

Selecting Winners - Six Steps to Selecting a High Performance Employee

What constitutes a good employee - a real "winner"? Many people think there's one profile for a position or one set of criteria cast in stone: "This is a winner." But that's just not the case. Winners are unique to your organization.

The criteria which make up a winner should be determined case-by-case, based on what makes sense and what works within your organization. For instance, if you have an outside sales force calling directly on customers, a winning sales rep is going to have a set of skills and abilities completely different from an inbound or telemarketing sales rep. So, what is a winner? A winner is a person who is successful in your organization.

Step 1: Developing a Profile

Developing a success profile is like painting a picture of the successful person. If you want to hire a winner, you must first have a clear picture of what success means for your particular position.

To begin, work backwards from the end result. In the selection process, the end result you're trying to achieve is to label a person a success: you hire him, he's on-board, he's contributing, and he's successful.

Two things must occur for you to label an individual a success. First, he has to be doing the right things. If he's not handling the tasks and demands of the job, you will never label him a success.

Second, he must do those things the right way. For example, you may know a person who gets the results you're after, but does it in a way that may alienate your customer. We've probably all known a customer service representative who answers the customer's question, but in a way that really turns the customer off.

Following this logic, the process for developing a success profile breaks down into two steps. The first step is to determine the what: what must the person do for you to label him a success? To develop your list of expectations, ask yourself: what must this person deliver to the organization in terms of results, outcomes, accomplishments and deliverables in order to be labeled a success?

Once you've determined what those outcomes are, the second step involves taking each desired outcome and determining the qualities or characteristics needed to accomplish those tasks and meet your expectations. For example, it may not only be important for a sales rep to have good sales skills. She may also need to be self-directed, organized and an excellent time manager.

It's critical to put your success profile in writing. The old adage, "I'll know it when I see it" just doesn't work. A concise description on paper of your expectations, and the characteristics necessary to meet those expectations, will guide you toward hiring talent - not enthusiastic interview behavior.

In summary, to paint a profile of success, first determine what a person has to "do" to be labeled a success. Then determine the knowledge, the skills and the abilities - or the qualities and characteristics - that he needs to meet those expectations. Once you make your determination, put it down in writing.

Step 2: Recruiting

The definition of recruiting is to develop a qualified applicant pool - to find the bodies you can consider for employment. This may be the toughest challenge facing your business today. There is just a lack of qualified people. Therefore, you have to double your recruiting efforts, and do it more intelligently. You just can't run an ad in the newspaper or a trade journal and assume that people will come flocking to your door. You need to be a lot more creative to generate a decent candidate pool.

Start by thinking, "Where are the people that I would like to attract sitting today?" For instance, how many of the people that you would like to attract are reading the classified want ads of your local paper? What are they doing right now? The following page offers some suggestions for alternative recruiting tactics:

- Work referrals. What always has been - and always will be - the best source of candidates is employee referrals. But you have to be proactive about getting employee referrals. Don't wait for your people to walk in and suggest other people who might be good candidates. On their very first day on the job, ask them, "Do you know anyone else whom you think would be successful here?" If you're proactive about soliciting names from your employees, you'll do much better.
- Consider working with a staffing service. In many cases, staffing services can provide a cost-effective alternative to recruiting candidates on your own.
- Try on-line recruiting. Today there are lots of places where you can post positions on-line. The good news is that in many cases there's no charge. Go to the career section of your favorite on-line service or web browser for ideas.
- If you want to advertise in a publication, focused technical journals make more sense than newspapers. The best place to advertise is where your prospects are reading. For ideas, find out what your current employees read.
- Recruit 365 days a year. If you start to recruit when you have an open position, you're recruiting reactively and you will almost always find yourself in a desperate mode. Be proactive about it. You think pipeline in terms of clients, so you need to think pipeline in terms of candidates for your jobs.

Step 3: Screening

Effective screening is a two-part process which will enhance the productivity of your interviewing time. A thorough screening process starts with a resume screen. Those candidates who make it through the resume screen should then complete a telephone screen before being invited in for an interview.

The resume screen

Screening resumes is a difficult part of the selection process because it forces you to make a decision about a candidate based on a piece of paper. So rather than trying to make a hiring decision based on a person's resume, you should only determine whether it is worthwhile to invest more time in that candidate. Here are a few guidelines for effectively screening resumes:

Look for trends and patterns of accomplishments, as opposed to individual occurrences. For example, if there's a single gap in a candidate's employment, it may be nothing. Remember, it's only one data point about that candidate. Look instead for a series of gaps in employment.

Look for results and behavior you think will be effective on your job. Look for patterns of accomplishments that are similar to those things they're going to have to do on your job. Read the resume in correct chronological order. Most often, resumes are written starting with a candidate's most recent job and go backwards. If you read a resume in correct chronological order, you'll follow that person through her career and be better able to detect patterns and trends: Has she picked-up new technologies? Has she absorbed those very quickly? If not, is there a pattern of her sticking with a position?

Give the benefit of the doubt. At this stage, you really know very little about a candidate. If you're undecided as to whether to include a candidate in your "yes" pile, give the applicant the benefit of the doubt. Use the phone screen to make your determination as to whether or not to bring the person in for an interview.

The telephone screen

Have you ever invited someone in for an interview, and in the first two minutes said to yourself, "Boy, this person is totally wrong. How did I get myself into this?" If so, think back: did you screen that candidate on the phone first? An effective telephone screen may be the most under-utilized tool in the selection process. A good rule of thumb is to never meet anyone face-to-face until you've first spoken with him on the phone. During this "mini-interview", spend a few minutes delving into one aspect of his background. Alternately, ask a few targeted questions regarding a particularly critical requirement of the position and get as much data as you can.

During the telephone screen, try to answer the question, "Is this someone I want to invest my time in and bring in for a face-to-face interview?" In a nutshell, you want to gather as much information during screening, to determine whether it is worthwhile to invest more time in a person.

Step 4: Gathering Data - An Effective Interview

The real key to making an effective decision is to gather enough data so you can make a quality evaluation. The majority of the information you gather comes from the face-to-face interview. As such, the effectiveness of your face-to-face interview is totally dependent upon the types and quality of questions you ask. High-quality questions should have four characteristics:

1. They should be easy to answer. The questions you ask ought to be focused and direct.
2. They should have only one answer. Instead of asking a general question like, "How do you deal with deadlines?" ask, "What was the biggest deadline you had in writing your last book? Step me through how you dealt with that deadline." The second question gives you specific information you can use to evaluate the candidate.
3. They should have a specific, planned purpose. The purpose of every interview question is the same: to gather a piece of data. So, if you want to know if someone stays current on the latest technology, a good question would be, "What technical journals do you read?" as opposed to, "What's the last book you read?"
4. They should be job-related. We all like to delve into personal issues, but you're always better off if you stay with topics that are very specific to the job.

While all good questions should have these characteristics, there are still several types of highly effective questions to use when interviewing. For the most part, they can be categorized into the following six types:

Factual questions

A factual question is one that provides a factual answer:

How many people report to you?

By what percentage did you increase sales last year?

What financial software package do you use?

The answers to these questions are very simple and straightforward, but they give you good information to build a case for whether or not the candidate will be successful.

Action questions

These require the candidate to respond with examples of actions they have taken:

How did you handle the last customer problem elevated to your level?

Step me through how you debugged that particular program.

How did you build your business plan for the roll-out of that division?

In every case, the person has to respond with a specific action they have taken. Remember, you're most interested in the candidate's behavior and how they deal with situations that are the same or similar to what they will face in the job. So ask them to describe that behavior.

Candidate-specific questions

These questions are tailored to the specific candidate and the specific situation:

What was the last deal you closed?

What was the biggest objection you got in that sales cycle?

Step me through how you overcame that objection.

These questions elicit very specific behavioral information. And most importantly, it's behavioral information that helps predict whether or not a candidate will be successful.

Specific questions work for two reasons. First, they provide more accurate information than general questions. Second, they are easier for the candidate to answer than generic questions. If you ask a candidate how she overcomes objections, she may not really know how to answer because it is such a broad question.

But if you ask her about a specific opportunity and about how she overcame objections on that deal, she doesn't really have to think about the answer. She's just sharing information about what she did, and you end up getting much higher quality information.

To re-cap, these candidate-specific questions are good because they require specific examples of behaviors, not just "sound good" theories. If your candidate can provide specific examples of past behaviors, chances are she'll exhibit those same behaviors in the position you have available.

Probing questions

These are follow-up, clarification and detail questions:

Tell me more about that.

Could you please be specific?

What do you mean by that?

Probing questions help you get the complete information you need, as opposed to just the information the candidate wants to tell you.

Examples

Ask for examples of things that are the same or similar to what the candidate will need to do on your job. For example, if you have a job that involves solving customers' technical problems, ask candidates for examples of how they've solved customer's technical problems in the past. If you are hiring for sales positions that require calls on Fortune 500 MIS directors, ask candidates for examples of how they've called on corporate executives in the past.

More Examples

Don't ever stop at one example - get two or three or four in addition. If a candidate can provide you with several examples, it will help you confirm the candidate's behavioral pattern. Then you can be fairly certain that's how they will behave when they come to work for you. Remember, past behavior is the best predictor of future performance.

Step 5: Data Verification

Conducting a thorough reference check is critical to a successful hire. This step is not optional. But, the nice thing about focusing on behavioral information in the interview - the things a candidate has worked on, projects she's done and how she's done it - is that this type of information is relatively easy to verify.

If you have a hard time getting references because nobody will talk to you, there is an easy solution: make it the candidate's problem. If you have a qualified candidate you want to pursue after you've conducted the interview, ask her for references. If you call those references and they won't speak to you, or if they say that all they can do is confirm the employment dates, go back to the candidate and say, "You need to find some people who will speak to me about the quality and quantity of work you've done." Put the burden of getting people to talk to you back on the candidate. Don't make it your problem.

To avoid fluffy responses during reference checks, ask pointed, specific questions like, "How many people has George hired? How many did he interview? How did he train his people? What recruiting techniques did he use?" These very specific questions allow you to confirm and verify the data you gathered during the interview.

Step 6: Evaluating the Candidate

Evaluating candidates should be the easiest part of the selection process. If you've done a good job up to this point, you will have gathered so much data and so much quality information that the decision will really be pretty easy.

When you are finished with the previous five steps, use a simple matrix to evaluate your candidates. Along one axis list all of the requirements you generated when you created your profile: the knowledge, the skills, and the abilities the person must possess to be successful. Once you have created your matrix, evaluate each candidate against the requirements - one at a time.

At this stage, you may be tempted to make an overall evaluation of a candidate such as, "Will this person be a good sales manager?" or, "Will this person be a good customer support representative?" These are hard determinations to make, because they're so vague and encompasses so many variables.

But answering a series of specific questions about each candidate, such as, "Does this person have good knowledge of Unix?" or, "Does this person have effective writing skills?" eliminates the need for broad evaluations. Instead, it forces you to think of the candidate in terms of the individual requirements that will lead to success. You developed your success profile for this position one step at a time; you should conduct your candidate evaluations the same way.

To substantiate your evaluation, you should be able to back-up your conclusions with the data you gathered in the interview. For instance, if your determination is, "George has very effective writing skills," you should be able to back that up with real data. Review your interview notes to see if George has written any brochures, ad copy, newsletters or anything similar. If he has, that's pretty good supporting data for your evaluation of his writing skills.

If you break your evaluation job into small requirements and then substantiate each evaluation with the data you've gathered in the interview, you'll find that hiring decisions become much easier.

Summary

An old proverb says that if you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there. The same holds true in selecting winners. The process outlined here is designed to serve as your "road map" for hiring a candidate who will be successful within your organization.

Six Steps to Selecting a High Performance Employee

Developing a Profile

- Determine what the candidate must do to be considered a success in the position
- Determine the knowledge, skills and abilities needed to meet your expectations

Recruiting

- Ask for referrals from each new employee you hire
- Recruit 365 days a year

Screening

- Read resumes in chronological order
- Conduct a brief phone screen before inviting any candidate in for an interview

Gathering Data - An Effective Interview

- Ask specific questions with a planned purpose

- Always ask for examples of behaviors, and use follow-up questions to clarify

Data Verifications

- Put the responsibility for getting references on the candidate's shoulders
- Ask pointed, specific questions to confirm and verify data

Evaluating the Candidate

- Use a simple matrix to evaluate candidates
- Back-up your evaluation with data you gathered in the interview

Hire Your Winner

- Following these steps will make your final hiring decision much easier

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