

Not everything you know is wrong—but ...

Experts explode the HR industry's biggest myths

by Frank Sennett

After researchers recently concluded sitting up straight isn't nearly as good for our backs as we were told as children, we bolted from our chairs to ask several leading experts in recruiting and management to expose the worst pieces of conventional industry wisdom—and offer the following great advice to replace it.

Recruiters need spell-check, too

Most hiring managers and recruiters agree the quickest way for an applicant to derail his candidacy is to submit a résumé with spelling or grammatical errors. Attention to detail is of utmost importance, and a typo can indicate an unqualified candidate.

It's always amused us how this conventional wisdom is not a two-way street. Take a look at many of the job descriptions written by hiring managers and recruiters, and you'll often find poorly written sentences, slapped together with little thought and riddled with errors. And unlike most candidates' résumés, these job descriptions are displayed in highly visible forums such as job boards and a company's own Web site.

Cleaning up the grammar and spelling, presenting a strong WIIFM ("What's in it for me?") to your ideal candidate, and clearly articulating the job's responsibilities, benefits, and required qualifications are the best ways to win over your potential applicants. If you don't apply these simple standards, in-demand candidates may view your typo-riddled and ill-conceived job descriptions the same way you would a poorly written résumé: as unacceptable.

—Zoë Goldring and Gretchen Ledgard, founders of JobSyntax Inc., <http://jobsyntax.com>

Focus on needs, not wants

One of my biggest pet peeves in recruiting: Employers who focus on wants instead of needs. Let's take a recent Google ad for an administrative assistant: "BA/BS degree. Excellent academic credentials." Many of Google's job ads also include "Top-tier school preferred, strong academic performance required." But many of their positions (especially in recruiting) are part-time, or on contract through a temp-to-hire firm.

Many of their job ads also state "3–5 years experience" required. Does that mean anything over 5 is too much, and someone might be too old for the position? Top-tier school and a great grade point average also rule out many single working moms who are attending school. And who comes to mind when one thinks of who is attending the top-tier schools? Is it going to be Jamal from Metro, or Chip from Suburbia?

When I look at the current long-term unemployment rate and see that it is at the highest ever in history, I wonder: Do companies overqualify candidates by implementing requirements that have nothing to do with what the employee does? What is more important—sheepskin or proven abilities and accomplishments? How

many dynamic candidates did you miss yesterday because your job ad screens them out?

—Karen Mattonen, C.A.C., C.S.P., executive search consultant and trainer at Recruiting Standards Resources, www.recruitingstandardsresources.com

Dig deeper than keywords

Here's the biggest mistake: thinking you can find suitable résumés by looking at keywords. In technical fields, there are plenty of keywords, and savvy candidates know it. They fill their résumés with keywords—even if they're not suitable for the position.

Instead of looking for keywords, human beings (a.k.a. hiring managers) need to review résumés. They need to look for people who have worked in similar situations or are sufficiently adaptable to work in this situation.

People are more (and less!) than their keywords. And for any kind of knowledge work, tools expertise is generally easy to learn. Differentiating on keywords (tools) is differentiating on the least-important category of technical skill. Functional skills and domain expertise are much more important—and impossible to detect with keywords. Look for people who will fit the role, and who will relish that role.

—Johanna Rothman, author of *Hiring the Best Knowledge Workers, Techies & Nerds* (Dorset House), and *Hiring Technical People* blogger, <http://jrothman.com/weblog/htpblogger.html>

Prize enthusiasm over experience

Why do we hire people from other firms who have done their jobs the same way for years? Aren't we inviting them to bring their ruts and sour cultural milk into our companies? I've always believed that competency demonstrated over time is a ticket to "boring."

As a former executive for Disney and McGraw-Hill, I had much better luck hiring people who demonstrated enthusiasm for our culture and the industry we were in, whether or not they had ever done anything listed in the job description. Give me a fired-up person any day. I can teach them accounting or customer service. I can't teach loyalty and enthusiasm. Give me fresh hearts and minds and I'll give you better and more creative accountants and customer-service people (who will annoy the old fogies stuck in their smug and stodgy ways).

—John Hoover, author of *Bullwinkle on Business: Motivational Secrets of a Chief Executive Moose* (St. Martin's Press), and senior consultant specializing in leadership communications at Partners in Human Resources International, www.partners-international.com

Past performance isn't the best predictor

The worst piece of conventional wisdom in hiring is the idea that "past performance is the best indicator of future results." The idea that you can improve hiring by going out and finding people who have performed the exact same job at your competitor's compa-

ny sounds very simple. But in practice it creates distortions in the hiring process that narrow our ability to find quality candidates, and it's based on the lowest-common-denominator approach.

In assembly-line or entry-level positions requiring few skills, the ability to perform a job is easily transferable. Thus, the sandwich maker at Subway can easily go to Blimpie and replicate the success of making a sandwich. Hiring top sales producers, developers, executives, and middle management is not so easy. But because we can hire sandwich makers this way, companies often apply the same recruiting strategy across the board, with disastrous results. Knowledge workers succeed (and fail) for a variety of complex reasons. A top-performing salesman at one company is a bust 80 percent of the time they are hired away by a competitor. Is it the salesperson or the system which is to blame? Executives who are huge successes in molding one company often perform dismally at the next company they are brought in to fix. Whether NFL coaches or teachers in underperforming school districts, using past performance to predict future results leads to poor hires more often than it leads to bringing in a superstar.

So what's the solution? Apply a simpler formula: "Know Thyself." Companies that spend time defining who they are and what makes them great are better candidates for long-term hiring success. The opportunities at and organizational structure of a company are the best indicators of success for new hires. Unless, of course, you're looking for a tasty meat-ball sub.

—James Durbin, director of corporate communications at Durbin Media Group, www.durbinmedia.com, and *StlRecruiting* blogger, <http://stlrecruiting.com>

Don't rely completely on gut instinct . . .

"Recruiting is an art. A good recruiter can instantly tell if a candidate is a good fit."

Recruiters who believe the above are walking advertisements for the halo effect and typically are poorly trained in work design, have no formal knowledge of selection or assessment methods, and cannot spell validation—face, content, concurrent, or predictive. They may be able to describe behavioral-based interviewing techniques, but haven't the competencies to employ them, nor the disci-

pline to repeat them in the same way with every candidate and every position. But hey, that is just my opinion.

—Gerry Crispin, cofounder of CareerXroads, www.careerxroads.com

. . . but don't ignore it, either

Here I was working for a company that sold the practice of scientific selection and I was about to make a bad hire! I was hiring a global account manager who was perfect for the job according to behavioral interviews, personality assessments, and reference checks. It appeared to be the absolute terrific hire so I was excited about moving forward. So I made an offer and was negotiating terms when the evidence of a bad hire was before my very eyes.

The candidate wanted to have lunch to discuss her offer letter. As I sat across from her, I noticed a scattered, uncertain, nonempathic and, frankly, odd person before me. My blood went cold. Was this more revealing of her behavioral style than the scientific processes we went through? After hiring her and experiencing her in the job, the answer was yes! She was unprepared for meetings, scattered in managing customer calls, failed to listen to the person she was presenting to and, simply put, strange in her interactions.

I learned from that situation and have a new approach to hiring. Sure, I still include the assessments, the interviews, and the traditional reference work. I didn't lose faith in their insights. But I also always take a person out for a meal or coffee. There is something about eating food with a person that reveals their style. Also, their hopes and fears. The net here: Take them out to sup!

—Paul J. Gorrell, managing director of human capital consulting at Partners in Human Resources International

One-page résumés don't fit all

If you are a professional who has had several jobs and several successful career experiences, how could you fit all of that on one page? I recently gave some advice to a colleague of mine who had qualifications for a CMO role and he had his résumé squeezed onto one page. I know him and all he has accomplished and his résumé on one page made him feel like a lightweight.

—Regina M. Miller, founder of The Seventh Suite, www.theseventhsuite.com, and *HR's Brand New Experience* blogger, <http://blogs.bnet.com/hr>

Two hiring misnomers

1. Employment agencies provide a better caliber of employee (candidate).

Why is it that folks who get hired via agencies tend to leave faster as they are courted away a few years later by the same agency who placed them?

2. Newspapers are not the place to put help-wanted ads.

A Conference Board study advised that depending on the socioeconomic point of the ladder you are on, they can be a better place to find a job (lower-level openings).

—Mark Mehler, cofounder of CareerXroads

Banish lowball offers

A pet peeve that certainly ranks high on the list is employers who extend low offers to start the negotiation process in a highly competitive market. The logic, as it has been described to me, goes something like this: A manager (often relatively new at hiring) falls in love with a candidate. Along the way, the recruiter learns the candidate's wage history and expectations, calibrates it with current market conditions, and coaches the manager about an acceptable price point. Check—the desired amount is in the budget range. The candidate is primed to receive good news, and then the hiring manager offers well below the price point because he or she wants "room to negotiate." It's like watching the final tragic seconds of overtime in a basketball game where the deciding point is up in the air: he aims, he shoots . . . HE MISSES!

In the spirit of setting up the new hire for optimal retention, isn't it more efficient to approach the offer as a whole interaction that includes up-front discovery of needs, transparent calibration of company resources, and a resulting agreement on the number? Great candidates always have other options (especially in a competitive market), and the price of lowballing isn't just the loss of talent; it's also the viral negative effect of word on the street about how your company does business. Recruiting the next person gets more difficult as a result.

—Alise Cortez, founding partner of ImprovedExperience.com

Salespeople don't have to be extroverts

Conventional wisdom: The best talkers, or extroverts, make the best salespeople.

This advice is just simply not true. First off, extroversion is a style and should be

treated as nothing more than a style. Unfortunately, many people mistakenly believe that selling is about talking. Talking is one small component of selling, but listening is the greater asset.

In its purest form, selling can be reduced to qualifying. Qualifying a prospect involves determining their needs, budget, decision process, and time frame to purchase. These pieces of information are gathered through asking good questions and then listening to the prospect. Often times, those with introverted styles are more adept at gathering this critical information.

My advice would be to look at a salesperson's qualifying skills in the hiring process as opposed to their linguistic mannerisms. Watch for their ability to ask pertinent questions regarding the opportunity. Some candidates will be outgoing, jovial, and entertaining. And they will prefer to hear their own voice over that of anyone else in the room. At the end of the interview, they will have talked much and asked few, if any, questions. What did they qualify about the opportunity?

Other candidates will be more reserved and thoughtful in their responses and relaxed in asking the interviewer qualifying questions. We have observed some candidates who are so deft at qualifying that our customers didn't even realize how much information the candidate gathered during the interview. Information-gathering ability is the sign of a strong qualifier, whether they are gregarious and outgoing or reserved and serene.

—Derrick Moe, managing partner at Select Metrix LLC, www.selectmetrix.com

Play to natural strengths

My biggest pet peeve is the thinking that everyone can be "trained" to do every kind of role. It is this thinking that results in great performers being moved into roles that they are not intrinsically suited for. It ignores a person's natural strengths and treats them as expendable resources rather than true individuals.

—Gautam Ghosh, management consultant and blogger, <http://gauteb.blogspot.com>

Beware premature promotions

It's easy to get excited about energetic and enthusiastic people early on. But promoting them too soon is like killing them with kindness. Moving someone from manager to vice president without

preparing them for the increased complexity of the job is the opposite of good retention practices. I learned the hard way that people in the throes of their professional growth and development don't need visionary leadership as much as they need skilled day-to-day guidance from an engaged manager. Premature promotion is a fast way to lose a good person. Even if an ambitious and talented newcomer feels ready for the fast track, a wise leader will exercise patience in the best interests of the firm and the individual.

—Amy Friedman, founder and CEO of Partners in Human Resources International

Go beyond legal considerations

As a management labor and employment lawyer, I have a very general statement about bad advice. Too often, when an HR issue that has a legal dimension is raised, the focus is exclusively on the lawfulness of a particular course of conduct. By thinking only in terms of whether a particular action (e.g., terminating an employee under particular circumstances) is legally permitted (i.e., not prohibited), we may overlook two other equally important questions:

1. Are the benefits of the action outweighed by a risk that the conduct will be perceived as unlawful, potentially resulting in an economically unjustifiable costly legal battle?
2. Is the action a good idea?

The second question includes the first one, but in addition includes considerations such as the effect on the morale and productivity of other employees, possible impact on turnover, bad PR, etc.

—George L. Lenard, managing partner at Harris Dowell Fisher & Harris, L.C., www.hdfh.com, and editor of *George's Employment Blawg*, <http://employmentblawg.com>

Eliminate recruiting BS

Requisitions—Don't have anything to do with recruiting. They are a way to stay on the CFO's good side.

Job Descriptions—Don't have anything to do with the job.

Applicant Tracking System—Not only isn't the center of recruiting systems, it's the worst part of it.

Third-Party Recruiters vs. Corporate—It's a silly war started by corporate recruiters who are trying to justify their poor performance and TPR's who are trying to justify fees they don't earn.

Recruiting—Isn't about filling one position with the lowest cost candidate.

Customer Satisfaction—Isn't the ultimate measure of whether you are doing a good job, especially if you are a corporate recruiting department.

Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs—Isn't about expanding opportunity for more people, it's about giving bureaucrats a way to look like they care.

It's About the People—Bull . . . It's about the business.

So think about the following:

The offer is your ultimate control document. If you don't trust your corporate recruiting department not to waste time interviewing people the company won't need then you have a bigger problem than "time-to-fill."

Job descriptions should be about the job that needs to be done next year, not the job that was needed last week. By the time you have spent 90 days hiring the right person for yesterday's job, tomorrow's job still needs filling.

ATS is a commodity. Recruiting is about sales, and sales is about relationships. Customer Relationship Management is the right software for recruiting. It's easy to embed ATS functionality in your CRM to handle compliance issues. When it comes to selecting your system, focus on winning the relationship game, not making best friends with the CIO and general counsel.

You use the best resource that will produce the best results for the lowest price. If your corporate recruiting department can't hire someone after 90 days, and the position is critical to fill, it's cheap to put a TPR on it. And if you aren't proactively sourcing all the time, even in downturns, for the talent that drives your business, then every TPR you use when you get surprised by a new requisition for one of these critical positions is too expensive.

Recruiting is about driving the business forward. That means you figure out the positions that will make or break your company and you get the perfect person for that job.

And finally, if you really, really care about getting a more diverse work population, then partner with your lawyers to keep the bureaucrats at bay and go find great people where you wouldn't normally look. They are there.

—Jeff Hunter, director of talent strategies and technology at Electronic Arts, and *Talentism* blogger, www.talentism.com

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