

Successfully Acquiring Information Technology Professionals

Your organization needs to embrace technology more fully in order for it to grow and possibly even survive. In order to do this, your organization will need to acquire talented information technology (IT) professionals, either through hiring an employee or using an outside firm or consultant. Hiring technical professionals is difficult because in many cases the candidate will know the technology better than the interviewer. An understanding of what is required is necessary. Many times an organization does not know whether they need a full time employee, a part time employee, or an outside contractor. Even so, that does not preclude an effective acquisition campaign. This article contains tips on what an organization (large, medium, or small) needs to know so that these IT professionals can be acquired effectively. Hopefully, technology sophisticated business owners or hiring managers who need to add new technical persons for their organization will find this article beneficial. Technical Resource Group (TRG) recommends the following:

1. Evaluate where in your organization a technical professional will fit best.

Peel away your organization so you can get a clear sense of your needs. For example, does your organization primarily need a Web site developer and operator who could work off-site and on contract, an office fix-it techie who could be on-call, or a programmer or network administrator who must be full time and based at your organization? If you are not really sure what you need, strongly consider hiring a fee-based technology staffing expert to help your organization pinpoint pertinent issues and recommend a short or long-term solution. If an outside contractor is desired, the organization needs to interview the contractor the same as a full-time job candidate. An organization needs to identify and clearly define the technology deficiencies that exist in its organization or specifically where technology improvements need to be made. Before acquiring the IT professional, a clear job description should be written and an hourly rate or annual salary should be determined.

2. Make sure your technology professional can implement change. There are scads of technical wizards available, but that does not necessarily mean that their skills will apply to the organization. One element of an organization's hiring process should be an examination of what an applicant has done in the past. Have the candidate explain in detail how he or she was beneficial to their employer. Ask the candidate to talk about how past projects fit into the organization. Find an individual who will build a bridge between their technical skills and the organization's needs.

3. Have candidates show you documentation of their work. Technology is terrific, but it is of significantly lesser value if you do not know how to use it or how it is put together. Make a point to have technical candidates show documentation from prior projects so that you get a feel for their documentation skills or have them explain on what they used to document their previous engagement. Obviously, you or others within your organization need to know how to use the solution they implement. Moreover, there is no guarantee that the technical person who designed what your organization uses is going to stay at the organization forever. This means someone else will likely have to learn from the documentation left behind, if there is any. There are many cases where an organization desired to terminate a technical person but could not because the technical person was never asked to or never created the necessary documentation for a replacement to use. Do not be held hostage by your technical resources. Make sure that they can document effectively.

Successfully Acquiring Information Technology Professionals

4. Make certain your organization hires a person with people skills. The stereotype of a technical person is that they toil away in solitude in dark basements, cannot communicate effectively, and do not look professional. This may be acceptable when an organization's information technology is operating as it should. However, if a major technical problem occurs, your organization will want to make sure that their technical professionals can work with others to deal with concerns and get things up and running.

5. Make sure the technology professional has broad expertise. Specialization can be effective, but you will likely need someone with a wide array of technical knowledge and philosophies. A focus of expertise with a particular product or platform can prove a problem should a technology professional be forced to cope with a product or platform with which he or she is not familiar. If someone comes from one particular culture, it shapes their approach to problem solving. Familiarity helps with quality.

6. Map out the candidate interviews strategically. After your organization has a pool of candidates, via advertising or a recruiting agency, do not just walk into interviews and ask the candidates to talk about themselves. Here are several specific tips for an effective interview process:

a. Keeping Current - Ask the candidate to address the issue of keeping current on technology. Technology changes at lightning speed. Have the candidate spell out precisely how he or she keeps abreast of new technologies.

b. Levels of Communication - Have the candidate talk at both a layman level as well as over a layman's level. Any technology specialist should be able to explain concepts to the most rudimentary of laypeople. He or she should also be able to operate at a degree of sophistication that the interviewer cannot reasonably hope to understand. Consider splitting the interview in half, one with the owner or human resource manager and another with a technology professional who can converse at a much higher level.

c. Different Image - Do not look to acquire an IT person in your own image. A rule of thumb for any hire is not to hook up with a clone, someone who thinks just like the interviewer and does just what the interviewer does. Indeed, the greater the differences, the more a hire may contribute to your organization. Pay particular attention to this concept when doing any technology hiring.

d. Difficult Situations - Ask the technical professional candidate about a time when something went wrong at a previous organization. You want to know how he or she handles difficult situations.

Successfully Acquiring Information Technology Professionals

7. Move quickly. Once the IT needs of your organization have been decided, it is critical to act quickly. Assuming the organization's staff or hiring partners have identified one or more qualified candidates by reviewing resumes and phone calls, it is in everyone's best interest to move forward with the interview and offer process quickly. If you like someone and take a month to send them an offer, in most cases that person will not be available. Today's talent "pool" has changed drastically over the last few years and the "pool" is more like a puddle. With IT hiring levels at or near pre Y2K levels there is a "war for talent". This is coupled with the fact that federal mandates have cut foreign worker visas by over half in the last few years and there is a 30-40% enrollment drop in IT and computer science degree programs throughout United States universities. A quick interview and offer process not only assists an organization in securing top IT talent but it can also directly translate to improved business processes overall. The longer a position remains open, the more existing IT resources will have to take on in order to keep pace with existing demands. Slow hiring can lead to worker overload, lower employee satisfaction, and higher turnover.

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