

Creating a Staffing Strategy that *Works*

Making the right hiring decision can determine whether you stay in business.

By Tim Ryan

Chances are you've heard the phrase, "Our people are our most important asset." Maybe you've even uttered that phrase yourself. Yet while most folks will agree with that statement, the decision to hire someone is often the least sophisticated one that small firms make. In fact, more time is typically spent evaluating the purchase of a new copy machine than on whether or not someone has the talent to be a contributing part of your team.

But as contradictory as that sounds – rashly making decisions about the most important asset to your firm – it's not that surprising. The subtleties of running a business are something that's rarely taught in law school or even undergrad business school.

When I attended business school, my studies taught more about finance, economics and marketing in the same way law school teaches would-be attorneys to understand, interpret and apply the law. It seemed to me that the teaching philosophy operated on the idea that we'd all go to work in a nicely sized corporate environment with resources galore to handle those problems for us.

The right staffing decisions can determine your firm's success.

But for the entrepreneurs who find their true worth in running smaller, leaner, more hands-on companies for themselves, decisions on who to select, retain and terminate very well could decide the future of their firm. Those critical decisions are often new ground for us. Some business owners have a good 'gut' and they can regularly pick winners for their team, though they may be hard pressed to explain exactly how they do that. For the rest of us, finding a way to increase our chances of making the right staffing decisions is a key to not just running a successful business, but staying in business altogether.

Experts say the cost of a poor hire typically drains an organization of 3 to 5 times that person's salary when considering all the factors such

as wasted management and training time, lost opportunity and adding "work-arounds" to normal processes in an effort to combat negative behavior or general inability.

Of course, that cuts both ways. Anyone who has a real difference maker on their staff will likely gush about all the work, headaches and costs their key employee saves them. Similarly, firms that want to grow know that a true rainmaker is worth his or her weight in gold and those that have true rainmakers on staff usually do their best to keep them happy and producing.

Getting it right.

So now, the million dollar question: *how the heck do we do this right?* The answer is actually quite simple: focus on behavior.

Behavior can be defined as what motivates a person, how they think, act and interact with others. By the time a person reaches the workforce, most of his or her behaviors are intact and not likely to change dramatically. Yet the amount of time many managers spend trying to coach and counsel negative behavior is staggering. Especially when you consider that most of that management effort is utterly wasted when it's lavished on low-end performers instead of invested on key players who deserve it. Plainly put, get out of the behavior modification industry and into the behavior selection industry.

It's all in the behavior.

Your top performers often demonstrate the ideal behaviors needed to successfully fulfill a particular role. Think of the person currently fulfilling a role – be it an administrative support person, an office manager or associate attorney – who you'd love to clone if you could. Then study the behaviors he or she leverages to be successful in that position. Ask yourself and possibly those that work closely with the employee: How does she act? How does she think? What motivates her? How does she interact with others? The descriptions will provide the 'blueprint' of the behaviors you need from anyone else filling that role. Once identified, focus on selecting people with those particular behaviors instead of trying to mold people without the right stuff to fit those descriptions.

Next up, you need to be able to surface evidence of a desired behavior in job candidates. To do that, compose open-ended, situational questions around the desired behaviors for the position.

Need top level client service? Ask a candidate to tell you about a time that he or she went the extra mile for a client. If he or she can provide



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a clear, specific example, they just may have what it takes to do the job well.

Need a rainmaker to help grow the firm? Ask a candidate to tell you about one or two of the out-of-the-ordinary clients they surfaced. Same rule applies here – those that actually have the right stuff will be able to come up with real examples of clients that were valuable.

However, if the candidate waxes on about how he or she “always does that” but then can’t really think of specific time when they did, then it’s just filler. It’s more likely that the person took an interviewing skills class rather than actually has the talent necessary to successfully fulfill the position.

And here’s the most important part of the equation. Don’t settle.

Be firm in your selection.

During the interview process, don’t settle for answers that lack substance or require you to infer meaning upon them in order to be a good answer. Ask multiple questions relating to a specific behavior and be willing to repeat the questions for candidates, but don’t interpret them (because all you will do is give them the answer that you’re looking for). Instead say, “However you want to take it,” and see if they can handle that. Talented performers will usually have no problem with that response while those that are less than the best will struggle with it.

Also, remember that it’s evidence of behavior you’re looking for, so examples from family life, school life or their social life often have the same value as examples from their work life. Someone who goes the extra mile for their alumni association or social club is exhibiting the same behavior as the person who does it on the job.

The hiring process can be tough. Know this: settling is a short term solution resulting in long term problems that, ironically enough, will only end up in terminating the lackluster employee and starting the whole process over, only more weary and with a lighter wallet than when you started. Don’t be so charmed by someone’s resume that you let it cloud your judgment on poor answers to behavioral questions.

Lastly, embrace the fact that there’s no bulletproof method for guaranteeing the success of any employee, no matter how thoroughly screened. When you do your homework on the front end to establish the behavioral blueprint and ask questions that zero in on those behaviors, you greatly increase your chances of success. To further boost those chances, generate plenty of applicants to talk to by soliciting referrals from employees and colleagues as well as posting ads online and in print. If you have objective standards on which to base your decisions as well as a steady flow of applicants to look at, you’ll be pleased to see that getting top level talent is very possible.

And that’s a much more effective strategy than interviewing only one person and then hoping he or she works out. Hope is one of the best things around, it just doesn’t make for a good staffing strategy. ■