

The Secrets of Hiring Top People Finally Revealed!

By Lou Adler

Consider this hiring puzzle:

Some companies have created extensive competency models, but haven't seen much difference in the quality of their new hires. Other companies have started top-grading, but also haven't seen much difference in the quality of their new hires. Still other companies rely on the tried and true behavioral interview and – not surprisingly – haven't seen the quality of their new hires increase by much. Then there are the companies which still use traditional job descriptions and gut feelings to make hiring decisions: believe it or not, they haven't seen much difference in the quality of their new hires either.

My sense is that we're spending too much money and too much time solving the wrong problem. While more accurate interviewing is important, it doesn't drive hiring success. Good jobs, good sourcing and good recruiting do.

Why do I believe this? Let me first offer a few observations from the past 25 years in the HR Industry. These observations are drawn from the over 2,000 interviews I've conducted over the past 25-30 years (I started doing this when I was very young) and my work with about 100 great managers.

Observation 1: Tony Robbins in his first book, *Unlimited Power*, suggests that modeling best practices is a quick way to become as good as the best. It's how he got started; training army officers to use a .45 caliber handgun in one-third the traditional time and with far better results. The point behind this is that all you need to do to hire top people is just copy what the best hiring managers and recruiters already do.

Observation 2: Employers of choice have an easier time hiring top people. As long as the jobs are challenging and the pay is fair, they just need to put a "help wanted" sign up, and the best will come running. But if you're not an employer of choice, you can't just do what they do.

Observation 3: The best people want to work for the best managers. The best managers invest the time to find and convince the best people they should be on their teams. They offer challenging jobs and personally commit their time to making their team as good as it can be. They can point to other top people already on the team as proof to potential new recruits that this is what they do.

Observation 4: The best people want a better job that challenges and stretches them. They want to earn the job, so they prefer a rigorous selection process. The best people get turned off by a manager or a recruiter who goes into instant "sales mode" within five minutes of the opening interview.

Observation 5: Recruiters are important. The best people need more time, more information, more convincing, and more hand-holding before they'll accept an offer. Frequently, the hiring manager can't do this all alone. If the manager is not one of the best, then the recruiter's involvement is even more important. Before they accept an offer, the best people need constant reassuring that the job opportunity is as good as advertised.

Here are some of the common things these best managers seem to do:

- They know the work the person is expected to do.
- They spend an extra amount of their time interviewing and recruiting the candidates.

- They have high standards of performance.
- They have a track record of hiring top people.
- They push their teams to excel.
- They're not always great interviewers (although they all think they are).

I had a chance to review the latest research conducted by the Corporate Executives Board's Recruiting Roundtable. Part of their research included a survey of about 100 major companies to determine the key factors driving candidate quality.

Two factors stood out above all else:

- 1) the quality of the job offered and how it's advertised, and
- 2) the amount of time recruiters and hiring managers spend recruiting the candidates they're targeting to hire.

Nothing significant stood out about competency models or behavioral interviewing.

In effect, whether you're an employer of choice or not, a company needs to offer compelling jobs and then be able to convince candidates that these jobs are personally worthwhile. A compelling job is, first, one that clearly describes what the person taking it is supposed to do to be successful. This is called job branding. It is not a list of skills and duties or a list of personal attributes. (This is called a boring job.) Second, your recruiter must be able to demonstrate that this job offers growth, challenges, and opportunity. This is called job matching.

Not surprisingly, this is pretty much what Marcus Buckingham described in his ground-breaking book, *First Break All of the Rules – What the World's Best Managers Do Differently*. He indicated that clarifying expectations upfront was the key to maximizing personal performance. This is done by clarifying expectations and then hiring people who are both competent and motivated to do this type of work. This is what job matching is all about. A recent Harvard Business Review article came to the same conclusions.

At a practical level, potential candidates must be able to quickly find these compelling jobs whenever they look. You need to go out of your way to make these jobs easy to find. You might want to use outrageous and extra long titles so they really stand out. Then, to really spice them up, tie some of the performance objectives in the job description to the company's strategy and vision. This is how you brand the job, even if you're not an employer of choice. By making jobs meaningful this way, top people will explore them.

It goes without question that the success of every sports team is directly dependent on the quality of its team members. That's why good coaches must first be good recruiters. The same is true in business. You can't be a good manager unless you can build a good team. The Recruiting Roundtable research clearly indicated that recruiting and convincing was a key reason why top people ultimately accepted an offer. They surveyed recent hires and discovered that the number one reason for accepting an offer directly correlated with how heavily they were recruited.

Early this year, I read a report that indicated we really don't have a volunteer army; rather, we have a recruited army. Surprisingly, those who simply joined the army were not the best soldiers. Those who had to be convinced to join were. In my opinion, building an outstanding team should be the number one performance objective on every manager's job description.

Here are the conclusions that can be drawn from all of the recent research on hiring. To begin hiring top people, you need to do these two things:

1. Write compelling job descriptions that clarify expectations. Describe the big projects the people will be working on and then tie these projects to the company strategy and mission. Making these jobs important and compelling is how you brand the job.
2. Make sure you hire the best recruiters you can possibly afford. Team them up with managers and make them collectively responsible for finding and hiring top people. All of the evidence indicates that recruiting is a core requirement to building strong teams.

Great hiring is the result of a perfect job match. A great job leverages a person's competencies, behaviors, energy and skills in exactly the right proportion. This is what drives the person to excel. Put a great person in the wrong job and you have made a bad hiring decision. This is why I believe competency modeling, top-grading, and behavioral interviewing don't yield the expected results. These techniques assume that competencies and behaviors cause great hiring decisions. The evidence seems to show the opposite — they're a result of it.

The cause of great hiring is not competencies and behaviors; it's compelling jobs, great recruiters, and committed managers. That's the secret.

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