17 Keys to Hiring the Right Person

NAHB Builder’s Show

Orlando, Florida

February 2007

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Seventeen Keys to Hiring the Right People

Hiring the right people is probably the single most important thing any manager can do. This is especially true in the construction industry. With remote production sites and a tremendous number of subcontractors, suppliers, inspectors, owners, etc., it is critical to the success of an organization that the right people are in place.

As one builder put it, “I am on the threshold of a building boom and I probably won’t be able to take advantage of it. I don’t have the right people in place to allow me to grow. If I had the right people there is no doubt I could double my business. As it is, I will be lucky to grow 10-20% this year and even that will bring us to our knees.”

Another builder who was able to take advantage of growth opportunities had a similar experience. He opened several new offices. He didn’t have a training program in place before he started to grow, so the next year was a real trial. There were a lot of homes that took over 200 days to build. He had some dissatisfied customers and most projects were over budget. His overall profit margins were drastically affected. Fortunately, he was able to turn things around, but only after some intensive training and substantial turnover of production personnel.

The following are guidelines to help you in your efforts to hire the right people.

1. Don’t wait until the last minute to start the hiring process. It is amazing how many builders wait until the very last minute to decide to hire somebody; and normally that is exactly what they get -- some body. The decision to hire a new employee normally should be made a minimum of three months before they are really needed. Under the best of circumstances it normally takes three months to locate, interview, check references, re-interview, hire and initially train a new employee. Employee decisions require advanced planning and some crystal ball forecasting.

Often you are faced with replacing an employee who quits with little or no notice. Even though you are in a tight situation, don’t panic and hire the first warm body you run across. The future of your company depends on your hiring decisions. Hire a replacement from a temp service if necessary to get the work done while you are interviewing candidates for the position.

2. Network. In the hiring process it is definitely “who you know, not what you know” that makes the difference. From the employee’s as well as the employer’s point of view, you will be about twice as successful searching within a network of people you know than by advertising or getting people off the street. Talk to others: your employees, subcontractors, suppliers, other builders, remodelers, bookkeepers, people at church, friends, relatives, or anyone you trust who may know of qualified people. Spread the word. Have your current employees keep an eye open. Develop a list of potential employees for each position in the company. Update it periodically and keep it current.
3. **Look for experienced college graduates.** You may want to consider recent graduates from your local college or university. There are a number of very good construction management programs around the country that have a ready pool of graduates to choose from. Construction management graduates tend to be a little different than the typical college graduate. They are often older, more mature, and often have *several years of experience* in construction.

Most construction management programs require an internship experience prior to graduation. By hiring interns, you have a great opportunity to evaluate potential candidates for future positions in the company at a relatively low cost.

The best time to recruit college graduates is in October for December graduates (there will likely be a significant number) and February for those May or June graduates. The Manager of Student Chapters for the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) can give you a list of colleges and universities with construction management programs. The NAHB also has a Job Fair in conjunction with the NAHB convention each year. Over 1000 of the top students from throughout the nation attend the job fair and are available for interviews.

Some college graduates have minimal experience. If you have the resources and the time to train these inexperienced graduates, they can be valuable additions to your company. They are well educated and computer savvy. However, don’t expect them to “hit the ground running”. It will be more like a walk. They have some experience but need time to mature and gain experience. They will make mistakes (everyone does) so be prepared for the cost of on-the-job education and training. If you need them to take immediate, full responsibility for the construction of homes, you must carefully interview them to determine their expertise.

4. **Analyze your needs before you start interviewing.** Make a list of the duties and responsibilities for the person you want to hire. Consider the current as well as future needs of the company. Look at the career path of each individual and determine how he or she would likely fit in the organization. Most builders find the creation of position descriptions is a very insightful experience. It helps them solidify what they are looking for in their employees. Because this can be such an effective tool, the Business Management Committee of NAHB has published a compilation of position descriptions for virtually every position in a construction company, from the small volume builder who needs a bookkeeper to the Vice President of Construction. *Job Descriptions for the Home Building Industry 3rd edition.* You can obtain a copy by calling NAHB Builder Books or on their website at: 

http://store.builderbooks.com/cgi-bin/builderbooks/343?id=TvpUrXvc&mv_pc=33.

Look for people who will compliment your current employees. If you have people who are very good at building homes but are not good at customer relations, look for people with very strong interpersonal skills.
5. **Assemble a list of potential employees by using applications.** If you do not have an employee application form, develop one. You can obtain employee application forms at any good office supply store. These will likely be generic forms applicable to any business. Adapt it to your specific needs. Make sure that the pertinent information is contained on the application form, including a list of references. If possible obtain a resume from each applicant.

6. **Rank the applicants.** Once you have the applications and resumes in hand, read them carefully. Highlight those things that are most outstanding about each candidate and those things that you would like to know more about. Then rank them from the most likely prospect to the least desirable. Those applications that are definitely not qualified can be discarded.

7. **Prepare a list of questions.** Before the interview, prepare a list of questions you would like answered by each candidate.

   You need to decide what is important for you to know about each candidate. Ask a lot of open-ended questions. "Can you give me an example in your previous employment when you were required to __________?" "How did you react or handle the situation?" You want to get to know the candidates and how they would perform in your work environment, not just how you feel about them personally. They may be a great conversationalist but a pretty poor organizer or a pushover as a superintendent. Ask questions that require the candidate to relate real life experiences. For instance, you could ask, "Can you give me an example of a time when you were required to hold the line with a subcontractor and how you handled the situation." Generally, you will have greater success asking the candidate to relate actual experiences from previous employment situations than asking how they would respond to hypothetical situations. When relating actual experiences, candidates find it harder to guess what the interviewer is seeking. They must instead think of situations and relate what actually happened. You might ask them, "What is your greatest weakness?", or "If you were hiring you for this position, what would be your greatest concern?" Or you might ask, "What is your greatest strength?" or, "What do you have to offer in this position that no one else does?" You might ask why they are considering a change in employment, or why they are interested in the position you have available. (See the appendix)

8. **Don’t do all of the talking.** Inexperienced interviewers typically ask whatever question comes to mind and often spend the majority of the time talking instead of listening. After the interview they wish they had asked different or additional important questions or they are so enamored with their own performance that they are impressed with how well the candidate did in the interview when in fact they may not have said much. Research on interviewing techniques indicates that the most successful interviewers do relatively little of the talking. An effective interviewer listens at least 2/3 of the time. Focus on asking a lot of leading or open-ended questions and then let the candidate express herself.
9. **Take notes.** Immediately after the interview, take some time to jot down your reactions. Even if you have another interview scheduled immediately afterward, take the time to record your impressions between the interviews. The few notes you jot down may be the most accurate information you will have. Do not take any more notes during the interview than absolutely necessary. This often puts the candidate on the defensive. The candidate may become preoccupied with worrying about what they said or did wrong and wonder how they are doing.

10. **Consider using a personality or job compatibility profile.** Many companies who administer a personality profile or a job compatibility profile have found them very valuable. Such profiles can often pinpoint with greater accuracy the personality characteristics of a candidate. For example, if you need a superintendent who is organized and can work well under pressure without becoming frazzled, a personality profile can help you identify people who have strong skills handling stressful situations.

Personality and job compatibility profiles provide a lot to discuss in a second interview. You can simply ask the candidate to confirm whether the outstanding characteristics (positive or negative) indicated on the profile are indicative of how the candidate perceives him or herself. Many people are amazed at how accurately such profiles describe them and it opens up the conversation to areas they would not have revealed without the profile results.

11. **Check references.** The best information you will likely obtain about a candidate will most likely be the information you receive from those who know the candidate best. It is amazing how many people skip this important step, however former employers are often excellent sources of information. The candidate will often supply a list of references. Expect references to give glowing remarks about the candidate. Ask these references hard and direct questions. Ask the references for other people who know the candidate well, or ask for the names of two people who worked with the candidate at their last indicated place of employment. In today’s legal environment many people are very reluctant to answer questions about candidates for employment. You may have to be very tactful and develop trust with the person before asking the tough questions.

12. **Never settle for just one interview or make an offer at the first interview.** It is important to interview each candidate several times. It is a good practice to interview the candidate in different settings. If you are interviewing the candidate on a college campus, it is also important to bring the candidates to your operation. Let the candidate see the environment in which they will be working. Give the candidate a lot of time to ask you questions in the follow-up interviews. It is just as important for the candidate to feel good about you and your company as it is for you to find the right person for the job.

Spend some time showing her/him your operation. Explain how the candidate would fit into you company. Introduce her/him to the key players, especially
those she/he would likely interact with most. Give the candidate time alone with those key players. Get the reaction of the key players concerning their interview(s) with the candidate. If the immediate supervisor is not doing the hiring directly, make sure the supervisor has the opportunity for an in depth interview of the candidate. Spend as much time with the candidate in as many different ways as possible before making an offer. You may want to have two or more people involved in follow-up interviews. It is often easier to concentrate on the candidate when more than one person is doing the talking. Some experts in the field even encourage employers to do a “home interview”, where you have the opportunity to meet the candidates’ spouse or family to determine their compatibility with the company.

13. **Re-rank the candidates.** Review your most important needs in hiring a person for the position and then compare each candidate to the requirements. After the follow-up interviews rank the candidates. Note the strengths and weaknesses of each. Discuss the candidates with those who interacted with them.

14. **Make a final decision.** When you have weighed all of the data and searched your own feelings as well as the feelings of those directly involved, make a final decision. Consensus decision-making is an important part of the process. Discuss openly the feelings of all concerned and then see if you can come to a consensus as to who should be hired.

15. **Make the offer.** When you have made your final decision, prepare an offer. Hire the best candidate. Be prepared by doing your homework, researching the market in your area and determining the competitive salaries/wages for the position you are filling. Make sure you know the salary and benefits requirements of the candidate as much as possible. Compare the candidate’s requirements with what you are willing to offer. Prepare the offer including base salary (wage) and fringe benefits including vehicle allowances, vacation, insurance coverage, sick leave, etc. Be prepared to answer any questions regarding the offer or benefits. Discuss the future career path and possibilities with the candidate; but in doing so make it clear that their future career path is dependant on performance, market conditions and the company’s needs. Have the essential elements of the offer prepared in writing so the candidate can see them. Give them a reasonable but limited time to think it over.

16. **Train, train, train.** Every employee deserves the opportunity to be properly trained. Many employers forget the next and perhaps the most important step, training. Often people are hired in the heat of battle. You need them to hit the ground running immediately. It is not likely to happen, so do not fool yourself or destroy an otherwise good employee. It does no good to spend all this time and effort finding and hiring the right people then burn them out in the first few weeks. These kind of expectations can cause a new employee to become so frustrated that they quit.
Develop a good training program that presents the requirements of the job in a logical and controlled manner without the pressure of ongoing problems and difficult situations. Teach them the way things should be done. Teach them good habits and practices. Often the employee will come to the job with some bad habits from a previous employer. Show them the right way to do things. Provide a good mentor for them. Supervisors or a good fellow employee who does the job well will be invaluable in training the new employees. Develop a checklist of things the new employee needs to learn and master. Then develop exercises or opportunities to teach them those things. Check the item off the list as the new employee masters that item.

17. **Have fun.** Most important, have fun with the process. Finding and hiring new employees can be both very challenging and rewarding experience. A lot depends on how you approach the task. The future of your company depends on the way you hire new employees. If you do it well, it can be one of the most exciting things you do.

Good luck and good hiring!
IMMEDIATELY AFTER the interview, evaluate the candidate and record your impressions.

1. Tell me how you prepared for this interview.
2. Why are you applying for this position?
3. Tell me about your education.
4. Why did you decide to attend college at ______?  
5. Why did you major in __________________?  
6. What was your most difficult class? Why?
7. What extra curricular activities did you participate in?
8. Were you employed during your schooling or during your summer breaks? What did you do? How did you obtain your position?
9. Did you participate in sports? What did you do?
10. What are your goals now that you are graduating?
11. Where do you see yourself five years from now? 10 years?
12. What leadership positions have you held?
13. What is the best idea you have ever persuaded your boss/peers to accept? How did you convince them?
14. Describe your best or worst boss.
15. Do you work better with a micro or macro manager? Why?
16. What would you do if your boss asked you to do something in a specific manner and you felt like you had a better way of accomplishing the task?
17. What do you do if your boss doesn’t realize his/her thinking is out of date?
18. Tell me about a criticism that you have received which you did not necessarily agree with. How did you react?

19. Describe a situation when you have had to deal with someone who was difficult to get along with. How did you handle it?

20. Describe your typical day.

21. How have you overcome obstacles that have prevented you from completing projects on time?

22. What do you do if you are given an important job to do with an unreasonable deadline?

23. What do you do if you are given too much work to do?

24. Give me examples when you did more than was required in your course work or in your job?

25. What do you do if your accuracy is challenged?

26. How would you handle a person who is not performing up to your standards?

27. While at your present/former job, describe your customers and how you provided good customer service.

28. Have you ever had to go the extra mile to satisfy a customer? Tell me about what you did.

29. What additional strengths do you have that we haven’t talked about?

30. Why should you be considered for this position?

31. Do you have any geographic preferences where you want to work or live? Why?

32. Do you have any outstanding offers?

33. If we were to offer you a job as a , what additional training do you feel you would need?

34. Do you have any questions for me?