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High tech: How to hire new employees

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Hiring new employees at a high tech company doesn't need to be black magic. The legendary hiring practices of companies like Amazon and Google, where interview questions include, "How many gas stations are in the U.S.?" or "Why are manhole covers round?" are a great way to see the problem-solving abilities of job candidates.

However, this represents only one small part of the process. If your company's hiring process isn't formalized, then consider the following when interviewing new employees or contractors.

Phone Pre-Screen

I've seen many company HR departments receive a resume that looks good and schedule the candidate for an onsite interview without first qualifying the candidate's technical abilities. The best way to save everyone's time is to pass the candidate's resume to an employee, who would be the candidate's peer, for a phone screen.

[1]

Hiring by committee is a smart move in hiring high tech employees.

A phone screen should only last about 15-20 minutes. The employee, with resume in hand, should ask the candidate some questions about their technical knowledge and experience. I've seen job candidates argue during a phone screen and refuse to answer questions with statements like "Why would I ever need to do that?" and I've seen phone screens stretch out for more than 45 minutes because the employee and candidate "hit it off."

Hire by Committee

Hiring by committee is key to hiring a new employee that's the best possible fit for an organization. A job candidate should be interviewed in several sessions, which each last about 50 minutes. Each session should have a group of one to three employees who will either work as the candidate's peer, work for the candidate or be the manager of the candidate. Immediately after the candidate leaves the premises, all the employees who participated in the interviews should meet to discuss the candidate and then decided to hire or not hire the candidate through a simple majority vote.

Problem Solving

The most important part of the hiring process is to ask the candidate to solve problems. When hiring a Java, .NET, or C programmer, ask the candidate to write code on a whiteboard. Give them an example such reversing the string "To be, or not to be. That is the question."

Watch how the candidate tracks variables, structures their syntax, etc. When hiring an AJAX programmer, ask the candidate to outline a technique to send data from a web browser back to the server and into the database. You're looking for candidates who can solve problems without over-

engineering their solutions. Asking a candidate a trick question is a no-no.

Gauge Passion

When I worked for Apple, we used to ask job candidates why they wanted to work there. Having no experience with the company's products, services or technology, and not knowing any of the company's history usually didn't bode well for the candidate.

[2]

Joe Moreno writes about high tech issues.

At a small startup that's in stealth mode, employees should be passionate about the technology and tools they use on the job. In the world of computer programming, it is widely accepted that the difference between a great coder and a so-so coder can be a factor of ten in terms of productivity. Passion, more than experience, is the key to great employees.

Check References

Everyone expects that the references that a job candidate provides will give shining praise. However, that's not always the case and each reference should be checked. One question for the candidate's references should be, "Where did s/he have problems or need to improve?"

Social media websites are an excellent source for informal reference checks to gauge a person's "tone and attitude."

There's no need to "friend" a candidate on Facebook, but be sure to check sites like Google, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

Also, see if the candidate writes a blog. If most of his or her posts are negative and full of complaints, then this might give you some insight into their personality in addition to their written communication skills. As a side note: We should all use social media as another "weapon" in our job hunting arsenal and keep in mind that others are watching us – so put your best foot forward.

Coffee or Lunch

Once a job candidate is hired, you will have 250 opportunities to have lunch or coffee with them each year. If you never want to interact with a person, socially, then do you really want to work with them every day?

Communications

Always keep the candidate in the loop during the hiring process – especially regarding timelines for each step. It's ideal for a single employee to walk the candidate through each step of the interview process from the phone screen to the job offer or rejection.

The person who oversees this must have the fortitude to call a candidate and tell them that s/he was not hired – no specific reason needs to be given.

Sometimes a candidate is simply not a good fit. While Bill Gates, Steve Jobs and Larry Ellison are masters at running high tech corporations, these three people probably would not work well together.

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