

The Challenges of Attracting Great Candidates

By Jim Midelis

Hiring and retaining great candidates is one of the most difficult and challenging aspects of running a specialty contracting company. This is the result of several issues. First is the decreasing number of young people entering the construction industry, which is seen as hard work for less pay compared with some other fields and as a less interesting destination in this highly technological age. For repair companies especially, there is also the lack of educational classes in this specialty contracting niche, in addition to an aging workforce. The top college graduates with construction management and engineering degrees often get recruited out of college by what they consider the more prestigious general contractors and construction managers. This fact sometimes makes it difficult for specialty sub-contractors and manufacturers to attract the top graduates out of college. Finding an experienced senior estimator, project manager, superintendent, or salesperson can be an even a greater challenge for any contractor regardless of size.

As the economy picks up and companies become busier, hiring qualified candidates will become increasingly important and, most likely, increasingly difficult. It is, however, still possible to find and attract top talent. It just takes a little more work and you may have to examine some of the methods you're accustomed to using during the hiring process.

In its most simplistic form, hiring consists of three elements: finding someone who has the

experience and qualifications you need, attracting him or her to the opportunity within your company, and closing the deal. Each of the three elements has challenging aspects. Things can go wrong in any one of them during the hiring process and have accounted for numerous incidents of hiring the wrong person, as well as missing the opportunity to hire the right person for the job. On the other hand, understanding these three elements and using that understanding to your advantage can save any company time and money during a search for qualified candidates. This understanding can put you ahead of your competition and ensure that you have a qualified person show up who feels confident about having made the right career move.

Experience and Qualifications: How to Find the Right Person

Finding the right person for the job is arguably the most important and often most difficult part of the hiring process. Look around your office today. You can probably guess who reads the classified ads or searches the Internet on a regular basis. Are they your top performers? Probably not. The top performers in almost any company are generally satisfied with their positions and are not actively seeking new employment. Very few positions, especially management level positions, are filled through newspaper or Internet advertising. There are exceptions; however, most of the candidates who respond to advertising are unemployed or unqualified. But don't give up hope. There are more effective ways to gain access to the top talent you need, especially in the concrete repair industry.

The good people who work for you generally have a network of like-minded and similarly talented acquaintances in the industry. Use them as a valuable resource. Your vendors can also be a good source for talented people at companies similar to yours. Use people outside of your company with a degree of caution, as some of these individuals may gossip about your search and they too may also know only of people who "are looking." Another proactive and effective approach is to enlist the help of an executive recruiter who specializes in the construction industry. There are a few firms that deal almost exclusively in the concrete industry and have worked for many





concrete repair companies as well. Though these companies charge for their services, they will commit to an exhaustive search on your behalf. Before you put a recruiter to work on a search, however, check out the individual and the firm. Ask for a full description of their process as well as client references to make sure that they have a clear understanding of both the concrete repair market, as well as your specific search.

Making Your Opportunity Attractive

Once you have identified a great candidate or candidates, you must also put an effort into attracting them to your opportunity. This should begin during the first interview and, in my experience, is the most poorly handled and frequently overlooked part of the entire hiring process. That's a shame because it is really quite simple. Selling the opportunity consists mainly of asking questions about the career interests of the candidate and showing how your company can fulfill those interests. Look at these candidates as long-term employees rising through the ranks of your company instead of just people who are filling an immediate need. Then, tailor your remarks about opportunities and benefits at your company accordingly.

Of course, you are going to thoroughly test and reference-check someone before you hire, and they have to be the right fit for your firm, but the truth is that if a candidate doesn't leave that first interview with more interest in your opportunity than he or she had upon arrival, you have probably wasted your time. I've seen the whole hiring process fail during the initial interview with a candidate who

had the potential to excel with the new company if the hiring authority would have done a better job off selling the opportunity.

Remember, a top prospect is rarely desperate for a job. In this market, a sharp estimator, project manager, or superintendent with a track record of success has countless options. Sometimes an employer will tell me, "I don't want to do any selling; either they want the job or they don't." That's fine if you're happy taking a chance on somebody who got fired from their last job or quit because of not being able to get along with others in the workplace. We have all seen examples of poor work ethics and job hoppers. Besides, during the process of selling the opportunity, you can also gain valuable insight into how the prospect thinks and whether or not you want to hire him or her. It's a two-way street. You should consider yourself both a "seller" and a "buyer" throughout the hiring process.

During the course of this process, it is also critical to check out the candidate's work. For example, if you are trying to hire an estimator, then a take-off test is critical. Use a small section of an old job and go through the take-off together. You can gain a lot of knowledge about the estimator's thought process as well as his expertise through this type of exercise.

If you're looking for a project manager or superintendent, ask questions about specific jobs the candidate has been involved in and what his or her duties were on each particular job. Ask for examples of jobs that were turned from losers into winners. Ask about jobs that made profits substantially above the expected, and ask how that was accomplished. Let them brag a little, and then ask them to speak candidly about a problem job or



a loser. Dealing with challenges and unforeseen issues are fairly commonplace on restoration and repair jobs, and it is important to gain insight into how an individual will react to these types of problems. An experienced and competent project manager or superintendent should be able to explain his or her answers with great detail.

A thorough interview process lets a potential prospect know that you are serious about putting together a competent and successful team, and that you intend to make it a long-term career opportunity for the right person. Don't expect to accomplish all of this in one interview. Typically, two or three interviews are appropriate for a senior level estimator, project manager, or superintendent. More interviews than that will probably turn off your best candidates. It is also critical to keep the momentum flowing during the interview process and not to leave great candidates in limbo while you are making your decision.

Closing the Deal

Just as in sales, closing the deal is the final component of making a good hire. Handled properly, this step can ensure that your newest addition starts off with a satisfied feeling and a genuine excitement about this new opportunity. Handled improperly, you may help someone get a big raise at his or her current company or start work with you feeling unsatisfied.

If you have the indication that a candidate is motivated only by money, then tendering an official offer is probably a waste of time unless the candidate is significantly under-compensated. Most career moves are based on growth opportunities within a

company, as well as its culture and environment. If you believe a candidate has the expertise and personality you need, then your company should expect to pay a 10 to 20% increase of the candidate's current income. There are some exceptions to this increase in compensation, but most candidates expect a raise to make a career move. Again, the top candidates are typically somewhat satisfied with their current situation, so you have to make both the financial and growth opportunities attractive enough for them to make the move.

Successful hiring has become more difficult and will get worse before it gets better. This is due to demographics as much as it is to the fact that today's college graduates with construction management and engineering degrees have many options that appear to be more glamorous than the specialty subcontracting niches. As long as you are willing to put forth the effort to find quality candidates, attract the candidates to your opportunity, and make a competitive offer in a reasonable time frame, you can still attract and hire great candidates in today's market.



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