



NATHAN ZELDES

Thinker, Speaker, Problem Solver.

Effective Hiring: What I've Learned from Experience

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Hiring is the second most important thing a manager does (the first being empowering their employees to succeed). Strange, then, that I can't recall a course on how to hire people anywhere in my career as a manager. Perhaps it was assumed that the Human Resources department will take care of the intricacies of getting the best people on board; if so, I couldn't disagree more...

In three decades in various organizations I've seen and done enough as a manager to form my own opinions, and these I share with you in this article.

Who owns Hiring?

Of course, the "hiring manager" owns hiring. That is, the manager who will in fact supervise the hired employee. If this is a very junior manager, they may need help from their own manager (acting in the role of "empowering their employees to succeed" that I just mentioned); but the primary responsibility should always be with the direct manager.

Why? For many reasons:

- That manager knows the job that needs doing better than anyone else.
- That manager will be managing the new person, so needs to be certain they will get along well.
- The confidence and motivation of the manager can be badly crippled if they aren't in a key place in the decision loop.
- The new employee needs to perceive from day one that their boss had in fact chosen them.
- This involves delegating the ownership as low in the hierarchy as you can go – and that is a wise thing to do in any organization.

Of course, HR is also a key player. I don't mean just because it handles the paperwork; HR folks have great experience and know-how in all matters of hiring. But that doesn't make HR the owner; it makes it, in a properly run organization, a real partner and an invaluable resource for the hiring manager – who retains the ultimate ownership. That's a serious responsibility, but if your managers aren't up to it, you may need to reconsider your manager-hiring strategy!

The importance of hiring well

Nothing can be more disastrous than hiring unwisely.

This is no surprise: a company's success depends directly on the qualities of its people, and getting the best people is critical. This is especially true because the qualities of people in the "candidate pool" vary enormously; like anyone who interviewed candidates, I was always struck by the range separating the very best candidate from the very worst (and this after initial pre-screening!)

The fact is, you could have two people doing the same job, and one is a joy to behold – smart, resourceful, dependable, and – a key parameter – with the quality we call in Israel [Rosh Gadol](#) (“Large Head”), the ability to see the big picture, take initiative, and go beyond the immediate task at hand to ensure that the end goal is achieved. Tell them what needs doing and you can consider it done. The other, meanwhile, may be lacking in any parameter – and in many cases their performance will be terrible even if they aren’t lazy or evil in any way – it’s just how there are. This will soon come to light, but then it will be too late, and result in much harm to the job at hand and much heartbreak all around. Better hire wisely up front!

I used to joke with HR, telling them to simply only bring in to interviews the best people; of course, it doesn’t work that way. You, the hiring manager, must interview and screen for yourself. Which is why, as I said, *you* own the process!

Guidelines to keep in mind

Here are some things I’ve been taught over the years – some by a number of smart managers I’ve worked for, others by my own experience.

- **Invest the effort.**

Interviewing is hard work; you should remember that it’s your (second) most important job, and invest in it any effort and time required – which will be a lot of time.

- **Never compromise.**

This I learned very early, from a boss I had that set it as the top directive: if the only candidates you have are imperfect, simply don’t hire them. To appreciate the idea, think of a situation where if you don’t hire by tomorrow, you will lose the headcount; that is, you must either hire someone imperfect or hire no one. My boss’s teaching was that even then you must resist temptation and lose the headcount, but you never, ever compromise on someone you know isn’t good enough.

- **Match your hiring to the company culture.**

Different organizations have very different cultures, and require different people. A candidate that is a good match to a startup may be a total misfit in a government office. Remember, whether you like the candidate isn’t the issue; what matters is how they’ll be able to do the job, within the constraints of your organization. A lot of ineffectiveness (and grief) is caused when a person is placed in the wrong milieu, no matter how much you might warm up to their qualities.

- **Look at the person, not at their CV.**

Dov Frohman, the founder of Intel in Israel, famously said he may well prefer to hire a well rounded philosophy graduate rather than a shallow engineer. Formal degrees meant a lot less to us at Intel than the person’s character and intelligence, and by taking such bets – and training people on the job – we saw excellent outcomes. The same approach also allowed our people to make [flexible career moves](#) once they were on board.

- **Establish a selection process and stick to it.**

Great companies have a well thought out, consistent process for selecting new hires. This involves the number of interviews, the staffing of each interview (single manager or committee), the agenda, the types of questions asked, and how the decisions are ultimately made.

This process will vary from company to company, but will remain the constant within each one – constant enough to become the stuff of legend, as evidenced by the stories making the rounds of what you get asked in an interview at Google. Having a fixed process is not only more equitable, it's important as part of the organizational culture.

- **Get a second opinion. And a third. And a fourth.**

Talking to the candidate is fine, but you also want to talk to their previous employers and colleagues. Obviously this is tricky, since they may not be totally forthcoming... but unless you can decipher the truth from such interviews you may end up holding a hot potato they were relieved to let go. Even if they are open, you need to explore with them how they think the candidate will cope with **your** situation... again, tricky. Doing such interviews is a form of art.

- **Teach your subordinates how to hire.**

Many of your subordinates are, or will eventually become, managers; they will then need to hire their own people. As a more experienced manager you want to teach them the tricky art of how to interview and make hiring decisions – in the context of your organization's processes. Involving even fairly junior subordinates in your interviews, and seeking their opinion, will help them develop these skills and build up their confidence.

And they, in turn, will transfer the know how to their own junior managers in future... keeping the tradition alive. That's how a culture is built.

And a bonus guideline

- **Play fair by the candidates.**

This is sadly overlooked all too often. Hopeful job seekers send in their CVs, and never hear back from a company. Some get interviewed and then wait forever. This is blatantly uncivilized, callous, outright evil behavior. You should always get back to people with a clear statement of where they stand, the sooner the better.

You may want to copy my method – at the end of the interview inform the candidate when they can expect to hear from the company, and hint that should this not happen, they may call you directly and ask what's causing the delay. You owe them that much courtesy!

Nathan Zeldes has been leading improvement of knowledge worker effectiveness for over 20 years, at Intel and for other companies. He's exchanged knowledge with scores of organizations worldwide, and has founded the Information Overload Research Group, which he chairs. He now [advises managers](#) on improving their groups' results through improved tools and work processes.

For more insight articles on Knowledge Worker Productivity, see [here](#). You may also want to check out Nathan's blog at www.nathanzeldes.com, and consider subscribing to his RSS feed and to his Newsletter on that site.

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