COOKIES & PEOPLE:
Find the Recipe for Hiring Success

By Fred Ode, CEO/Chairman
The easiest part of baking is picking out the shape of cookie you want to eat. The easiest part of hiring is writing a job description. The only problem is — despite what some Christmas-cookie aficionados might argue — the taste doesn’t come from the cookie-cutter, and your day-to-day operations aren’t done by a bunch of bullet points and boilerplate. Finding the best fit for an opening in your organization isn’t just about what you need — it’s who you need. If you want to hire the best estimator, controller, project manager, whatever, always look to hire the best person.

Position-Focused Hiring

Understandably, employers usually want someone who can hit the ground running and do the job they were hired to do. Contractors have a specific vacancy or a concrete need in their organization. They identify what the position is, the duties and responsibilities, the desired skills, and a level of experience that will likely make them successful. They might even think to call out some “soft skills” and traits that will help them perform the job, like “critical thinking” or “interpersonal communication” or being a “self-starter.” But merely constructing a job description and looking for someone to fit it can cut success short.
Position-focused hiring can miss the best people, because it’s not aimed at them; it’s aimed at an “ideal candidate” who may or may not be the best addition for a company. For many reasons, hiring dominated by a job description might rule out excellent candidates — whether that’s because they don’t quite have the 5+ years’ experience required or because they’re turned away by how static the job sounds. On the other hand, bullet points can also pre-qualify a number of candidates who won’t be a long-term fit for your company. They might have the right education and experience but might be unable or unwilling to grow with the position as your needs change in the future. So how do you find the best person for the job? Look for the best person!

**People-Focused Hiring**

People-focused hiring doesn’t ignore the real, day-to-day needs your company has to get the job done — it simply recognizes that an organization’s first and foremost need is the right people. In Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don’t, Jim Collins looks at the common denominators that explained how top-performing companies escaped mediocrity and got to greatness. Surprisingly, Collins learned, it wasn’t that their CEOs came up with an amazing vision and led their people there; instead, they got the right people on the bus, in the right seats, then figured out where to drive it. Once the best people were on board — and the wrong people off — it became a matter of letting everyone thrive where they had the best chance to succeed.

People-focused hiring therefore doesn’t ignore basic qualifications. Your bookkeeper shouldn’t be helpless with numbers. But it does give weight to factors that a position-focused approach can view more as icing-on-top rather than as critical ingredients: cultural fit, character, aptitude, attitude and even passion, for example. These are things that you can’t teach and aren’t likely to appear mid-career. On the other hand, someone with above-average aptitude and the motivation to grow and be challenged continually can easily learn a few missing skills or a new software application, both now and in the uncertain future — all they need is to be empowered to flourish.

**Rethink Your the “Ideal Candidate”**

Moving from position-focused thinking to people-focused thinking might mean revising that “ideal candidate” job descriptions are always talking about. However you craft your actual job ads, the following are among some of the important questions to keep in mind through your recruitment and hiring process.

- **What are the marks of a “fit” for our culture?** Think about how your staff works together and when you’re working in your best flow as an organization. Is it important that they have a sense of humor? Do they need to be able to stick to their guns? Can
adapt and pick up the slack easily?

✔️ **What are the real non-negotiables?** A candidate for an internal CPA position who isn’t credentialed is a nonstarter. Your superintendents might have to be bilingual for safety reasons. What are the qualifications that you absolutely cannot budge on?

✔️ **What could a top candidate learn on the job if necessary?** Could the right candidate teach themselves your estimating software? Would you be willing to take someone outstanding who’s finishing their degree? Could you consider reimbursing for Spanish-language classes to land an otherwise ideal fit?

✔️ **How might I like an ideal candidate to be able to grow in the future?** Whatever plans we make for our company, we can never be entirely sure where the market, changes in technology and sudden staff moves can take us. Could your receptionist need to pick up a couple of HR tasks in the future? Do you harbor secret dreams of opening a second office and need someone to groom for leading it one day?

The ingredients that go into hiring the right candidate for your construction company can be a complex and subtle mixture. The last thing you want to do is limit your pool of resources and miss out on the best talent to move forward with your business.

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