Ascentii

The Nine Deadly Sins of Hiring:

IT Professionals in Particular

By Jonathan Poe

Summary: Hiring highly competent people is never easy. Common employment traps can easily undermine the search for talent. To improve recruitment of competent employees, CIOs use a systematic approach.

As business organizations focus on strategic partnerships and customer needs, IT organizations will (re)evaluate ROI strategies. As IT/business collaboration matures, organizations will incorporate more balanced performance investment approaches. Since 2004/05, scenario planning has formed the basis of balanced value/innovation programs that manage dynamic technology investments and enable organizational agility. In 2007, 25% of Global 2000 firms will dynamically assemble, restructure, and dissolve virtual teams on demand.

Hiring is a nerve-racking task. Increasing globalization, business pace, and technology complexity intensify the demand for more talented individuals and executives. Several recent academic studies show that 40% of all business hires end in firing or resignation within 15 months. Several business studies also point to a diminishing pool of executive talent. At the same time, the nature of IT work is in flux and decreases the efficacy of traditional human resources (HR) activities.

By 2004, more than 75% of world-class firms typically had systemic and modular IT hiring processes. Detailed approaches defined the roles, responsibilities, processes, criteria, and tools to perform top-notch hiring independent of geography, job sophistication, and interviewers. These world-class firms have applied team interviewing, reference checking, and psychological profiling to obtain best-fit candidates for corporate openings.

Following the lessons learned from these companies, by the end of 2007, more than 50% of Global 2000 firms will institute formal and standardized HR IT hiring processes. In learning the differences between good and bad candidates, many corporations will adopt portions of a systemic hiring process, but politics, poor (knowledge) management, lack of discipline, and feeble execution will prevent them from achieving enterprise-wide success.

With a greater emphasis on people, CIOs develop human capital management centers of excellence (HCM COEs). Based on lessons learned from temporary employment agencies, executive recruiters, outsourcers, and first-class IT organizations, holistic hiring processes should, at a minimum, contain the following five activities:

· *Define candidates:* Job descriptions explain in detail the appropriate candidate qualifications, duties, expectations, responsibilities, and roles. To ensure everyone is working together, world-class hiring plans list schedules, resources, activities, objectives, benefits, risks, and dependencies.

· **Describe success:** Practiced IT executives create performance criteria to state how and when the minimum and preferred candidate requirements will be met. By defining and describing key recruiting artifacts, hiring becomes less of an ad hoc activity and more of a regular and repeatable process.

· **Differentiate messages:** With online job boards and classified ads, firms must break through the recruitment noise. Skilled IT HCM COEs produce external artifacts (job postings, recruitment programs) whose components can be disassembled, reaggregated, and reused across various channels (Web, word of mouth, headhunter, etc.). Many world-class firms now apply retail and brand psychology to get recognition on Web sites that could have 500,000+ job listings.

· **Delineate applicants:** Smart IT groups employ team interviews to obtain a candidate's business, technical, administrative, logical, and emotional quotients. Practised IT shops benchmark, employ scenario planning, and ensure at least one spontaneous simulation in interviews. World-class teams exploit psychological factors (two-on-one, negative interviews).

· **Depose references:** Experienced HCM COEs perform thorough background, performance, and reference checks with former managers and peers. World-class firms obtain past work samples and strive for unanimous hiring agreement from team interviewers.

As these five procedures become part of a well-documented process baseline, IT organizations should perceive recruiting as becoming a more regular, repeatable, and evolving core competency of an HCM COE. Although a developed hiring process manages out ambiguity and risk, CIOs should also take great care to avoid the following nine deadly sins of hiring:

· **Reactive searches:** Few mangers plan for turnover and often fill openings without regard for team composition or departmental strategy. Most look for someone similar to the predecessor, but with fewer defects. Savvy managers have pre-mapped scenarios, job requirements, and hiring plans (for growth and turnover) that are also known by their departments.

· **Unrealistic specifications:** Many search teams create job descriptions impossible to fill except by a superhero. Experienced managers have job specifications accounting for specific short-term priorities and long-term organizational objectives.

· **Mundane scrutiny:** With little advance preparation, interviewers revert to their favorite questions such as "What are your strengths?" Such questions provide no insight into the candidate. Accomplished executives structure the flow of interviews to uncover specifics. Candidates' answers are followed up to understand the situation, context, and value of actions described.

· **No skepticism:** Too many managers accept people at face value and are not critical enough to ask tough questions of candidates. Good interviewers probe for detail and complete context. Large projects, for example, require more than just a formal leader.

· **Soft spots:** Without practice, interviewers easily tend toward several bad biases. "Just-like-me," "seems like a nice person," the halo effect (one positive characteristic outshines all others), and stereotyping are biases to avoid. Accomplished managers test for and teach out these biases.

· *Delegation slip-ups:* Common executive mistakes include the wrong people initially interviewing candidates, drafting job descriptions, and contracting with search firms - all of which waste corporate resources and time. Experienced executives recognize the need for preparation and feedback.

· *No structure:* Skilled interviewers have well-prepared questions designed to reveal a candidate's competencies, character, knowledge, skills, and aspirations. CIOs should carefully avoid extended small talk, chitchat, and irrelevant conversations.

· *No temperament surveys:* Because new hires must become part of the existing team, knowledgeable managers test for culture, character, and personality fits. Many world-class firms administer short cultural tests to candidates as they proceed through the hiring process to get multiple data points.

· *Political stress:* Too many executives, in particular, prefer to hire friends. CIOs should judiciously apply transparency and value management to prevent nepotism and unwise CEO dictations.

In the pursuit of speed, rapidly growing firms easily succumb to these nine deadly sins of hiring. Recruiting well requires a systematic approach, discipline, and plenty of preparation. CIOs should not shortchange the hiring of talent by succumbing to the pressures of time, convention, and politics. Purposeful strategies, plans, processes, and reviews should be raised, realized, and refined. With such discipline and courage, recruiting becomes a core competency of an IT HCM COE.

Business Impact: Hiring the right person for the right job increases corporate productivity and avoids having to deal with non-performers down the road.

Bottom Line: Recruiting is an essential part of IT HR excellence. By focusing on five critical procedures and avoiding the nine deadly sins of hiring, CIOs can rapidly evolve the recruiting of talent into an IT core competency.

###