

Tips on happy hiring

By Dan Brockett

Last fall a friend asked if I had a sample employment policy concerning drugs and alcohol that I could share with him, specifically one that would prohibit his new employee from showing

up to work drunk or high.

"Gosh I don't think I do, but why do you think you need one. Isn't it just expected that employees don't come to work under the influence?" I asked him. "It's like wearing pants. My boss didn't tell me I had to, I just assumed I should."

"Well" he replied, "there was an incident and I heard before I hired him he's had some problems in the past."

I thought but didn't say "And you hired him anyway?" After all, my friend is a bright, successful business owner.

When the whole story came out it had a familiar ring. A small employer who is busy loses an employee and needs to find a replacement yesterday. The employer wants someone with previous experience in his field because he doesn't have time to train.

The phrase I most often hear is "I need someone to hit the ground running." This phrase often puts me in mind of my hyperactive 4-year-old who sometimes literally hits the ground running when I put him down. If we added up all of the time we saved not training employees who were to hit the ground running, and subtracted all of the time we spent fixing problems, would we most often save time or lose time?

Back to my friend's hiring story: He asked around for a few days and finally heard of someone who apparently no one else wanted. My friend hired him on the spot and the guy showed up drunk (at 6 AM!) his third day on the job. My friend assures me that the other 2 days the guy was just fine.

First, let me assure you that an employment policy prohibiting this type of thing is not going to fix the problem. Second, when an employer uses this kind of hiring process, they are spinning the chuck-a-luck wheel and the odds of winning are decidedly not in his or her favor.

Bad hiring decisions cost time, money, and stress. In many cases you are hiring someone to come live with you and your colleagues



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for 40 or more hours a week. Do you want to live and work with someone who doesn't perform or is painful to be around?

Small employers are at a disadvantage when it comes to hiring because, generally, small employers wear many hats and that often leads to a lack of time, expertise, and effort in the hiring process. I would encourage you to spend some time and effort in improving this process; bad decisions and bad results happen when you are in panic mode. Start planning now for your next hire.

Who are you looking for?

Before you start looking for employees, decide who it is you are looking for:

- Hard skills specific to your trade
- Soft skills such as communicating or problem-solving
- Attitude, i.e., get along with others, avoid making excuses, react well to criticism.

- Aptitude, i.e., ability to learn, follow directions, understand. (Aptitude can vary a lot from job to job, e.g., someone with a high aptitude toward mechanics may have a low aptitude in communicating.)

- Work ethic, i.e., ability to get to work, being self-motivated and stable, etc. Stable. (Some might combine this with attitude, but I have met some folks with cheery dispositions who couldn't seem to get work done.)

This list is like a restaurant buffet; choose which ones you like the most (and are most important to you) and leave the rest behind. You cannot eat everything on the buffet.

You may consider several options (and combinations) for recruitment based on who you are looking for. For example, if you need technical or professional skills, you may consider recruiting through technical trainers, trade publications, professional associations, or headhunters. If you are looking for general labor you may place a help wanted ad, help wanted posters, try temp agencies, or use the Career Link.

Another idea to consider is personal recruiting: locating the right talent and selling the job to someone whom has proven themselves capable with other employers. I once recruited an employee at a convenience store who impressed me with his quick, capable actions in a vast sea of slow-moving sloths (his co-workers). I thought if he could succeed in that atmosphere he could thrive elsewhere.

Interviews/selection

Your screening of applications, interview questions, and selection process need to be based on the criteria you develop from the "Who are you looking for?" list above. In order to develop these criteria, look at the list and decide what are your top needs. A lot of employers will jump right to the hard skills section. I would advise you not to do that unless these skills are very particular to your work, very hard to find, or take a long time to develop.

For most general labor jobs, I will take a good attitude over good hard skills. It is far easier to train someone to do a task than it is to change someone's attitude. I have occasionally hit the jackpot when I have found someone with a good attitude, aptitude and work ethic that is missing hard skills. Many employers have overlooked them and they are easy to train and become a valuable employee.

There are very good people out there who are great for one job and terrible for another. A good interview question to sort out personality

types deals with work styles: Do you prefer working on a lot of things at the same time (multi-tasking) or working on something until you are done with it? You don't want to phrase these questions to tip an advantage to either answer. You need honesty, not the "correct" answer to your question. Many job applicants will tell you they are willing to do anything or that any opportunity would make them happy. Don't believe it. It generally won't last a week.

Once you have selected which qualities are most important to you, develop methods to screen people in or out. For example, if I am looking for someone who is stable, reliable, etc., I will look for people who seem to be able to hold down a job for a while. I have looked at many applications that list 10 or more jobs over a 2-year period; I'm generally not interested.

If attitude and ability to get along are important, look for clues from "Reason for leaving employment" and from interview questions like "Tell me about someone from your last job that was hard to get along with." You can even get at this by asking the opposite question "Tell me about your favorite boss/co-worker/teacher?" The real bad attitudes will jump right out at these types of questions by telling you how unfair everyone has been to him throughout his lifetime.

The best interviewers do a lot of listening and even leave plenty of blank spaces and pregnant pauses so that candidates feel compelled to carry on. This may feel uncomfortable at first, but you

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won't believe what will come out of some mouths when you get candidates talking freely and openly. One candidate told me he didn't really want to go back to work but his unemployment was running out!

Another told me he would be miserable at the job he was vying for but he needed something to tide him over. Others have confessed not being able to get to work on time regularly, not showing up for work (almost always someone else's fault), and various past misbehaviors. These responses have not come out due to brilliant questions, but from silence.

I often use written interview questions in combination with the verbal portion. I normally have them fill this out right before an interview. I use this because: a) it takes little of my time; b) a lot of people have someone else write their application or resume; and c) I get some extra insight into attitudes. These questions are short, simple, and open-ended and I don't generally make judgments based on spelling and grammar. (Examples: I like to ... Stress is ... When I have problems I . . .) You can tell based on these replies whether someone is self-motivated or needs to be given a lot of direction. Example: Do they run to the boss when they have a problem or try to figure it out themselves?

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I have read "The 25 most asked interview questions." They cover almost every question asked at an interview in one form or another and none of them would probably be new to you. I only ask five or six questions. What's important is to gear your interviews toward your criteria of most desirable traits or skills and spend most of your time listening.

Cautions

1. Avoid the temptation or expectation to find "mini-me." You cannot expect hourly employees to have the same level of motivation, commitment, and expertise that you have. Furthermore, you may find that having the same skill sets and personality types may be duplicative in your organization. You may also find that a different version of yourself can drive you crazy sometimes (anyone with children know what I'm talking about.)

2. The Friends and Family Plan. The problem with hiring friends and family (and other employees' friends and family) is when it doesn't work out. If you have to discipline or fire someone's family member or friend it can be painful professionally and personally. It is also difficult being objective in evaluating friends and family as employees. There is a reason many companies have a nepotism policy. Most policies resulted from serious problems.

3. Legal issues. I am not an attorney (although I would like to be paid like one). There are some questions you are not allowed to ask

in an interview. You can't ask if someone has been arrested, but you can ask if they've been convicted of a crime. You can't ask someone's age. You can't ask if someone is disabled. You can ask if they are physically capable of lifting if it required in the job.

Review the law or ask a professional after you develop interview questions.

4. Training. If you can't find the time to train new people, don't be disappointed when they mess things up. My preferred method of training is one task at a time. This can be difficult with a small group of people wearing so many hats, but the results tend to be much better.

In the end even the best human resource professionals sometimes get it wrong. It can't be avoided, if you do a lot of hiring, you will sometimes get a dud. One successful business I work with has a fantastic, dedicated staff. I commented to the owner that he must be wonderful at hiring the right people. He responded that he is not that good at hiring the right people, but he sure knows how to fire the wrong ones. Before you think him Machiavellian, consider his explanation: "I owe it to my customers, my associates, and even to the person getting fired to do the right thing. I can't let someone flounder in a job he or she is just not right for." ■

Dan Brockett is a Penn State education extension specialist in Venango County, PA.



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