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Get IT Right the First Time

How Smart IT Recruiting Can Save Organizations Time and Money

By Heinan Landa

In an industry that continually shifts and adapts to the latest innovations in technology, successful IT recruiting is as much art as science. Great IT professionals are hard to find and retain. IT professionals with superior customer service skills are even harder to find. Organizations with internal IT teams are well aware of this; organizations that outsource their technology and network management needs may know less about it.

Assuming the economy improves, the need to hire more IT professionals to expand companies' business needs, or to fill positions vacated over the past few difficult financial years, is paramount. If the economy worsens, companies will need to be even more particular about making sure the talent they have in any given position gives them the highest levels of performance. But how does an organization find the right people to helm the IT jobs necessary to further business needs?

What Organizations Want

Companies are looking for IT candidates with technical competence, service skills, and the mindset to keep their skills relevant to the needs of a changing industry. They are looking for candidates who will easily assimilate to their corporate culture and will stay at the company. According to JDA Professional Services Inc. (<http://www.jdapsi.com>), studies show that 78 percent of all IT workers will leave their company before their fifth anniversary, taking skills acquired and knowledge gained while at the company.

In addition, employee turnover greatly affects the bottom line. According to The Cost of Employee Turnover by William G. Bliss, employee turnover costs can easily reach 150 percent of the employee's annual compensation figure.

The problem, however, is that 45 percent IT employers say that they have open

positions that are difficult to fill with qualified talent, according to an article by News Report "IT Hiring Expected to Continue at Healthy Pace" published by Govtech.com. In addition, the article states that 53 percent of IT leaders agree that "finding and hiring needed skill sets" is a top industry concern.

Though the hiring situation may look bleak, companies can attract and retain the right qualified candidates for their businesses.

The Necessity of a Comprehensive Recruiting System

So what must an organization have in place to remain competitive in this recruiting environment? A comprehensive recruiting system. This system is necessary for a few reasons. First, the IT industry is fairly new when compared to other professional industries. IT doesn't have the kind of standards of practice that the legal industry, medical industry and accounting industry have in place. There is no IT equivalent for the bar exam, medical board certification or CPA designation. The "burden of proof (for competency)," therefore, rests with the IT professional's employer. That's why organizations need a sound way to vet IT candidates.

Second, the IT market is booming. The second half of 2008 remained a strong period for IT workers looking for jobs, as 35 percent of IT companies looked to enlarge the number of full-time, permanent employees through the end of December—and no other surveyed industry comes close to the growth that IT has planned, according to the article by News Report. This means that the competition for good candidates will be fierce.

A great recruiting system should have the following elements:

- **Clearly defined job requirements.** What will be required of the candidate on a daily basis? What technical skills are required?
- **Complete candidate search.** Perform a thorough candidate search. Being creative and making use of Web ads, television, alumni association lists, billboards, and trade journals will help to increase the number of job seekers.
- **Comprehensive interview process.** This should include multiple interviews with various persons within the organization. Make sure interviews help to identify technical competence, service skills and even cultural fit. Employing behavioral interviewing techniques is also helpful.
- **Structured vetting process.** This must be a consistent, unbiased testing system that is applied fairly across all candidates. It should also help determine technical competence, service skills, and possibly other work-related traits such as ethics and teamwork.

- **Final steps.** Make sure you have a system in place to ensure that the standard steps in the hiring process occur quickly and smoothly.

Note that although the number one factor in effective IT hiring and retention is a comprehensive hiring system, there are a few more ways to tip the scales in your favor.

Forward Thinking Recruitment and Retention Strategies

In addition to a comprehensive recruitment process, there are other things organizations can do to make themselves even more attractive to the right candidates. One way is to accelerate the hiring-decision procedure to quickly secure strong candidates. Second, companies would do well to review salary levels to ensure compensation packages are on par with industry standards, as lower-paying organizations risk a much higher employee turnover. Third, companies might even consider looking back to the dot-com era to discover some of the more effective recruitment practices, such as signing and retention bonuses or counteroffers. Finally, companies who reinvent or revive their corporate culture may attract more prospective hires, as many job seekers consider an organization's culture to be as important as their salary, a trend referenced in "IT Hiring Heats Up" by Katherine Spencer Lee, published in *Information Week*.

Organizations should also take care to note how to react quickly and thoughtfully to the applicant's needs, demonstrate interviewing flexibility, follow a consistent process, and follow up with an offer of further information and accessibility. Ensuring that hiring managers have a retention plan in place is crucial. More than 65 percent of the hiring managers surveyed in 2006 stated that their organizations did not have any instituted policies designed specifically for employee retention, according to the article by Lee.

In a July 2008 survey, 52.7 percent of CIOs cited that the ability to provide career advancement (46.5 percent) and employee retention (34.9 percent) were their top challenges, according to a report published on Cellular-News.com titled "Majority of Bosses Expect IT Hiring to Remain Steady in 2008." CIOs who want to retain their most promising employees will take the mystery out of career progression by working with them on individual career development plans. According to the Hudson Highland Group's "Retention Initiatives Report," IT employees are more likely to resign because of a lack of career advancement than for any other reason. Companies can trump the talent-retention wars by thinking on a long-term basis, offering competitive salaries and taking note of retention best practices. Investing in employees through training, offering involvement in stretch assignments and creative projects, and nurturing their career progression will help to keep the best workers in the company.

Last Word

The IT sector continues to expand and grow, which means increased competition for IT talent. CIOs should view staffing strategies as an investment; if hesitant about implementing their own recruiting and retention systems, they can always consider outsourcing the hiring process to a qualified IT placement service.

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