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Seize chance to hire smart in today's talent-rich environment

The job market is flooded with top talent. Extensive layoffs and prevalent hiring freezes mean many highly educated, skilled and often experienced workers are finding themselves either underemployed or unemployed.

Many of the work force reductions have occurred in large public companies and big professional service organizations that typically enjoy a competitive hiring advantage because of the attraction of larger companies with aggressive compensation programs.

But now the tide has turned. Organizations of all sizes have a unique opportunity to reassess their teams and identify positions to upgrade.

In doing so, however, there is risk that leadership might be unduly biased by résumé qualifications and experience and therefore fail to hire smart.

So what do we mean by "hiring smart"?

• Assess the team and build internal alignment: Conduct an accurate assessment of the entire team and determine the organization's needs and where improvements can be made. Once that is done, leadership must align the organization in support of the direction. A key factor is to adopt a plan to effectively communicate the results of the assessment and the hiring strategy to all constituents.

• Hire smart people: One of the curious fallouts of the current recession is that highly educated, smart people who have previously been heavily recruited by major employers are in the market looking for jobs.

In many of the layoffs, job performance and intellect were not issues. They have been victims of circumstance and poor management decisions. As a result, smart, capable people are available. The challenge is to ensure that they are not only well-educated and intellectually competent, but also enthusiastic about their profession and their job opportunity.

In the recruiting process, probe these issues and be satisfied that the candidate does not manifest resentment and distrust because of his or her experience, but rather exuberance and a sense of challenge and opportunity.

• Hire from culture: When looking to hire, it is critical to determine whether the candidate is aligned with the company's mission and core

approach over the past decade and pushed compensation to unsustainable levels. The impact of those decisions has resulted in a material imbalance between compensation models and value creation. This has resulted in significant layoffs, salary reductions and hiring freezes.

As hiring opportunities present themselves, business leaders must guard against repeating such mistakes. Customers are sensitive to pricing struc-



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values. So long as the organization's culture is well articulated and clearly communicated, there is no excuse for making a bad hire because of cultural mismatch.

Experience suggests that people who align with their employer's culture but disappoint in terms of job performance can be trained and developed to improve job performance. They often grow into long-tenured, loyal employees and guardians of the company's culture.

On the other hand, high-performing employees who do not "get it" and operate inconsistent with the culture of the organization rarely evolve to embrace the culture. These employees typically have a cancerous effect on the people around them. Avoid such hires regardless of how good they appear to be.

• Hire with financial responsibility: Business leaders today are compelled to operate conservatively in all aspects of their business. In the process of attracting new talent, it is important to remain committed to fiscal responsibility, even when presented with the opportunity to attract the best and brightest.

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approach over the past decade and pushed compensation to unsustainable levels. The impact of those decisions has resulted in a material imbalance between compensation models and value creation. This has resulted in significant layoffs, salary reductions and hiring freezes.

As hiring opportunities present themselves, business leaders must guard against repeating such mistakes. Customers are sensitive to pricing structures, and are looking for management to contribute value and not merely pass through excessive cost in the form of higher prices. With a disciplined, performance-based compensation structure that balances customer interests with those of the internal team, everyone has a chance to win.

In many respects, we are in uncharted waters when it comes to the available talent pool, its mobility and the opportunities this presents to companies. The number of very talented business executives, investment bankers, lawyers, architects and engineers that are available is staggering.

Well-managed companies that are succeeding in this environment have the opportunity to capitalize on this unique set of circumstances. Determine your needs even if they are not readily apparent by reassessing your entire team. Find the best and brightest — those who connect with your culture — and be disciplined in your approach to compensation. Proceed wisely and carefully and you absolutely can hire smart in today's environment.

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