Experience is Not What You're Looking For

Skip Graham   Follow

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OK, not exactly. Where a person has been, and what they've been through, is somewhat relevant to where they might go. But, for the sake of argument, let's say that it's not the most important thing. Or, let's say that a person's experience shouldn't be the basis by which they are measured. Hear me out.

Imagine you're in a leadership position setting out to hire an important management role for your team. Unless your company operates differently than most, here's what usually happens.

You contact your HR or talent partner to let them know you need to fill a position on your team. Either you provide a job description, or HR dusts one off from existing inventory, from which a final job requisition is created, usually complete with a job summary, a responsibilities section, and a list of experience requirements. The req routes through some approval process and it's off to the races.

Here's a typical example of a job posting for a Technology Director — it's an actual job posting but with some generic masking.

Join our team and get away from corporate life as you know it. We are a top-notch operation with main offices in Anywhere, USA. We have a progressive culture and we are looking for a rockstar. Please read carefully.

Job Responsibilities

- *Implement technology to make our operation more efficient.*

- *Diagnose and resolve issues*

- *Train our employees on all the software we use including MS Office, Netsuite, BigCartel, Amazon Web Services (AWS) and other proprietary software.*

- *Oversee the design and maintenance of our corporate website.*

- *Manage and maximize our SEO and PPC campaigns.*

- *Always look to improve our operations through employing technology.*

- *Help with office operations when needed.*

Requirements

- *7+ years of experience managing a technology team.*

- *5+ years of experience managing the development of enterprise applications in Java.*

- *Understanding of HTML5, CSS3, and .js frameworks.*

- *Experience managing budgets of up to $25 million.*

- *Experience with IT security, SOX and PCI.*

- *Experience managing server co-location and offshore infrastructure.*

- *Experience managing remote and offshore teams.*

- *Excellent communication skills, verbal and writing.*

- *Degree required.*

- *Demonstrable interpersonal skills.*

We are not looking to fill a position. We need a person who isn't afraid of big challenges and who can rise to any occasion.

Please review the job description closely. Do not apply if you don't have the skills or the work ethic required. We will only accept the best, hence we don't want to waste your valuable time, or ours.

Once the job is posted to the corporate careers site, and maybe gets picked up by some aggregate search sites like Indeed or SimplyHired, the wait begins. The internal recruiter might set up some time with the hiring manager to conduct what is commonly referred to as an intake meeting. A stock questionnaire is often used to clarify top candidate attributes and what keywords to focus on. Unfortunately, this same recruiter is probably managing a workload of at least 15 other open positions and a plethora of process responsibilities like scheduling, reporting metrics, compliance, background checks, etc. The requisition usually becomes another line item on a long to-do list.

The Review

As the wait continues and as time allows, the recruiter may review resumes that come in from applicants and forward any prospects who look like a match to the hiring manager for initial review. If the manager is responsive, the recruiter may conduct phone screens of a few matching candidates to verify work history, relevant experience, current status and compensation, and then pass these notes along to the hiring manager. Interviews are set up, a handful of people on the team are scheduled to interview and some form of post-discussion & vote is held to see if the candidate meets muster. If not, the recruiter may or may not find out why.

Sound familiar? It should, unless you work in an organization with an exceptional talent acquisition process and you've gone much further down the road than most. Granted, there are variations on the theme, but the core process is well ingrained and has endured despite mediocre results.

I said all of that to say this (and attempt to get back around to my original point).

Managers are so conditioned to create and rely on *experience-based* job descriptions that they will rarely even look at candidates through any other optic — either you have a specific matching experience in your background or you get passed over. Sadly, many recruiters exacerbate this behavior through the methods they use to search, which are usually keywords from the job description or ones that have been provided to them by a manager. And now, automation in some applicant tracking systems won't even let resumes in the gate unless they surpass a keyword matching threshold of a certain percentage. Ugh!

There's likely not a more authoritative voice on the subject of performance-based hiring than Lou Adler, but it's not an entirely new concept. Exceptional executive search recruiters leveraged these concepts long before books were published on the topic, but Adler has provided easy-to-understand concepts that should be followed. I'll start here.

It's What You Can Do, Not What You Have!

Shouldn't we be assessing candidates on what they can DO (ability), not on what they HAVE (experience)? Just because someone has experience working with a specific technology, or managing a certain sized team, or has a specific degree doesn't qualify them for a job. Isn't that the easiest concept in the world to understand?

Why would any company design a recruiting process that rules out candidates, who may be top performers by the way, just because they don't fit into a predefined skills and experience box? If Adler's data is even near accurate, this method has no hope of reaching more than 10% of the total candidate market. Not only are you missing lots of people qualified on the experience requirement due to the boring job description, but you don't come close to touching a vast population of performance-qualified candidates. Are companies really writing job descriptions, or are they writing people descriptions? When you look at the job description specimen above, doesn't it really define a person?

Doesn't it say "you must be…" and "you must have…" more than "you must DO…" — in fact, it doesn't say much at all about what a person needs to do.

What's The Candidate Thinking?

Let's look at it from the lens of a prospective candidate. Does the language in that job description promote an opportunity and challenge? Does it help render a vision that says "if I take this job, this is what my first year would probably look like. It's a move up, it's a challenge", etc? No, it doesn't. This presents big problems if you want to hire the best possible candidate.

Next time you have a need to fill an important role in your organization, consider these things:

Instead of dusting off the old stock HR people description, consider investing a little time in really constructing a success profile for the job that describes what a person will need to DO in order to be successful. How much experience do they need? Just enough to do the job. Too little and they'll fail — too much and they're bored.

Instead of stating "*7+ years of experience managing a technology team*", consider saying something like, **"Manage a team of ten software engineers — five who are in Bangalore, India — and grow the domestic team by 15% in the next 12 months."** Instead of stating "*experience managing budgets of up to $25 million*", consider saying **"manage a $17 million budget where you will be expected to find reduction synergies of 10% by moving the entire offshore development team onshore over the next 18 months."**

Here is another great residual benefit you'll get from writing great job profiles where performance objectives are clearly stated. You'll not only attract better candidates, but you'll provide your team with an interview guide to assess candidates effectively, and you'll eventually provide your new hire with a clear onboarding plan. Amazing!

And one more benefit, as if this isn't enough. By profiling your jobs based on real performance requirements, your search partner and internal recruiting team has a platform from which to sell the opportunity, not just a job. To borrow one more Adler concept, shouldn't great candidates be attracted to what they can become just as much,

if not more, that what they can get? If not, then you're probably looking at the wrong candidate, which is how we got here in the first place.

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