

**DRINK IT
ALL IN**

SELECTING TOP TALENT

Trends, Lessons Learned,
and Best Practices from
America's Top Employers

This paper summarizes a discussion hosted by Coca-Cola at their global headquarters in Atlanta on May 20, 2015 on the topic of "Selecting Top Talent." In attendance were a group of senior Talent leaders from leading companies. The discussion focused on best practices and lessons learned, which are captured in this article. In addition, this paper contains conclusions from a literature review on the same topic, plus trends in assessment technology. Those who participated in the discussion are listed on [page 6](#).

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Smarter People Investments

The ability to create a high performing team of talented individuals aligned with business goals is a priority for any company. After all, the people an organization employs are simultaneously its most valued asset and its largest expense. As such, it is crucial that companies get the hiring process right — from engaging the best candidate sources, identifying individuals with the greatest likelihood of success, onboarding those candidates effectively and providing the ongoing support and development to help them grow professionally. However, given a challenging hiring environment, often characterized by high turnover, growing competition and rampant skills gaps, this is easier said than done.

Certainly, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to talent acquisition (TA); what works for one company might not be the best approach for another. Still, there are common themes and strategies that can help any employer improve how they hire, engage and retain top talent. And, at a time when many companies are struggling to compete for the talent their organizations need to be successful, recognizing the best practices and proven tools to enhance talent acquisition can make a significant difference.

The challenges and opportunities of today's hiring landscape were brought front and center in a recent event hosted by Coca-Cola. During this "Think Tank," talent acquisition leaders from some of the most successful hiring organizations gathered for a day of in-depth discussion, lively debate and exchange of ideas on how they can continually improve their talent acquisition efforts. Ranging from how their companies source talent to how they interview and evaluate them, participants shared a wealth of best practices that can help any company enhance their recruiting strategies.

The best way to organize the ideas, perhaps, is to follow the funnel — the path by which roles are identified, described, and communicated, and matched with a winnowed list of candidates until a hire is made.

A DISCERNING LOOK AT TALENT NEEDS

Let's begin by examining the population of roles an organization must fill. Many businesses have a tendency to use a standardized approach to staffing their positions. After all, common wisdom indicates that standardization breeds consistency and economies of scale, and with continuous improvement efforts, leads to efficiency. However, one standardized method may not be the most effective.

This group of professionals spent some time discussing a more discerning approach to viewing talent. Instead of an even "peanut butter spread" treatment of roles, a different approach categorizes roles by examining two factors:

- 1. Criticality to the business**
- 2. Talent availability**

In a culture that values fairness, as is common in the U.S., it can be difficult to shift to a mindset wherein *not* every role is equal. Certainly, every role has a level of importance, but assessing *criticality to the business* is a way to suss out roles that — when filled with exceptional talent — can make exponentially greater progress toward achieving business objectives than others. Paying a disproportionate amount of effort on filling roles that are most critical is a smart business decision.

The most critical roles vary from company to company, depending on strategic goals. For

a retailer, a most critical role may be that of a merchant. For consumer packaged good companies, it may be the role of product manager. And critical roles are not limited to those that are salaried; hourly positions can be categorized as critical, too.

Determining the criticality of a role takes thoughtful consideration by business leaders, and requires alignment with hiring managers — the assessment should not be done by TA alone. Newly hired TA leaders charged with revitalizing recruiting may need to invest effort in educating and influencing business leaders — especially in companies without a strong talent management infrastructure and culture.

In addition to examining criticality, talent acquisition professionals also need to examine *talent availability* as they tackle open roles. On the surface, the consequences of talent availability seem clear cut — that it would be a positive thing to have lots of talent to select from, and a negative thing to find that talent were scarce. However, each end of the spectrum carries its own challenges. For example, when talent is plentiful, companies still struggle to find the most efficient way to wade through the stacks and stacks of applicant and find the best fit candidate.

Think Tank participants discussed the interaction of these factors — talent availability and criticality — represented in a 2x2 matrix wherein organizational roles could be plotted.



It becomes clear that each quadrant or category of roles, dictates a different treatment: Recruiting for a critical role for which talent is scarce looks different than recruiting for a non-critical role for which talent is abundant.

The varying approaches for each quadrant in the 2x2 extend beyond the scope of talent acquisition staff, too. TA may be finding itself playing a greater role in educating hiring managers about how they should handle candidates from the different quadrants. The overly critical, skeptical, executive interviewer trope doesn't play well with passive candidates that recruiters worked so hard to woo.

Some of the Think Tank folks pointed out that the 2x2 analysis can be influenced by region, where concentrations of talent in a particular discipline may vary by geography. In Silicon Valley, the availability of IT talent will look different than it does in Biloxi, MS, and dictate different staffing strategies.

This more refined perspective on talent has driven changes in the structure of TA departments within organizations. While the workgroup names vary, more mature TA units are organized in a way akin to the 2x2 matrix, with the most seasoned and effective recruiters working on critical roles that are hard to fill. An entire TA career path is borne of this thinking, too, where new, junior recruiters start with roles that are less critical, and where they can leverage technology to help narrow the field before they make their first screening call. The next step in the career path might be to work to fill roles where talent is abundant, but the criticality of the position calls for nuanced discretion in identifying the best fit.

THE FIRST ARTIFACT: THE JOB SPEC

After the group discussed this refined way of looking at talent and roles, they directed their attention at what is often one of the first artifacts in the hiring process: the job spec. Consider the vast applicability of an effective job description. While the hiring manager is familiar with the ins and outs of a job, s/he must be able to convey its meaning to a number of stakeholders:

- To TA, to describe the roles and responsibilities to potential hires
- To Compensation, to determine pay scale
- To adjacent leaders and peers, to establish organizational boundaries

- To his/her team, to clarify roles
- To the eventual incumbent, to set objectives and expectations.

Despite the importance of the job description, managers are still recycling them from years ago, rather than making them more relevant to today's job seekers. Instead of using the job description, hiring managers often have separate conversations with each of these stakeholder groups and disregard the outdated job description altogether.

Participants shared a range of strategies they found fruitful, such as reviewing job descriptions, taking out internal jargon, and using more common language. Another strategy is to be much more specific and descriptive in the job description, including areas like scope, risk, budget, direct reports, and level of decision making. Since the job duties of a common position may be nearly the same for any company, it is important to show any differentiators unique to the company, highlighting its culture or commitment to employee development.

Further, this team of professionals cited the importance of distinguishing between the *job description* and the *job posting*, as this difference can be critical to the company's ability to attract needed talent. While the job description describes the features of the job, it may do little to encourage candidates to apply. However, a job posting should act to engage job seekers, culling the most important responsibilities,

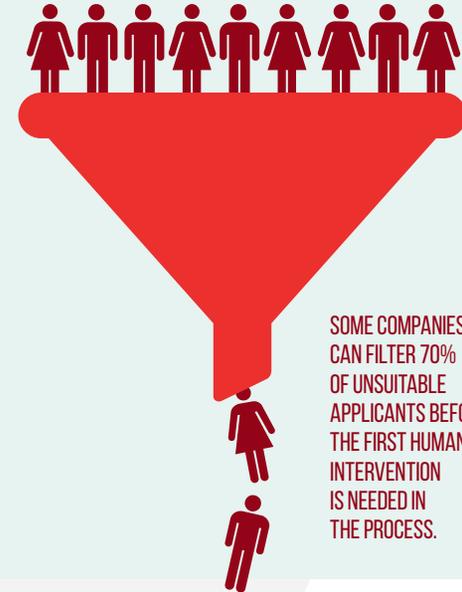
competencies and qualifications from the job descriptions, as well as offering a compelling description of the company and department. To ensure effective job postings, one participant cited their company's use of the Textio platform, which offers a real-time, numerical score predicting the success of a job listing and offers guidance on how to improve.

FILTERING CANDIDATES

The Think Tank discussion turned its attention to a point further in the recruiting process: tackling the list of applicants. For high talent availability roles, it's no small task. Participants discussed some of their roles for which they had high talent availability, and depending on the company's reach, reported hundreds, and sometimes thousands of applicants. How do they make sure they're filtering the right applicants out, and seeking the best?

Most mature organizations have optimized their Applicant Tracking Systems to take a first pass in narrowing the field without human intervention. They've developed online questions to take inventory of key skills and competencies as well as to knock out applicants that don't meet required or even preferred levels of experience or capability.

Some companies in our discussion continued to winnow the list of candidates by electronically administering a values (fit) assessment, and



then a more specific competency assessment for remaining applicants. The list reduces further when asked to complete a video interview: some applicants self-select out before they attempt it.

With automation, some of the more mature companies can filter 70% of unsuitable applicants before the first human intervention is needed in the process.

With roles that have low talent availability, the process looks different, especially for critical roles. The recruiter sources passive candidates—those who aren't actively looking for a job. Once they engage potential talent, they employ a high-touch approach, building a relationship while seeking to understand and meet the candidate's unique needs.

For these scarce candidates, recruiters try to make the process as seamless and easy as possible. Some Think Tank participants indicated they still require them to apply online, but the process can be conducted via a private portal with a streamlined flow and only a few questions to answer.

While most organizations represented in the discussion use face-to-face interviewing as the one of the last steps in the selection process, the interviews for scarce talent might be with seasoned executives. The panel of industry experts as interviewers makes candidates feel more confident that they would be joining a team of competent colleagues, should they decide to accept the job.

One of the companies in our discussion used a challenging simulation assessment as one of the last steps in the selection process. It served to provide a preview of the kind of work required for the role, but also created a sense that the candidate would be joining an exclusive team comprised of those who could meet stringent requirements.

Realistic job previews (RJPs) are also effective for streamlining the list of candidates for roles in which talent is abundant. Some participants reported that their organizations created videos to convey positive — and negative — aspects of the job, in the hopes that some candidates would self-select out of the running.

INTERNAL MOVES

The companies engaged in our Think Tank had varied approaches for managing internal and external talent. For example, those from more mature organizations viewed interactions with internal candidates as an opportunity to strengthen their relationship and affinity with the company. Internal candidates were interviewed first, got more frequent process status updates, and tailored offer or decline letters.

On the other hand, companies with less mature TA organizations tended to differentiate internal candidates less frequently. They also applied archaic policies around internal talent moves, such as, requiring an employee to be in role for 18 months before applying for another. Astute participants pointed out the challenges with these policies when business demands that talent move seamlessly to meet changing needs.



Another area of variability in our discussion was around the relationship of Talent Management and Talent Acquisition. More mature organizations viewed Talent Management as a discipline, and therefore organizational structure, that included Talent Acquisition. After all, it is difficult to claim that Talent Management focuses on getting the right people in the right role at the right time, when Talent Acquisition is siloed separately.

Many Talent Management leaders are now following the logical business reasoning to integrate these two functions, and have Talent Acquisition included in scope. But many struggle to understand the numerous moving components in talent acquisition processes, and have a greater appreciation for the effort it takes to keep processes running smoothly while managing a host of stakeholders.

The ownership of employee talent profiles is often a sticking point as these two organizations are integrated. Traditionally, Talent Management owned the repository of incumbents' resumes, but now this information is often shared more broadly with Talent Acquisition professionals so they can consider a wider range of possibilities for filling roles. Many leaders reported some resistance to sharing information — often because of business leaders' fears of losing good talent, or the fear that scarce talent would be tapped haphazardly, without governance.

THE JOURNEY TO TALENT ACQUISITION SUCCESS

The challenges surrounding the hiring process will not disappear anytime soon, making it crucial that companies continually fine-tune their hiring strategies in order to find the top talent for their organizations. And one of the most important factors in any hiring strategies is to understand that HR and Talent Acquisition teams cannot always push change themselves; they must influence a strategy that is supported from the top. By focusing on best practices for finding the talent they need today, while showing how the company can support their future growth, organizations can ensure a successful talent acquisition strategy that gets top talent through the door — and keeps them there. ■



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Interested in hosting a Talent Think Tank on a topic of importance to you, at your location? Contact linda@teamtga.com for more information.

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