

This is the 2nd article of 6 in the Managing Performance Toolkit. You can download the articles in this series, and other tools, at: atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation

Decisions about who to hire are some of the most important decisions you will ever make. Each time there is an open slot, you have the opportunity to significantly advance the work. But many, if not most, performance issues begin with bad hires. Failed hires are a huge waste of organizational energy and morale.

For over a decade in our Rockwood National Yearlong Leadership Trainings, our senior progressive leaders have been sharing best tips and practices about hiring. Here is some of their collective wisdom.

Tips on Job Descriptions

- Take job descriptions seriously, for they are the foundation for good hiring.
- The process of creating the job description should include those in the organization who best understand this role and its impact from their varying perspectives. The previous holder of this position will often be a valuable source of information.
- Understand that job descriptions actually serve numbers of purposes. They:
 - provide an opportunity to clearly communicate the mission and where the employee fits inside of the big picture
 - set clear expectations for what you really want and expect from this person
 - are a tool for you to help make good hires
 - are a tool for aligning the organization's expectations of new hires
 - address issues and questions of those people who were not selected
 - help others in the organization understand the person's responsibilities
 - help cover your legal bases (e.g. compliance with the Americans With Disabilities Act)
 - serve as the basis for goal-setting and ongoing management of performance
- Focus on what the person will actually do – the activities that make up the roles and responsibilities.
- Separate out “must haves” from “nice to haves”
- Include the intangibles – spirit, energy, values, impact on others – as well as the tasks. Don’t get so lost in making the job description sound “professional” that you lose communicating what you are really looking for. Let the job description reflect your organizational culture.
- Job descriptions should be updated whenever there is a new hire. It is also a best practice to review it annually as part of performance reviews, as the reality of roles often evolve.

Tips on Searches

- Proactively set up a pipeline in anticipation of future hires, rather than waiting until you're in immediate need. Developing your pool should be an ongoing organizational initiative.
- Go outside the box. We too often get stuck with a pool of the usual suspects, recycling around through the same network of organizations.
- Look at the edges of your social networks.
- The for-profit world can be a good source of people who have highly developed skills and may be wanting more meaningful work, even at less pay.
- Three options for searches:

1. Manage the search internally

The challenge: everyone in the organization is typically already overloaded. When managing a search is placed on top of existing commitments, it is rarely done well. An excellent search requires someone waking up each morning with their first thought being, *“How do I insure a really great hire?”* If you do assign a staff to run the search, make sure to reduce their other responsibilities.

2. Use a search firm

Search firms should be considered for larger organizations regularly doing senior level hires. This works best when you develop a relationship over time with a recruiter, so they really begin to understand the nature, values and spirit of your organization, as well as its functional needs. There are several firms that specialize in the social change sector. Headhunters typically charge 1/3 of annual salary, though there's always the chance of pro bono or negotiating reduced rates.

3. Hire an independent consultant

This is a cheaper and often very good alternative. The ideal is to find someone who knows your organization and its culture well – a former staff, board member or ally who's now a consultant or in between jobs. This gives them a jumpstart on the search. Not only will they understand your needs, but they will be far cheaper than a search firm.

Tips on Interviewing

- Get multiple perspectives in interviewing.
- Make sure the hiring committee is aligned *before* beginning interviews.
- Engaging others from all levels in your organization in the hiring process serves two purposes: one, getting better quality hiring decisions and, two, creating inclusion and buy-in for key hires that help position people for acceptance by the organization.
- Always ask people about a significant failure and what they've changed as a result.
- Make sure you know regulations about what you can and can't ask.
- See them in action. Role-plays and hypothetical situations are fine but insufficient. Some tips:
 - Actually have people do a piece of work similar to what they would do in their position.
 - When appropriate, bring people to a meeting or event with the constituents/allies with whom they will be working. See how they interact.
 - For important hires, consider paying them for a day or a week of consulting.

Tips on references

- Don't stop at the references candidates suggest. All candidates can come up with a few people that will say good things about them. If you're not sure about a candidate, ask to speak to key people in past positions *not* on their reference list.
- Try to get below the surface in reference checks. Establish rapport as a fellow leader.
- References are often hesitant to talk about a person's weaknesses. Ask questions which make it easy for them. For example:
 - *"What is the most important way they could improve their performance?"*
 - *"What two positions would this person ideally be suited for?" And then, "What two positions would they be less well-suited for?"*
- Make sure you understand regulations on what you can and cannot ask.
- If anyone in a reference check raises any concerns or red flags, magnify it by a factor of 5!
- Use social media as part of your background checks.

Tips on making final decisions

- *"No hire is so much better than a bad hire."*
- Always keep in focus the absolute "must haves" for this position.
- Be clear what skills are trainable and which are difficult to develop. Technical skills can be developed with training and mentoring. Personal habits and talents are far more difficult. Be careful if you see shortcomings with things like personal discipline, focus, motivation, critical thinking, or communication skills showing up in the hiring process.
- Consult your gut.

We all-too-often have a nagging feeling and then override our gut sense. Consult and trust your inner wisdom. Especially be wary when you see yourself rationalizing:

 - *There's a shortage of good people right now...*
 - *What can you expect at this salary level...*
 - *Well, they were probably just a bit nervous in the interview...*
 - *Yeah, but we really need someone right away... I don't have the time to keep looking.*
 - *But they're a great person...*
- Consult your gut, but watch for implicit bias.
 - We can confuse intuition with personal comfort.
 - We're usually more comfortable with people like ourselves.
 - This can lead to exclusionary hiring and lack of diversity.
- Remember you're hiring for a position and certain skills. Be careful not to give inappropriate weight to personal preferences of who you might enjoy hanging out with.
- Don't make the mistake of hiring a good person who really doesn't want this position and sees it as a stepping-stone to something else, e.g. hiring someone

for an admin position who really wants to be an organizer. This situation presents itself even more often when job markets are tight.

- Make sure you know the competitive salary range for the position in your market. Pay what is really needed to get the right person. “Saving” money by hiring a less-qualified person may cost a lot more in the long run.
- Continue accepting resumes even after you’ve narrowed the field to your best candidates. Sometimes when we don’t get our first choice, we end up settling for someone we don’t really want. Having an additional pool of possibilities may help encourage you to stay the course and get someone you’re really happy with.
- Even after you do all of the above, remember the words of a very experienced ED. *“It’s still a crap shoot.”*
- One last technique: consider a trial period, and actually manage the trial or probationary period in a real way so that you do not get stuck with a poor hire.