-4 seconds, and remove the most obviously unsuitable.

Take the remaining CVs and scan them in a bit more detail (maybe 5-10 seconds), and remove the least suitable from those.

Make as many passes as you need until you have maybe twice as many CVs left as there are people you'll want to interview face to face.

You should note that this screening process is often performed by recruitment agencies. If that is the case, you may find yourself entering the recruitment process again at this point.

Take the remaining CVs and read them in full. This might rule out a few of the remaining applicants.

We highly recommend that you perform one final, and potentially very effective, form of screening – telephone interviews.

Telephone Interviews: Best Practices

- o **Short & Sweet** – the whole point of a telephone interview is to save time – yours and theirs – by quickly checking if a candidate (and employer) is for real
- o **To the point** – get down to asking a handful of questions that are designed to quickly establish competence. This isn't a serious

technical test, and you don't want to check their detailed knowledge of obscure widgets. Just the basics will do.

- o **Courteous & Professional** – even for a 5-minute chat, make proper introductions, try to make the candidate feel at ease, and thank them afterwards – regardless of how it went

Remember that it is your technical expertise that adds value in the screening process. Someone who doesn't have your in-depth understanding will struggle to pinpoint the best candidates in a reasonable amount of time.

Selecting the Right Person

Finally you've whittled down the applicants to a handful of the best, and now you want to find out more about each of them. The best way to get to know people is face to face, so the next logical step is to invite them in for an interview.

What you do in the interview process will depend on how much of a role the client wants you to play. They may just want your input on the candidate's technical skills. Or they may ask you to handle the whole process, perhaps even making the final decision about who to hire.

Face-to-face Technical Interviews: Best Practices

- o **This is not about you!** First and foremost, remember that this is an opportunity for the candidate to show how suitable they are for the role. It's not an opportunity for you to show how good you are compared to them
- o **Ask relevant & open questions:** Technical questions should be totally relevant, and aimed at establishing that the candidate can do the job. Don't expect them to know everything, and don't ask obscure questions. Questions like "what do you think of AJAX?" allow more room to explore the candidate's knowledge than "What method of the Document object would you use to add a Text element?"
- o **Be welcoming & informal:** Try to put candidates at ease. Always make them feel welcome. Offer them a drink, and make sure the setting for the interview is quiet and relaxed. Some very capable people turn to mush when they're nervous.
- o **Sell the role.** It's important to remember that the selection process works both ways during an interview. You might think the candidate is perfect for your client, but they might think otherwise about your client being perfect for them. Don't oversell the role, though!
- o **Have a roadmap.** Don't let the interview ramble on. Make sure you cover some key points with every candidate, and keep on eye on the clock. An hour is plenty of time for an in-depth chat.
- o **One interview is plenty.** Some companies have several rounds of interviews, and candidates might have to visit them several times before they are offered the job (or rejected). If you can't figure it out in an hour, then you might not be the right person to be conducting interviews.

Finally, remember that – just like marketing – you are playing a numbers game. The more suitable applicants you get, the greater your choice for interviews. The more choice you have, the better your chances of finding the right person at the right price. Your role as a technical consultant is to skew those odds in your client's favour. Your knowledge and expertise means that you will be better at screening and better at selecting, and may do a better job of selling the role. This adds considerable value for your client, provided you don't abuse the trust they place in you and use the selection process to prove how good you are.

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