

## improve your hiring process

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Biotechnology companies locate prospective employees in a number of ways: through advertising, job postings in strategic locations, professional recruitment and employee referrals. You know by now which system works best for you and your company. But even though you rarely have a problem recruiting a talented group of candidates for an opening in your company, you may have occasional disappointments. This can even happen to the top-tier companies. Sometimes a qualified candidate for a key position turns down an offer and walks away – which can indicate that it is time to fine-tune the hiring process.

I rarely see a company with a mechanism in place that ensures a consistent approach to attracting Biotechnologists. The hiring manager, even in well-run, efficient organizations that have established personnel policies typically determines recruitment, screening and interviewing processes.

If your process isn't consistently providing the results you want, take a look at three procedures that can typically be improved: qualifying applicants, interviewing and extending the offer. This column focuses on the three-stage process that occurs after you have located your talent. Here are some ways you can improve the odds that you'll hire the best:



### QUALIFYING APPLICANTS.

Screening a huge pile of applications to select a reasonable list of interviewees involves a great deal of work. This is when you physically sort through resumes and letters to find those that indicate an applicant who resembles the person you are looking for. If you've recently gone through this process, you'll recall that most resumes are too light, indicate too much experience or are completely irrelevant. But a handful will emerge as possibilities. It is at this point that many managers pick up the telephone and start talking to applicants.

**Cold calls.** When contacting an applicant cold, you can earn respect by asking if it is a good time to talk. If it isn't, offer to schedule the telephone conference at a more convenient time.

**Appointments.** Nothing tells you more about an applicant than setting up a phone conference for a specific time (such as 7:15 on a Wednesday evening) and then discovering that he/she is unavailable. Keeping up your end of a schedule like this is also a good way to demonstrate that you are not treating the applicant's interests casually.

**Appropriate questions.** Certain questions are meant for face-to-face situations and are not appropriate for a telephone interview. Go for detailed information about work experiences and their relevance to your open position, clarifying the resume as much as you can. Save "where do you want to be in five years?" and other hardball interview zingers for the next step. However, anything you can learn about the applicant's work habits and personality is valuable.

**Prospects.** Keep in mind that people referred by your colleagues or by professional recruiters may not be in the job market as aggressively as those who responded to your ad. With these prospective candidates, avoid the traditional "why do you want to leave your company?" question. Recruited candidates may not react well to this question because they are probably doing very well in their current company. They've been enticed to listen to the prospects for a new position, but they may have just a "toe in the water" until you develop a strong mutual interest. Don't derail this by lumping them together with ad respondents.

Some hiring managers express concern about telephone interviews and prefer to rush right into face-to-face meetings with their best applicants. In my opinion, this is a mistake. We've all seen terrific looking resumes that later turn out to be full of inaccuracies and exaggerations. Similarly, some first-rate people can't write decent resumes. Therefore, remain open to talking with a number of your applicants in advance – you'll find the time is well spent. The best search firms suggest telephone meetings with their prospective candidates for your post. It just seems to set the stage for a better face-to-face meeting when the time comes. It also helps to provide some course-correction for their search.

Many successful managers prefer two telephone meetings. They conduct a short introductory conversation to see how the personal chemistry feels and follow it up with a mailing of corporate literature. Another telephone meeting a few days later sets the stage for the interview day and provides much more detail for both parties. One manager I know asks candidates to call him back at a predetermined time of the candidate's choice. If that call doesn't come in as scheduled, my manager friend drops that person from consideration. This decision is usually the correct one.

## INTERVIEWING CANDIDATES.

Dozens of books describe successful interviews, both for the job seeker and the employer. Rather than rehash material that is already extensively available, let me offer some interviewing suggestions from personal experience in the Biotech industry.

**Welcome.** When candidates arrive the night before an interview, the best companies arrange for the hiring manager or a key associate to meet them for dinner or just to greet and brief them on events of the following day. If that is not possible, have a package of goodies – an agenda, articles or technical papers to review (corporate literature, for example) – waiting for them at the hotel when they check in.

**Ice breaker.** The person who has had the most contact with the applicant to date should be the first contact on the day of the interview. Avoid an intensive paper session in the HR department first thing in the morning.

**Interviewers.** Add interviewers to the schedule only when they have a solid interest and reason for being there. Nothing ruins an interview faster for a good candidate than an apathetic interviewer who keeps looking at his/her watch. Some companies line up six interviewers for an applicant and then conduct the same interview six times. Work with your group in advance to break down the information needed about the applicant, and ask each person to cover specific topics. Afterward, get together promptly, or write up interviewing reports to get the data back to the hiring manager.

If you are sure a colleague will not purposely torpedo the hire, it is sometimes a good idea to include a devil's advocate – an interviewer who has a different view of the department's needs or an internal customer your group has had a hard time dealing with. Do this only if your colleague is solidly on the team. You can gain some valuable feedback on how future relationships might play out.

It is vital to include a senior executive on the interview day, if only for 15 minutes. Good people need a taste of the company's vision for the future so they can understand what their own future there might look like.

**Your company.** Don't be afraid to do a little subtle selling throughout the day; the key word is *subtle*. Many small Biotech companies try too hard to sell candidates on their company, leaving the impression that everyone was wearing a velvet sport coat and suede shoes. On the other hand, some larger firms sometimes rely too much on letting the company's reputation sell itself. Remember, lots of opportunities are available for the truly exceptional candidates. Don't be afraid to remind them why your department is a good place to be for a science career.

**Extending an offer.** It is absolutely amazing to me that so many deals fall apart at the offer stage for minor reasons. This part of the process may be much more successful with a third party involved. A search firm, for example, usually has advance knowledge of a candidate's expectations and can pass along information that facilitates the transition from candidate to employee. Here are some ways to smooth out the offer process that may improve your ability to land the best people:

*Timing.* Don't wait until the time of an offer to ask an applicant about his/her current income. Although it is considered bad taste to bring up the issue of salary expectations before mutual interest is acknowledged, there is nothing wrong with asking about the applicant's current compensation, even as early as the first telephone contact. When it is time to discuss a job offer, you can recheck your information about the prospect's earnings and then ask about compensation expectations.

*Position.* Position your company as one that operates from a "first offer, best offer" philosophy, the way top-notch employers handle employment offers. If everything about the compensation package appears to be negotiable, the players can go back and forth forever which can give a candidate unrealistic expectations. On the other hand, if you appear to be completely cold and unrelenting about an offer, you could occasionally lose a good candidate over a very small matter.

If several people in your group are involved in the hire, arrange for the person best acquainted with the candidate to present the offer. Many companies make the mistake of passing the responsibility for the offer back to the Human Resources department. One of the strongest cards you can play might be the developing relationship between a prospective employee and his or her new supervisor. If you are working with an outside recruiter, consider asking that person to extend the offer. By this stage of the process, the candidate and the recruiter have probably developed mutual respect. If the candidate wants to reject the offer, it can be useful for the third party to ferret out some minor detail that might be corrected. Obviously this works only when you trust the headhunter's advice.

Rather than send out a letter of offer, use the telephone or a luncheon to present the details. Once you have a tentative acceptance, firm up the details with a letter of agreement. Although we like to think of professionals as the sort of people who don't play one firm against another, many an offer letter turns up on a supervisor's desk in a bid for a counteroffer.

### IN CONCLUSION.

After many years of studying this process, one fact has emerged for me: time kills deals. The longer and more convoluted the interviewing process, the less likely it is that the candidate will remain enthusiastic. Similarly, the longer the time period you give a candidate to decide upon an offer, the greater the risk that he or she will decline. After a positive series of interviews, a person usually has enough information about the job and the company to decide upon an offer within a week. It is a mistake to give prospective employees any longer than that.

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