

Attracting and Hiring Top Talent

By Bob Cantrell

Attracting and hiring top talent is one of the most difficult and challenging aspects of running a fire protection company. This is largely the result of several issues, including the decreasing number of people entering an industry that is seen as less interesting a destination than other fields, in addition to an aging workforce. According to the *Segal Special Report*, "The Aging of Aquarius, The Baby Boom Generation Matures," a maturing baby boom generation and a significantly smaller succeeding generation (Generation X) is causing the aging of America. In 1980, half of America's workforce was under thirty-five years of age. In 2005, the midpoint will be age forty-one. The retirement age adult population (sixty-five-plus years of age) will increase 102 percent between year 2000 and 2030 (34.8 to 70.3 million).

Additionally, top graduates with industry-related degrees are heavily recruited right out of college by larger firms with appropriate leveraging capabilities to do so. This also does not leave enough quality graduates to satisfy the demand. Sixty-four percent of Generation X workers have an education beyond high school compared to 44 percent of baby boomers. Attracting experienced designers, estimators, project managers, or branch managers who are at the top of their games should therefore be proactively embraced. Having that top talent will have a compounding effect on your overall business plan.

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As the economy continues to pick up and most firms' backlogs increase, hiring qualified candidates will only become increasingly difficult. It is, however, still possible to find and attract top talent. It just takes a little more work, and you may have to examine some of the methods you're accustomed to using during the hiring

process. This process should be thoroughly researched, and best practices should be implemented sooner rather than later.

In its most simplistic form, hiring consists of three elements: 1) finding someone who has the experience and qualifications you need, 2) attracting them to your opportunity, and 3) getting an offer accepted. Each of the three elements has its own challenges and has accounted for numerous incidents of hiring the wrong person as well as missing the opportunity to hire the right person. On the other hand, understanding these three elements and using that understanding to your advantage can save you time and money while you search for top talent. Having top talent can put you ahead of your competition.

Finding the Right Person

Finding the right candidate for the job is arguably the most important and often the most difficult part of the hiring process. Look around your office today—you can probably guess who reads the classified ads or searches the Internet for a new job on a regular basis. Are they your top performers? Probably not. I have found that the top performers in almost any company are generally satisfied with their positions and are not actively seeking new employment. Very few positions, especially management-level positions, are filled through newspaper or Internet advertising. There are exceptions, however most of the candidates who respond

to this type of advertising are generally either unemployed, unqualified, and/or unhappy. There are more effective ways to gain access to the top talent you need.

The top performers who work for you now know others like themselves. Use this valuable resource. Your vendors also know people at similar industry-related firms, and

they may be able to lead you to a strong candidate. Be careful. Some of these approaches can lead to unnecessary gossip and can also lead you to those candidates who fall into the unhappy or unqualified category and are looking to make a move.

A more proactive and effective approach is to enlist the help of an executive recruiter who specializes in your industry and who can commit to an exhaustive search on your behalf. Before you put one to work on a search, check out a recruiter and his or her firm. Ask for a full description of their search-and-selection process, client references, and their annual numbers. Some firms have very low placement rates—placement of less than one professional monthly is not what you are looking for.

Sell Your Opportunity

Once you have identified a strong prospective candidate, you have to put effort into selling your opportunity. Gone are the days where the candidate needs the company more than the company needs the candidate. In those cases, be cautioned of the unhappy, unqualified types who will tell you anything you want to hear.

Your selling of the opportunity should start during your first communication with the candidate. This is often the most poorly handled and frequently overlooked element of the entire process. This is a shame too, as selling the opportunity consists mostly of asking questions about the candidate's career interests and showing how your company can fulfill those interests. It is important to look at a candidate as a long-term career employee instead of someone to fill an immediate need, and to convey this to him or her.

Of course, you are going to thoroughly test and reference check someone before you hire. The truth is that if candidates do not leave a first interview with more interest than they had when they walked in, you have wasted your time. I've seen the whole process die during this first interview with a candidate who could have excelled with a potential

new firm if the hiring authority would have done a better job selling his or her opportunity.

It is critical to remember that a top prospect is not desperate for a job. The good ones almost never are, regardless of market conditions. In this market, a sharp designer, estimator/sales, or project manager with a track record of success has countless options. Sometimes an employer will tell me, "I don't have to do any selling. Either they want to work for me, or I am not interested in them." That option is OK if you are satisfied with settling on a candidate who is a B- or C-level player. We have all seen examples of poor work ethics and job hoppers. Besides, while you sell the opportunity, you gain valuable insight into how the prospect thinks and whether or not you want to hire him or her. Bottom line is that, as the hiring authority, you are in that position as a result of your ability to sell your own attributes and your firm. Remember when you were selling on a

able to demonstrate one or the other of the following: saving their company money or making their company money. The candidates who can successfully understand how to do one or the other, or even better, both, and have a track record of success in this effort are the ones worth your investment.

A thorough interview process lets a potential prospect know you are serious about putting together a competent and successful team, and that you intend to make it a long-term career opportunity for the right person. Don't expect to accomplish all of this in one interview. Typically, two to three interviews are appropriate for most top candidates. Conduct more interviews than that, and you will probably miss out on the

attracting them. It is also critical to keep the momentum flowing during the interview process and not to leave the top talent in limbo while you are making a decision.

Closing the Deal

Closing the deal is the final component of making a great hire. Handled properly, this step can ensure that your newest addition starts off with a satisfied feeling and genuine excitement about beginning his or her new career. Handled improperly, you may end up with someone who has a less than enthusiastic demeanor, or worse. In 1985, a study by the Saratoga Institute claimed that the average mis-hire cost the hiring company \$15,000. More precise studies conducted by Bradford Smart, PhD (author of *Topgrading: How Leading Companies Win by Hiring,*

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Coaching and Keeping the Best People, Prentice Hall Press, 1999) and Geoff Smart show that over a two-year period, a typical mis-hire for a position paying a \$62,000 base salary can cost a firm \$840,000, or a return on investment of -300 percent (that's right, negative 300 percent!). This includes cost in hiring, compensation (all years), cost of maintaining the person in his or her job, severance, mistakes/failures/wasted and missed opportunities, and the cost of disruption.

If you have an indication that a candidate is motivated only by money, then extending a formal offer of employment will only be a waste of time unless the candidate is grossly underpaid. Most career moves are based on growth opportunities within a candidate's current company. This common or consistent culture/environment provides for a less stressful advancement than that of an external move. If you believe the candidate has the expertise and personality you need, then you need to recognize the "all things being equal, stay with what you know" rule. (If hard-to-get candidates cannot see an improved value proposition in an opportunity, they will more likely stay with what they know.) Do your best to prevent it from being exercised—an improved salary, normally within 5–15 percent, is an acceptable guideline based on your need and the candidate's comparative qualifications.

Successful hiring has become more difficult, and it will get worse before it gets better. Knowing now that this is due to demographics as much as it is to the fact that today's fresh graduates have many career options that appear more glamorous, as long as you are willing to put forth the effort to find quality candidates, attract the candidates to your opportunity, and make a competitive offer in a reasonable time frame, you can still close the deal! ❖

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bid, or to current or future clients? Use this same approach when selling to candidates.

During the course of this process, it is also critical to check out a candidate's work. If you are trying to hire a designer, have the candidate bring in or send you some drawings. For an estimator position, have the candidate do a take-off test of some projects he or she closed or has been involved with. You will gain a lot of knowledge about the thought process and expertise of the candidate this way.

If you are looking for a project manager, ask questions about specific jobs on which candidates have worked or with which they have been involved, and exactly what their duties were on the project. Look for those jobs that were on time and under budget—the ones that were transformed from losers into winners—and find out how that happened. Most successful candidates will be