

The New Rules for Hiring IT Talent: Identifying and Correcting 4 Common Hiring Mistakes

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“I can’t find any qualified applicants.”

“The talent market is so competitive I’m losing candidates before we can even make an offer.”

“The competition keeps poaching my star performers.”

When I asked executives to name their top IT challenges for 2018, their responses were the same. Identifying, recruiting and retaining top IT talent is a major problem facing West Coast tech firms. Nearly 2 out of 3 technology leaders say “hiring challenges” are hurting their industry, according to KPMG’s annual [CIO Survey](#) of 3,000 technology leaders. That’s a six-digit jump over 2016 numbers. From Software Developers to Infrastructure Engineers, the problem is the same: high demand in a highly competitive market with a stretched talent pool. Top performers have more choices and more bargaining power than they’ve had in nearly a decade—and companies are feeling the shortage.

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While it’s easy to blame the competitive talent market for IT recruitment woes, there’s more to this equation. Whether a company needs a back-end Java developer, a Mobile developer or Cloud engineer, I’ve watched the same common mistakes sink otherwise strong recruitment efforts. Identifying and correcting missteps with employer branding, the interview process, and the final offer can make the difference between hearing a “yes” or a “no” from your first-choice hire.

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4 IT Recruitment Challenges: Understanding and Correcting Common Missteps

Challenge 1: A weak employer brand discourages talent from considering your company.

There’s more to employer branding than ping pong tables and nap pods. Is your company known for its innovative products or is it the punch line of “legacy dinosaur” jokes? Is your company respected for its collaborative work



environment or maligned as the place where “ideas die” because of institutional barriers? A positive employer brand is what gets top talent curious to hear more about career advancement opportunities at your company and to consider interviewing, even when this talent is happily employed elsewhere.

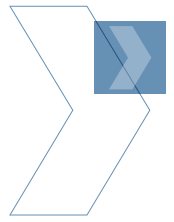
On the flip side, a negative employer brand can send talent running the other direction. A reputation for dysfunctional teams, poor leadership or legacy technology can hurt your reputation among prospective hires. A negative brand can cost a company at least 10 percent more per hire, according to research from LinkedIn Talent Solutions and ICM Unlimited published in [Harvard Business Review](#).

Solution

Today's competitive market means you'll need to recruit top talent away from their current employers. To do so, you'll need a proactive approach to recruitment that starts long before you ever bring talent in for an interview. It all comes down to reputation. When your hiring manager approaches a prospective employee, your company's reputation precedes this interaction. This reputation can either pave the way for a positive first conversation or be the reason the hiring manager's emails and phone calls go unanswered.

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- **Know where your reputation currently stands.** A misalignment between how you view your company and how prospective hires view it can adversely impact recruitment efforts. When you're “in the bubble” at work each day, it can be difficult to objectively see how management or process shortcomings are frustrating employees. I advocate going directly to the source: your former employees. Review candid feedback from exit interviews and check comments on review sites like Glassdoor. Sometimes frustrated former employees may be unfair in their assessment of company culture, but keep in mind this is the only information that outside talent may have about your company.
- **Identify branding challenges.** Look for patterns in the reviews. Does everyone mention the same frustration with legacy technology? If so, this may be a genuine issue your employees are currently facing and a huge red flag to prospective tech hires who want to keep their skills fresh. This is an employer branding problem that could impact both recruitment and retention efforts.
- **Address branding challenges during the interview process.** If you know your company is struggling with a negative employer brand, don't ignore the elephant in the room. Address this challenge head-on during the interview process. For example, cultural fit is an important deciding factor for tech talent. During the interview process, show candidates how the tech teams work together. Have your candidate meet employees of various seniority levels, even if they'll only be working with this person indirectly. If two employees have especially great rapport, have them do a joint interview early in the process so your candidate can observe this camaraderie.
- **Back up words with action.** Does your marketing department position your business to clients as an



industry-leading innovator? If your employees complain that management stifles creativity with institutional barriers to success, however, your employer branding will ring hollow. Look out for any disconnection between what your company *claims* it does and what it *actually* does. After all, you don't want to sell a prospective hire on a great opportunity at your company only to have them jump ship two months later because the reality of working for your business is so different than the image your company projected.

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- **Work with a recruiter to address branding challenges.** The right recruiter can serve as a personal brand ambassador, helping to address brand shortcomings or reach a new audience. A recruiter can use proprietary market intelligence to widen the talent pool and then get your business in front of candidates who might otherwise never have considered your company— all by building a strong employer brand.

Challenge 2: A lengthy interview process scares away potential hires.

Candidates are increasingly using their front-end hiring experience as a deciding factor when evaluating job offers. The way an organization treats their candidates during the interview process can be an indicator of how they will treat their employees once hired. For example, a drawn-out hiring process may signal the company has internal conflicts or institutional barriers to decision-making, two problems top IT talent wants to avoid. A negative first impression could be enough to scare talent away.

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Solution

Rather than treating the interview process as an “initiation” to see if a candidate is worthy of joining your company, I advocate the opposite approach: prove to the candidate that your company is worthy of *them* by making the process as straightforward as possible. This doesn't mean you can't ask tough questions or have your candidates work through challenging coding problems. But the process itself – scheduling interviews, communicating feedback, setting a timeline for next steps – should be seamless. If your company wants to build a reputation as a cutting-edge firm, your hiring process needs to support this goal.

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- **Respect your candidate's experience.** Traditionally, companies begin every recruitment process with an HR screening. Unfortunately, this also means the first contact your candidate will have with your company could be an HR associate who might not know the difference between Java and JavaScript. Save the screening for later and instead have a technical manager speak with your candidate. A technical conversation with someone who has deep expertise in their skills will get your candidate excited and curious about what it might be like to work for your company.



- **Set clear expectations.** Let candidates know exactly what to expect up front. Be clear about the number of interview stages, the stakeholders involved at each stage, and the interview arrangements, like an all-day session white boarding with the team or coding tests.
- **Communicate changes.** Give candidates a general timeframe for expecting a decision and then stick to it. Don't say, "We'll let you know in five business days" and then disappear for three weeks. If the process is going to take longer than expected, be transparent about this. Some candidates may be okay with longer hiring processes as long as they're kept in the loop.
- **Be efficient.** Always assume your candidate is interviewing with other companies and fielding multiple, competitive offers. The longer you take to make a decision, the more likely you are to lose the candidate to another company.
- **Boost your reputation.** Strive to make a positive impression on all candidates who move through your hiring process, whether or not you ultimately extend an offer. Applicants who have a positive experience will tell their peers. This is valuable word-of-mouth buzz that can help counter employer branding challenges and ensure future candidates are excited to come in for an interview.

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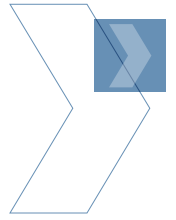
Challenge 3: Your interview process fails to sell candidates on the unique opportunities available at your company.

Top talent needs a compelling reason to switch employers and money should never be that reason. In fact, I caution companies against getting into a bidding war for talent. If money is the only motivating factor, you'll lose out on this talent as soon as someone with a better offer comes along. Instead, companies need to focus on what I consider the two most key factors: culture and purpose. To do so, you need to speak specifically to the candidate's professional aspirations and explain why your company is the ideal place to take the next step in their career.

Solution

The interview process must answer two questions – "Why now?" and "Why us?" – and do so with a sense of urgency. Why should this candidate decide to leave their current company *right now*? Why is your company the place they should be *right now*? To do so, you need to understand what motivates your candidate and then be sure your hiring team addresses these needs.

- **Understand what your candidate wants in a new company.** Your candidate is unlikely to come out and say "I need THIS from my next employer". Instead, listen for clues during the interview process. For example, does a candidate routinely express frustration about project stagnation? Does the candidate feel like their work is appreciated and important? Are they anxious about legacy systems? Until you're sure, keep returning to "culture and purpose" as your main selling points, underscoring the opportunity to work on impactful projects and keep skills fresh.



- **Focus on opportunity and access.** While you don't want to be overly critical about your candidate's current company, you can still highlight the ways your company is different, positioning your business as the better fit. For example, if your candidate seems to be frustrated with the pace of innovation at their current company, explain how they'll have the opportunity to create a product from the ground up, rather than just maintaining an existing system. Be clear about how your company's culture and team ethos, including mentorship opportunities, will support the new hire's success. Even if a candidate is openly critical of an employer, always keep your commentary positive and never criticize another business.
- **Focus on technology access.** Top talent won't risk working for a company that's behind the technology eight ball: their skills would stagnate and they'd find themselves pigeonholed on legacy systems. Instead, they seek to be part of a thriving technology culture where employees are challenged to improve their skills. Reassure candidates that your company is committed to staying on top of the latest developments and investing in the resources employees need to stay ahead of the curve.

Challenge 4: A generic offer doesn't speak to your candidate's needs.

A decade ago, extending a standard job offer with a competitive salary and benefits package was more than enough to close a top-choice candidate. Today, this same, one-size-fits-all approach to offers no longer works. While the details of the offer (job title, salary, benefits) may stay the same, how you pitch this offer is what makes the difference. Failing to tailor your offer to your candidate is like getting all the way down the field but missing the touchdown on the one-yard line. You're nearly there— don't fail to get over the last hurdle.

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Solution

Ideally, you've used the interview process to better understand your candidate's unique concerns and priorities. You've given the candidate compelling answers to the "Why now?" and "Why us?" questions. Keep the momentum going with your offer. The right offer will speak directly to your candidate's unique concerns and priorities, making them feel like joining your company is an exceptional opportunity they simply can't refuse.

- **Focus on what matters.** When making the offer, reiterate the unique opportunities available through your company and how these opportunities align with your candidate's goals and needs. Does your candidate have an idea about their career trajectory? Do they crave the autonomy to work on a project they are passionate about? Do they care deeply about having direct access to senior leadership or flat hierarchies? While you never want to promise something you can't deliver, assuming you *can* make good on these promises, outline these opportunities in the offer letter. Things like mentorship or promotion pathways can't be agreed to contractually, but you can still put these opportunities down in writing for a candidate to see in conjunction with the formal offer.
- **Be smart about the money.** While I generally advise companies against getting into outright bidding wars over salary, there are ways to get creative with financial incentives. For example, if a candidate is especially sensitive to salary, simply handing over the money up front could leave you hanging when the candidate bolts



for an even higher salary in six months. Instead, consider offering a retention bonus that's staggered over two years with the highest pay-off coming in year two. Or, I see many of my clients putting a long-term incentive plan (LTIP) in place that is designed to reward performance that is not tied to a company's share price.

- **Partner with the right recruiter.** While many tech firms are aware that industry recruiters can help find passive candidates, what these companies may not realize is the important, behind-the-scenes role that a recruiter can play in the offer process. As the candidate's most consistent point of contact, a recruiter will have a deep understanding of what motivates this candidate and what they need from their next employer. The recruiter can also engage in more personal discussions around cultural fit, lifestyle and career ambitions that may be off the table during the interview process. This information helps the recruiter serve as a behind-the-scenes negotiator, piecing together the perfect offer that captures the candidate's unique concerns and priorities.

Next Steps: Creating a Culture Where IT Talent Thrives

Landing top talent in a competitive market can be done— it just takes a willingness to be candid about employer branding and hiring process shortcomings. Identify and removing roadblocks in the interview process will keep top talent engaged longer. From initial outreach to the final offer letter, companies must be proactive and consistently measure process performance.

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Once you do land this talent, don't overlook the final piece of the puzzle: retention. Talent and culture are the biggest drivers of innovation, growth and performance. It is not enough, however, to simply hire talented people. Strive to ensure the experience of working for your company matches the brand promises you have made during the interview process. A positive workplace experience will engage and motivate your new hires. Engaged employees are not only more productive and less likely to be wooed away by competitor offers, but they can also be valuable recruitment allies, turning your company into a sought-after destination for top tech talent.