

How to Hire the Right Person Every Time

Q I'm thinking of hiring an employee, but the last time I tried to fill a position, I hired and fired three people before one worked out. I don't want to go through that again. What can I do to maximize the chance of hiring a productive, successful employee the first time?

A Mike Guertin, a contractor in East Greenwich, R.I., and a regular presenter at DeckExpo, responds: Hiring isn't easy. Finding someone who is a good fit for your company takes time and effort, but having a defined process for evaluating candidates can ease the task — and minimize the risk of a bad hire. I break hiring down into stages that successively narrow the field of candidates so at the end, the needle points to a good match.

Start by creating a job description. It will give you a reference to evaluate candidates against, as well as help you write an ad. Ask yourself these questions and write down the answers. What tasks will the employee be doing? Does he or she need to be skilled or are you willing to train? If you want someone with skills, list the skills by importance. What personality traits and temperament are a good match for your company's culture? For example, are you aggressive and fast-paced or easy-going and personable? What level of responsibility will the job entail? Will the employee be under close supervision or left to work on his or her own? What wage rate does the position warrant?

If you already have a crew, ask them what qualities and skills a new hire should have. Not only will that make them feel valued, they'll probably have ideas you didn't think of. Also, being involved will help them adjust to the idea of working with someone new.

Get the Word Out

There are two main ways to find new employees: networking and advertising. Networking has a number of advantages. Candidates referred by people who know your company and what you are looking for have already been filtered. Plus, a network can uncover great candidates who aren't even look-

ing for a new job but may be ready for a move. Tap into your builders association, community organizations, your subcontractor network, building materials dealers, and your current staff's networks. I've had the best luck with referrals from current employees and from the outside lumber salespeople I deal with. The latter visit job sites all day long and so get to know the field staff of other contractors. They may also know of some small contractors who would be just as happy to get a regular paycheck and give up the paperwork that comes with being self-employed.

Advertising casts a wider net, so write an ad that will catch just the fish you want and leave the rest in the pond. The key is to be as specific as possible; the job description will help here. List the skills and experience you're looking for and the position's tasks and responsibilities. I alert applicants to what I expect them to provide, such as a resume, and what the process will be for hiring. Be clear on the checks you will make (background, criminal, credit, drug testing).

Once the ad is out and applicants begin to contact me, I go through three qualifying stages before I make a hire. At each one, I respond to all inquiries even if to say that I've decided not to pursue hiring the applicant. After the phone and formal interviews, I call applicants to let them know where they stand so they can move on.

Stage One: Vetting Ad Replies

If you use Craigslist or other online advertising, expect oodles of applicants. With Craigslist, I use the blind email function to avoid being inundated with phone calls. I can usually weed out 80 to 90 percent of the respondents just by evaluating their emails. The first thing to check is whether they are grossly over- or under-qualified. Next, see if they followed instructions. If you asked for a resume, did they send one? If you asked them to provide a phone number, did they? This is pass-fail and you shouldn't dawdle. It should take 30 seconds to three minutes to decide.

Leads that come from networking differ from ad leads. The applicants might contact me or I might contact them. In either case there is usually enough information exchanged through the people in the network that poor matches are weeded out. Most of the time, network leads move right to stage two.

Stage Two: The Phone Interview

Once I've winnowed down the initial responses, I hold a short phone interview to get basic questions answered and to follow up on things I noticed in the resume. Just setting

GOT A QUESTION FOR OUR EXPERTS?

Send it to *Professional Deck Builder*, 186 Allen Brook Lane, Williston, VT 05495; or e-mail it to prodeck@hanleywood.com.

up the phone interview is a test for ad applicants. I respond to emailed ad responses and ask to set up a 20- to 30-minute phone call. I let applicants know that we'll be reviewing their resume and going over some preliminary questions, and that if all goes well, we'll set up a time for a face-to-face interview, usually about a week after I've spoken with all the applicants on the phone. I ask each applicant to call me at the time we agree on — it's amazing how many don't call or call an hour or two late with an excuse.

Before you start asking questions, be aware of employment laws in your state. Questions about age, physical condition, health, marital status, number of children, weight, height, race, national origin, citizenship, arrest record, religion, and organization affiliation may be illegal. Sometimes it's a fine distinction between what's legal to ask and what isn't. For example, you might be able to ask about convictions, but not arrests. One way I get around that is to ask applicants if they'll have any trouble with a criminal background check. Often, those who have had legal trouble in the past will volunteer that information in response. I'm not a lawyer, though, so avoid problems by checking with your state employment office or your attorney for guidance about what's legal to ask.

After introductions, I ask a few simple questions and some open-ended ones:

- We generally work from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. Will you have any problem working this schedule?
- Will you have any trouble making it to work on time and staying the entire day?
- Describe any safety training you've participated in.
- Why are you considering leaving your current employer?
- Describe your skills and the building projects you've worked on.
- What about this job appeals to you?
- What questions do you have for me?
- What tasks listed in the ad do you like the doing the most?
- What tasks do you like the least?

Do not record the conversation unless you tell the applicant you are going to do so and get his or her approval. I prefer to take notes; I include my impressions as well as notes on the applicants' responses — otherwise, it's easy to forget who said what. Before closing out the interview, tell the applicant what the next step will be.

Stage Three: The Formal Interview

I hold face-to-face interviews with just four or five candidates. Structure the interview schedule so you won't be interrupted. Also have your key production staff person (crew chief, production manager, or lead carpenter) interview the candidate for 20 to 30 minutes, either tag-team style with you at the office, or on a job site at a separate time. Involving your staff vests them in the process and the new hire, and can provide valuable insight.

Develop a bank of questions for you and your production person to ask. You can search the Internet for other ideas, but some common ones are:

- Tell me about yourself.
- What are your strengths?
- What are your weaknesses?
- Why do you want to work here?
- What do you like about this industry?
- What are your wage expectations?
- Describe the skill training and certifications you have.
- What do you know and what have you heard about our company?
- What interests do you have outside work?

Give the candidate opportunities to ask you questions, and look for clues for follow-up questions you can ask. I like to hear candidates ask about advancement opportunities and job security. These questions usually indicate that someone is serious about a career and not just looking for a job to pay the bills.

Take notes during the interview. Once you've interviewed all the prospects, it's decision time. Gather up your notes, rank the candidates based on your criteria, and make a selection. This isn't always easy. I once ended up hiring two people when I was only looking to hire one. ❖