Too many applicants?

10 Tips for Screening Tech Resumes and Candidates

By John Vlastelica

How do you screen through the masses quickly and effectively so that you spend your limited time on the candidates who are most likely to succeed? How do you improve your chances of filling that precious head count with a top performer?

Best Practice Resume Screening

1. Ensure your posting is attracting the right kind of applicant. Some active job applicants may apply for anything – even if they're not remotely qualified – so it's key that you outline more than just years of experience, educational and certification requirements, and technology buzzwords in your postings. Be specific about the kind of track record and *accomplishments* your ideal applicant *must* have. "Must have led Ruby on Rails software team that leveraged Agile methodologies to ship a successful multi-language consumer web product…" is much different than "5+ years experience as lead developer."

2. Look beyond keywords. Smart candidates have figured out that if they load up their resumes with more buzzwords (i.e. technologies), they're more likely to rise to the top of search results. We want candidates with hands-on experience *using* the technologies listed on our job posting. So, focus on resumes that show where and when the technology was used on the job. Keywords that show up in the bullets under job overviews are typically better than keywords that show up at the top or bottom of tech resumes in the skills summary section.

3. Get help from your ATS. If your applicant tracking system has functionality that allows you to leverage applicant questionnaires, create simple, 10-question-or-less questionnaires to help you stack rank your applicants. Leverage questions that pull out more details about the key technologies, skills, and accomplishments you need. "How many years of commercial experience do you have writing code in C#?" "What specific QA tools have you used: Select all that apply…"

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4. Get skill testing help. If you find yourself with too many "looks good on paper" applicants, and can afford it, you may also want to consider leveraging an online, pre-employment skills test. You can invite your short-list of applicants to complete the test and use the results to prioritize who you phone interview. For tech quizzes, check out companies like BrainBench (www.brainbench.com) and TechCheck (www.techcheck.com). (Note: Talk to your own legal counsel before setting up any kind of pre-employment test.)

5. Calibrate resumes before you phone screen. Ensure the recruiter and hiring manager are on the same page before screening starts. How? Recruiters should review a sample of five real resumes – real time – with the hiring manager, who should "think out loud" as they review the resumes. Are the "must-haves" really must-haves, or is there flexibility? Why is this resume going in the yes pile, while this similar one goes in the no pile? Are there some alternative technologies or industry experiences that the manager likes just as well as the requirements on the job posting? Is the manager all over the place – unsure about what he wants? Locking down the resume profile will save time for everyone and focus your tech resume screening efforts.

Best Practice Phone Screening

1. Focus on the deal breakers.
Whoever phone screens candidates – recruiter or hiring manager – should ensure that they are crystal clear about the deal breaker qualifications. In general, the focus of a tech phone screen in this economy is to weed out the unqualified applicants (but we still must sell top candidates!) so that you invest time with onsite interviewees who are most likely to get offers. While it may be nice to know, "Where do you want to be in 5 years?," that's generally not where you should focus during the phone screen. Instead, you'll want to ensure each candidate you pass on to the onsite interview has the required capabilities, meets your salary and eligibility requirements, and genuinely wants to do this type and level of work.

2. Get examples of related accomplishments.
Ideally, you want to focus on the applicants who have already accomplished the type of goals your position will focus on. Sure, responsibilities, years of experience, technologies and credentials should be reviewed. But a focus toward on-the-job skill usage and *job-specific accomplishments* typically yields better candidates. What have they delivered? To what kind of customer? Using what technology and skills? With what kind of resources and team? Over what kind of timeline? These are questions that will really help you predict on-the-job success and performance.

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3. Work through a real problem or skill demonstration.
While it's true that past performance is a good indicator of future performance, sometimes nothing beats present performance (like a live demo of a skill or a real-time problem-solving exercise). If possible, identify a tech challenge that your successful hire will likely face on the job; nothing too hard and nothing that requires an intimate understanding of your business, processes, resources or culture. But something that a top candidate should be able to tackle successfully. Ask them *what* they'd do first, *how* they'd do it, *why* they'd do it that way instead of this way, *what* they'd do if they ran into this kind of problem and *who* they'd involve if this happened.

4. Screen for job fit and motivation.
In this economy, there's a greater risk of "foot-in-the-door" applicants; people who just want or need "a job." Generally, we want and need people who are naturally motivated to do this type and level of work. So be sure to dig into *why* they loved past jobs and *what* they hope to find if they join your company (ask this before you tell them all about your culture and resources). Then compare their responses to your offering. Is it a good, honest match?

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5. Protect your employment brand.
Just because there may be hundreds of applicants for every opening you have, don't forget that you build your employment brand – your reputation as an employer – one candidate at a time. Even though you may be in the driver's seat, treat every candidate with respect. Follow the basics: start your phone interviews on time, ask fair, relevant questions, let them ask you a few questions and always follow up.

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