You Have an Opening— Now What?

When you have a staff opening, take the time to think about the kind of person you want and what you can offer that will attract that kind of person

By **Allison F. Dolan**

One of your best Web designers has just quit. Or your help desk manager's spouse has just relocated 500 miles away. Or your mainframe programmer has decided to retire. What do you do now?

Before you dash to a Web-based job board and post a job description requiring a clone of the person leaving, take a deep breath and spend at least 60 minutes thinking about (and writing down) an analysis of what kind of person you should be looking for and what you have to offer such a person. Although in today's market you can probably find people easily, the extra effort to think clearly about what kind of person you want to hire will pay dividends in the long run.

Some Misconceptions

Let's talk about some misconceptions about the hiring process and how you might approach things differently this time.

■ Misconception: All that matters is salary (or stock options).

If you listened to the media three years ago, most IT staff were mercenaries, hopping from job to job and getting big bucks with each move. Well, not only have times changed, but that was not an accurate description even then. In research regarding what motivates people, pay is typically no higher than fourth and more often lower than that on the list. (This assumes that pay falls within the market range for that position—and market range can be about 7 percent below the median salary.) Stock

options are now quite low on most new hires' wish lists. And, yes, there were many people getting big increases as they moved from job to job, but many of those same people are now looking at jobs with much lower salaries.

■ Misconception: Hiring is about finding the right technical skills.

Everyone wants people with experience in specific areas. Sometimes hiring managers wait months to find people with the right skills, when, in the same amount of time, they could have hired lesser skilled individuals and trained them. Research in this area suggests that a person with a basic ability to learn can pick up a new technical skill fairly easily (measured in months). You can also look for clues that will make the learning curve easier. For example, in the early 1990s, the Windows NT operating system bore a striking resemblance to Digital's VMS. As a result, a Digital VMS system administrator could learn Window NT system administration much more quickly than could a DOS support person.

■ Misconception: Hiring is *only* about finding the right technical skills.

Sometimes a résumé looks too good to be true, listing all the right technologies and experiences. When you bring the person in for an interview, something bothers you, but you can't put your fin-

ger on it. Very often, this is an indication that the person may not be a good fit from a nontechnical perspective. You want someone who has the right technical skills, true, but you also need someone who can work effectively with your existing team. This means you first need to understand what kind of person works well in your environment. And you need to be careful that you don't narrowly define "what works" by looking only in a mirror—good teams have a certain amount of diversity of thought. For example, if proactively sharing information is a critical success factor in your team, you not only want someone who is responsive when asked, but someone who recognizes when others might have an interest in knowing without asking.

Take a hard look at your team. Get

them together (or talk to them individually) and find out what they like about working in the environment and what bothers them. Observe the physical space (Do people work in the open? In cubicles? In offices with the doors perpetually closed?) and outward behaviors (When do people get to work? When do they leave? Do they eat lunch together? Is the dress code extremely casual?). If your team interacts directly with customers, what expectations do the customers have for your team? After you have asked yourself these kinds of questions, you should have at least an informal profile for your team. You can use this profile to ask some open-ended questions during the interview, such as "Tell me what you liked the most and liked the least about your previous work environments."

■ Misconception: Hire for ability, not for skill.

The opposite of looking only at technical skills is the view that, with training, any person can do any job. Considerable research into adult learning shows that, after about age 18, a person has a good deal of "wiring" that is very difficult to change. You need to be clear in your own mind about what kinds of skills you seek and what competencies or abilities might indicate an ability to learn new skills.

Some personal attributes are unlikely to be developable (or the time and effort needed to develop those skills will far exceed the return.) For example, if you need a person with a high energy level, you should recognize that low-energy candidates probably won't succeed in converting to a high-energy approach—changing from low energy to high energy is a very difficult change (some would say impossible). Other characteristics less able to be developed include ability to learn, flexibility, bias for action, stress tolerance, and tenacity.

■ Misconception: Interviewers can wing it when asking questions.

A successful interviewer has a prepared list of open-ended questions to encourage candidates to talk about their past experiences in a structured way. Although some interviewers like to pose tough questions to see how a person thinks
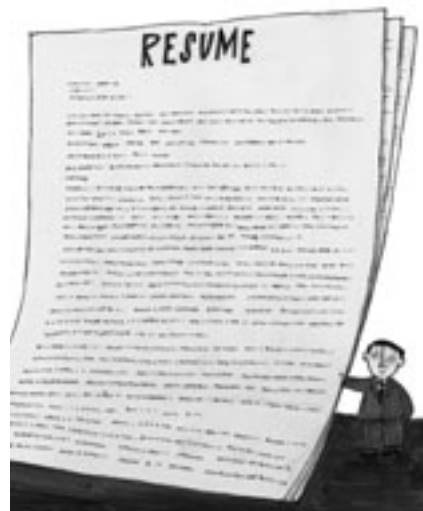
(such as "How many gas stations are there in Chicago?"), stock questions (such as "Where do you see yourself in five years?"), or off-the-wall questions (like, "If you could be a cat, a dog, or an eagle, what would you choose and why?"), often you learn more helpful information by getting the candidate to talk about his or her past. After all, the probabilities are that people will behave in the future pretty much as they have in the past.

Variations on this approach are known as competency interviewing or behavioral-event interviewing. It is extremely helpful to have a set of (8–10) standard questions that you use with all candidates. (Failure to use the same questions with all candidates could, in some circumstances, suggest discriminatory hiring practices.) Some generally useful questions to consider follow:

■ We've all had times when we had to say "no" to a customer. Tell me about a situation where you had to say "no." What did you do? What was the result?

■ Describe a project or idea that was implemented primarily because of your efforts. What was the idea? What did you do? What was the result?

■ If you are working on a team, there can be times when others' priorities conflict with your own. Tell me about a time when you had to deal with priority conflicts within your team. What did you do? What was the result?

■ In the IT realm, priorities often change. Tell me about a time when you had to adjust quickly to a change in team, departmental, or organizational priorities. How did the change

impact you? What did you do?

■ Tell me about a conflict you had with a coworker or your supervisor. What was the nature of the conflict, and how did you address it?

■ Tell me how you went about learning your most recent new technical skill.

■ We've all made mistakes in the past. Tell me about a situation that you would have handled differently.

In addition to questions about past activities, asking some questions related to motivation can also be effective. Such questions often help determine if the person will be a fit. For example, "If you think back over your past work assignments, what characteristics did you like the most? Like the least?" "If you think back over your past bosses, what kinds of things did they do that you considered most effective? Least effective?" For a successful hire, you want the candidate's positive characteristics to be present in the job you are offering. If you have the negative characteristics present in the job, you will want to talk candidly about those topics before considering an offer, in case those factors are show stoppers for the employee.

■ Misconception: The goal is a 100 percent match.

Sometimes a hiring manager will provide a laundry list of technologies to look for and won't consider any candidate with fewer than all of them. In many cases, however, a person who is a 100 percent match quickly becomes bored with the new position—they develop a "been there, done that" mentality. Of course, you don't want to hire someone who will fail, either. However, if you hire someone who isn't quite a perfect match (perhaps 80 percent), you are in a better position to offer some interesting or challenging new work while hiring someone who can meet the needs of the position.

■ Misconception: Success in IT jobs depends on an IT degree.

Many job postings start with "Required: B.S. in computer science." Right off the bat you are hampering the search—unqualified people ignore the requirements and send in their résumés, and otherwise qualified people are often conscientious enough not to apply. Unlike

engineering or medicine, where formal schooling is a perquisite to success, in IT formal schooling does not correlate with success. Rather than leading with the degree, talk about the attributes that you associate with a degree: Follow through? Ability to learn? Time management?

Start Fresh

This is your opportunity to build your team, to bring in needed skills, and to add new ideas and new perspectives to your environment. Set aside the old misconceptions and preconceived ideas with which many of us approach the hiring process and spend some time in careful reflection and planning. If you do this groundwork, the payoff will be a successful hire who is a good fit with the team and for the institution. *e*

Allison F. Dolan (adolan@mit.edu) is Director, IT Staff Development and Resource Management, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. See her team's Web site at <http://web.mit.edu/IS/competency>.

Additional Reading

For a provocative look at the manager's role, including staffing, consider *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*, by Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999). This book is based on years of Gallup research. Among other findings, the authors identified 12 questions that correlate strongly with retaining the staff you want to retain.

The sequel focuses more on personal skills and attributes, including a novel test to see what strengths you have: *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, by Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

Emotional Intelligence by Daniel Goleman (New York: Bantam Books, 1995) provides a broad look at the kind of behavioral competencies that correlate with successful interpersonal interactions.

For more a more traditional look at staffing, consider the training and development company Development Dimensions International. With roots in the competency movement, they offer solid interviewing and selection tools, as well as leadership development resources. See their Web site at <http://www.ddiworld.com/>.