15 Ways to Attract and Repel Top Tech Talent

Put up a job listing and you’ll get a number of resumes. Is that success? Quantity is never the goal. Quality is. So, what does it take to attract the best talent? If it were as simple as free meals, this article would be very short.

To uncover the answers, we interviewed dozens of recruiters, tech employees and hiring managers to ask a simple question: “What do you do to attract the best tech talent?” And as an adjunct, “What shouldn’t you do?”

One consistent theme was about “respect” for yourself, your company, your mission and your employees.

Here are the results, broken down

1: Show them the big important problem they’re going to solve
If you want to attract great talent, “provide an opportunity to solve cutting edge technical challenges, with other exceptional technologists,” says Brad Hoover, CEO of Grammarly.com.
You can communicate that opportunity by telling your company story.
“Demonstrate why people should want to join you,” says Sara Fleischman, Senior Technical Recruiter at Expedia. “We as humans all want to see how we can make a difference, how what we do on a daily basis can make someone’s life a little better.”

“The best technologists don’t define themselves by programming languages (e.g., Java engineer). Instead, they are phenomenal problem solvers, who will use the right tool for the job,” adds John Vlastelica, Managing Director for Recruiting Toolbox.

2: Get personal quickly: Introduce prospects to the team early in the process
“When I found someone we really wanted, I made sure that the candidate spent time (usually lunch) with a group of his/her future peers,” says David Nason, COO and CTO of Robust Decisions Inc. “Once they get to know you, ‘warts and all,’ and share in the excitement and optimism of the team... it becomes more personal.”

Learn more on the next page.
Although antithetical to the standard interviewing process, Nason suggests you bypass HR until the closing process so as to maintain a personal connection with the prospect.

3: Build a long-term relationship with the community

“What makes a difference is focusing on long-term relationship building and not only the short-term ‘hard sell,’” observes Katharine Bierce, Business Analyst for Opera Solutions.

You don’t want your only communications with the industry to be “We’re hiring.” Go out of your way to build a relationship with the community of talent whether they’re working for you or not. Bierce suggests these three techniques:

- Let employees blog on technical topics: Provide thought leadership and quality industry content to engage members of tech community.
- Host meetups at your office: Contribute to the tech community by bringing in thought leaders to speak and act as a connector to other members of the community.
- Maintain your reputation: This requires having a good relationship with media and other bloggers and your employees. As people come and go, they have the power to say good and bad things about your business.

4: Engage the community in solving a problem

“Job descriptions give little insight into where your problems are,” says Ryan Brogan, Principal for 1xRUN.com / MagnetAgency.net. Brogan advises releasing your API or a string of problematic code and asking for contributions from the open source community.

“Anything you can do to let them know you want to solve problems will get them engaged,” says Brogan. He thanks participants and lets them know they’ve got gobs more problems to solve if they want to come and work for his company.

We’ve also seen this technique used with contests, such as hackathons. If the contest is fun enough and challenging enough, and there’s value in participating in the contest itself, not only will you attract great tech talent, but you’ll quickly be able to see who is the best of the best.

5: Be careful about showcasing too many on-site perks

“Circa 1993, I was interviewing with a Microsoft partner that did custom software development. During the interview they touted all the perks that they offered, starting with bagels and donuts that were delivered each morning, the eight varieties of coffee that were always being brewed, the in-office gym and showers, the sandwich trays that arrived every afternoon, and the late night pizzas,” says Mark Bromberg, Director of Sales at IsoSoft Solutions. “The message I got was not that the company provided great benefits, but that they expected their staff to be on site working 24 hours a day.” Some organizations have on-campus housing and will shuttle you back and forth to your place morning and night.

Learn more on the next page.
“This really just makes it so they are always close to work and rely on work to get home,” says Stephen Lytle, Southeast Pharmacy Campus Recruiter at Target.

If you never leave campus, it’s difficult if not impossible to have a sensible work-life balance, says Lytle.

6: Don’t fake it
We all want to have the culture and momentum of a Google, Apple, Twitter or Facebook. But don’t try to pretend you’re like them if you’re not.

“Great employment branding emerges from the heart of the company,” says John Sumser of HRExaminer. “The most attractive things you can offer are resources, challenge and freedom to make mistakes. Pretending that you do these things and not delivering on the promise causes morale and attrition problems.”

“Any employer (tech or non-tech) can’t make themselves more attractive. If it isn’t true, then putting lipstick on a pig will be found out and no one will trust you again,” says William Uranga, Senior Director, Talent Acquisition at TiVo.

7: Ask them what they want
“I see employers take a cookie cutter approach to how they retain and incentivize employees who are at the same time becoming more and more individualized and unique,” says Michael Peterson, Acting Director of Recruitment Strategy at Sharp HealthCare.

“Something like a bonus may not matter at all (or may even be insulting) to someone that wants more time with their family,” he observes. “Challenging work may be the ultimate driver for others and no other incentive can replace that, especially to someone that is trying to grow and develop skills.”

8: Lower the ‘entry level’ expectations and offer training for those positions
“Gone is the day where training was expected after hire,” says Michael Wallstrom, Owner and Technician for Computer Repair Now.

Wallstrom is frustrated by the number of years experience required for “entry level” positions. He believes the disconnect hurts both the hordes of underemployed and employers. It’s almost impossible to find an entry level position that requires zero experience, and as a result, expectations have been raised too high for such openings.

9: Be eager to hire candidates with 80 percent of the qualifications
“Use the 80/20 rule,” says Bob Waldo, Senior Recruiter at LiquidHub. “If a candidate has 80 percent of the skills the job requires, they are qualified. Hire them! They will learn the 20
percent and be 100 percent whole in a shorter period than it will take you to find the perfect fit.”

In addition, Waldo argues that an 80 percent employee is far more attractive and much easier to retain than someone who is 100 percent qualified. “You get a much more motivated employee than the guy who has ‘been there, done that, got the T-shirt to prove it,’” he says.

**10: Treat your employees right so they can be your word-of-mouth recruiting force**

If you care for your staff, imbue trust—and help them—they’ll return the favor with incredible productivity, loyalty and recruitment, says Tom Cooper, Principal for BrightHill Group.

“When employees feel valued, they promote the brand,” agreed career coach Rita Ashley. “If employees aren’t referring their friends, there’s a whole lot wrong internally.”

Ashley noted one Seattle business that treated its staff so poorly that the reputation spread quickly among local talent. As a result, the company was forced to hire out of state.

**11: Write a job description with realistic expectations**

“Hiring managers have a tendency to write job descriptions about the most ideal candidate, asking for the world when in reality the job may not actually require that skill set,” says AutoTrader.com’s Ben Sian.

Doing that is absurd, argues L.J. Bothell of StudioBast, who has seen unrealistic job descriptions requesting candidates who do not exist. For example, she’s seen requests for six years minimum experience for HTML5 and CSS3, or concurrent 10+ years experience in open source, Apache, and Microsoft systems as if any company would have all three of those systems in play at any one time.

**12: Communicate during the hiring process**

We hear the “lack of communications” complaint all the time. “I know that I am guilty of not being able to communicate as quickly and in as much detail as I wish,” admits Greg Buechler, Recruiter and Researcher at eGain Communications. “But zero is too little.” He suggests you let candidates know where the process is with other candidates, and if anyone on the hiring team will be out of the office when an interview is scheduled.

Communications is just as important between recruiters and hiring managers, as Tim Heard, President of eSearch Associates, observes. “Unfortunately, I have dealt with many hiring managers who after the fact have added, ‘Oh yeah, we really need this skill too,’ when explaining why a candidate wasn’t a good fit.”

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13: Perks, perks, perks

It would be impossible not to mention this in any article about attracting top talent. There isn’t one perk that’s universally appreciated, but taken together a good variety can add up to an attractive offer. Perks can include additional vacation time, flex hours, all types of insurance, fully vested 401(k) plans, free food, pre-paid legal services, financial planning, concierge services, paid certifications, telecommuting, a pleasant work environment, health benefits that start on day one and, of course, a competitive salary.

14: Sell your company as a wise investment

In addition to perks, you’ll want to “sell your company and the opportunity as much or more than you expect your candidate to sell themselves,” says Bob Waldo of LiquidHub.

Beyond discussing benefits, talk to the candidate like they’d be an investor or stock holder. Share current revenues, anticipated revenue growth, current market share and how you plan to expand it, he advises.

15: Encourage employees to maintain past employer relationships so you can source from competition

You know where your best future talent is? It’s working at your competition. After all, many of your current employees probably worked with competitors at one time or another. If you want to get more talent from them, you’ll need your employees to continue to interact with them.

“We actually have a great reputation among our competitors,” says Debby Afraimi of Collective. “We poached some people that still have friends at their former employer. That helps when I’m sourcing from the competition.”

Conclusion: Respect the role of the tech worker

In all our interviews, we learned that tech employees view their career success as part advancement, part making a difference. Understand that need and desire, and foster it through a positive work environment that others want to share.