

How to recruit the right person

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For many small firms filling a vacant position can be expensive and time consuming so getting the process right first time is crucial, says HR and recruitment specialist, Janet Cowell

If your business operates with a small number of core staff, it's likely that every role is vital, so when a person leaves, or a position is created, there's typically little room for manoeuvre. Therefore you need to be sure you have found the right person, as making the wrong decision could prove costly.

Attract the right applicants

Many businesses stumble at the first hurdle when recruiting by failing to properly assess the position. Think about what the role currently involves and what it may involve in the future, and make a list of essential and preferred requirements that can be used to shape the rest of the recruitment process.

When doing this, it is also important not to become overly focussed on technical skills at the expense of 'soft skills' that might make people successful in the company. For example, if you will require the successful applicant to cover absent staff and move between departments on occasion, finding somebody who is very adaptable with strong teamwork skills might be equally or more important than their ability to work with a particular piece of software.

Once the requirements of the role have been agreed, these should be communicated as accurately as possible in the job advertisement. You might think that a massive response from an advert constitutes a good response, but in fact if you are accurate in your description, you should get a smaller but more appropriate group of applicants.

Filter candidates by phone

Many small businesses will invite people to interview after a brief conversation on the phone, but using this opportunity to conduct a proper first interview can save time and money by filtering only the better candidates through to the next stage.

Structure the telephone call to ensure that you are consistent in your approach and address all the areas that you need to cover. Have a full set of questions prepared in the form of a script, just as you would for a face-to-face interview, and use the opportunity to assess their communications skills and uncover barriers to their employability such as their eligibility to work or travel arrangements.

The telephone interview is also a great opportunity to make sure the candidate's expectations about what the role entails are aligned with your own requirements. The more information you can give to the candidate at this stage, the less chance there is of a problem arising when you meet in person.

Be realistic

In both the phone and face-to-face interviews, competency based questions that ask candidates to explain how they dealt with a particular scenario can be useful for assessing attitudes and behaviours, but sometimes, when there's a huge pressure to fill a gap it can be easy to cut corners which can often lead to hiring the wrong person. A manager might find themselves ignoring their intuition and leading a candidate who is struggling to give the right answers, especially if they had positive expectations from their CV. This is unwise as a struggling candidate is unlikely to have the skills required for the role. The business will then have to shoulder the expense of firing the poor performer and going through the whole recruitment process again.

To avoid this, when you reach the face-to-face interview stage, it's best to avoid interviewing alone so that there is always a second perspective on the candidate. In addition, sharing the interview with another person who takes notes allows the interviewer to concentrate on the candidate's responses to questions.

Align expectations

If you find the right person, you will probably want them to stay with the company long-term. While it's an accepted fact that careers are rarely for life these days, there are some steps you can take during recruitment to improve employee retention. The key is to ensure that the expectations of both parties, about how the role is likely to develop, are aligned. This doesn't necessarily mean you need to have promotion in sight; often, candidates are simply looking for the prospect of extra responsibility to keep the role interesting and broaden their skill-base.

Whatever size office you are in, it is also advisable to show candidates their potential working environment as part of the recruitment process. A quick tour of the office should help them visualise themselves in the role and get a feel of what the future might look like with that particular company.

Often, small companies shy away from some of the tips given above, such as competency-based assessments because they seem the domain of the large organisation. However, if you are willing to put the time into planning it is possible run a very effective recruitment process at a low cost and finding the right candidate first time.