

Do You Fit?

Whenever I speak with any of you on the phone or in person, the topic of “fit” to a job specification nearly always surfaces. This issue is so sensitive, that it has become an open wound and is causing many hiring executives, recruiters and especially job seekers alike to have fits due to their frustration. Candidate fit has caused me to have more than a few fits of my own during my career in IT executive search. I have some definite ideas about fit, and I think at times they have made me appear to be a misfit to a few of my clients.

Many of you are tired of sending hundreds of unanswered resumes into the black holes of cyberspace. Recruiters are swamped with Emails and faxes and one or two have requested that The TENG members stop submitting resumes on specific leads. Some of you have complained about the behavior of recruiters. Most of you are selective and self-screening when submitting your resume, unfortunately others are not. When I insert the advice “Qualified members only should apply”, I mean that we are all grown ups here. You should know within reason, how well you fit a given specification. If the client wants retail and you come from financial services, don’t reply. You may think you can manage any IT environment in any business, but that’s not how the companies see it. If you are missing important pieces of the requirement, don’t send your resume. Is this innovative? No, it is stifling, but it is what exists and I can’t express it in a more direct fashion. Think about how you hire for your own staff. Some of you have sent me for the anti-acid pills when I have performed searches for you. Remember however, that good fits are frequently ignored for reasons I will share below. We have to learn to live with that. In our recent era, I have seen cases where frustration sometimes begets desperation. This exacerbates the problem, which is complicated enough as it is.

The fit of any candidate to a job is driven by a number of factors, the obvious ones being industry, technology, education, culture and price point. Other more intangible issues have an influence on fit, and can include urgency to fill the position, hiring executive prejudices, lack of consensus within a company, misunderstandings and market conditions.

Let’s consider the problems, issues and motivators at work in our present business climate:

- Nearly every job seeker today feels that they are a non-fit. I have heard hundreds of stories over the past year from candidates who are exasperated by their search experience. Everyone can recount at least one scenario where they seemingly fit the specification, but didn’t get the interview or the offer. Paranoia is the dominant emotion when writing a resume or cover letter. Everyone is looking for that silver bullet that will make it a natural fit.
- In any tight job market, fit becomes more critical. When companies hire during slow economic conditions, hiring executives are under financial pressure to fill

only the most needed positions with the best people available. Fearful of criticism, they look for people whose experience is a perfect match to their job specification. Should the new hire fail, the hiring executive does not want to be criticized for hiring a non-fit or a close-fit that failed.

- In addition to tighter requirements, some companies will try to “bundle” two or three jobs into one specification, to hold down headcount. Many of you have shared stories with me of the technology executive job specifications from hell that require the anointed candidate to be a strategist, implementer, and hands-on doer all rolled into one. This is another point of contention: what do companies mean when they want someone who is hands on? Since when does a CIO earning over \$200,000 per year advise the CEO, use Java and XML, hook up users to the LAN or rebuild a server? I’ve heard more than a few heated words over that one.
- Unrealistic job specifications, or ones that change during the interview and selection process, usually indicate deep indecision on the part of hiring executives. They may know they have a need, but business uncertainty causes nervousness in the executive suite. Businesses are collections of people and they therefore collectively magnify the emotions we feel as individuals. When we are not confident of the future, we postpone important spending decisions, sometimes with lame and inappropriate excuses. Or we set unrealistic goals to trigger spending, knowing that they can’t be met, thereby taking away the pressure of having to make a buy decision. It’s almost like saying, “If I hit the lottery, I’ll buy a bigger house”. What are the odds of you hitting the lottery?
- High unemployment causes companies to feel that people are plentiful at bargain prices. Even when considering candidates who are near perfect fits, some hiring executives choose to continue the search, feeling that someone better will come along for less money. Too many choices breed indecision. In the “hotter” market, two years ago, people were being hired under less stringent requirements. The competition for candidates was so extreme, that companies lowered their hiring standards to avoid losing someone who may have been a good fit, but not a great one. This creates a “pendulum effect” in the market of supply and demand, which has a very strong influence on defining proper fit.
- The concept of fit varies with each hiring executive. Some are precise and uncompromising. Others will hire someone with a majority of the qualifications, factoring in intelligence and motivation. Some executives will loosen requirements after a lengthy, frustrating search especially if a major deadline is approaching with their own job in the balance. Timing is frequently a major influence on a company’s flexibility or rigidity on hiring specifications. Some will argue that it is the primary one.
- Newly created positions may have unrealistic requirements. This may be due to a lack of understanding and/or consensus among top management. They know they need someone to do something, but have difficulty specifying and articulating the exact details. Some recruiters refuse to take on searches for such positions because client executives may disagree with each other due to political and procedural issues, and continually modify the hiring requirements. This makes the recruiter’s job more frustrating, time consuming and less profitable because the officials are constantly moving the goal posts.

- The hiring executive may do a poor job of communicating requirements to the human resources people. This gets amplified if the HR people go out to a search firm. Conversely, some search firms may not have an adequate understanding of the search assignment. This may be more common with contingent recruiters because they are not furnished the high level of detail that is given to the retained recruiters. It is less common and forgivable with retained search firms, yet no recruiter can have all the answers.
- Company officials and third-party search firms alike are receiving thousands of resumes. They can't acknowledge all of them. Resumes of candidates, who are good fits, are frequently overlooked or lost in the shuffle. In tight economic conditions, the human resources department may have been downsized or outsourced. Search firms have reduced staff overhead. Unqualified people may be screening your resume out before it gets to a hiring executive.
- Some TENG members have reported that recruiters have told them that they are among hundreds or thousands of responses. This is the down side of the big job boards and Internet recruiting. There is a big difference between being hand picked and chosen by lot. Internet recruiting has speeded up the process, but has taken much of the personal touch out of recruiting. People at all levels are viewed as a commodity, and by extension, so are the recruiters, the job boards and the other advertising media. Respect and courtesy have disappeared.

How do search firms fit into this?

- Search firms by default are information brokers and competitive intelligence specialists. They are paid based upon their ability to discover and use information. Their sales process is complicated by the fact that they deal with two decision makers. If a candidate rejects an offer, they can't produce a clone. They typically have to continue the search. Depending upon timing, this may happen when the "trails have gone cold".
- Retained search firms are hired by companies to perform a process. They are paid whether or not they succeed in delivering a finalist who starts work with the client. Word of failure spreads fast. Their job is to find the best person available within an industry or specialty or both. They interview their clients and write the job specification that becomes their operating benchmark used to screen all candidates. They work under intense pressure, because someone has paid them a considerable amount of money in advance and in good faith. If the search takes longer than 90 to 120 days, the client frequently becomes anxious and angry. Retained search firms want to find their prey, not be found by them. However, they won't ignore a top candidate for an ongoing search, but they don't want to receive resumes of non-fits.
- Contingent recruiters are paid when a candidate they present is hired. Many of the processes used by contingent recruiters are the same as their retained counterparts, but they are not as deep. Companies use contingent recruiters to fill senior level positions to save money and take a more market-driven approach. Instead of paying a thirty to thirty-five per cent retainer on total compensation, plus expenses, a company will pay a contingency fee of twenty to thirty per cent of the

base salary, typically with no expenses. However, a contingent recruiter won't do as many reference checks, nor will they perform as much research. A client is hoping that if they ask three or five contingent recruiters to work on the same job, that they will find more competitive candidates within a shorter period of time than one retained firm would. Contingent recruiters are more tempted to submit the resumes of candidates who are not perfect fits, because they don't know what their competition is doing and they hope they will get lucky. This is especially true if the client has not shared with them sufficient details concerning the position to be filled. While this makes the process more random and increases candidate frustration, it is successful and clients will continue to use it. Some contingent recruiters are excellent interviewers and screeners, offering retained level quality, while others are mere resume pushers, who hope that they will win the numbers game. Choose carefully.

- Clients frustrate recruiters when they continually say, "show us more candidates". This is made worse if they offer little if any feedback on prior submissions, which the recruiter felt to be good fits. Retained recruiters have no choice and must continue the hunt. Contingent recruiters may choose to continue submitting candidates, or may decide to pursue another search that appears to be easier. If any candidates are left pending without feedback, they may never know this, unless the recruiter calls them to announce their withdrawal.
- Marketplace extremes may bring out the worst behavior in recruiters. Two years ago, the companies complained that recruiters did not return their phone messages; nowadays the candidates have the same complaint. These same marketplace conditions brought out the greed in candidates two years ago, and the backlash by companies today with downward pressure on compensation.
- Bill Vick, Chief Executive of the Recruiters' On-Line Network, once said, "recruiting is still a contact sport", people have to interact at a personal level. In the spirit of that, while the Internet has cause some changes and attendant pain to the process, it would appear that the recruiter who builds relationships will continue to be an important contributor to the identification, selection and hiring of top strategic talent.

What should you do?

- Read a job specification carefully. Some are better than others. I can't tell you if having eighty per cent of the qualifications will get you in the door. Every company's filter is different, but they're all pretty tight right now. In today's market, you probably need one hundred ten per cent. But this too will pass as conditions improve.
- If the job description is too vague, avoid responding to it or answer it and forget it. If the company wants to talk, they will call you.
- Analyze each job description from the company view. Would you hire yourself for the job you are reviewing? Would you pay a search fee and relocation costs to hire yourself into a specific job?

- If you send repeated resumes to companies and recruiters you will probably not get an interview, and you will annoy them. The “squeaky wheel” is ignored and being one labels you as a loose cannon or desperate person.
- Remember who treats you well. If a recruiter is arrogant, abrupt and disrespectful and is hiding details, do you want them to represent you when you are in a hiring mode? I learned to vote with my checkbook many years ago. Treat recruiters well. Turnabout is fair play. Some top executives treat all recruiters as undesirable people, without getting to know them on an individual basis. Some bad apples exist in the recruiter ranks, but this is true in any profession. Judge them carefully. Shortsighted executives deny themselves needed allies when they are back in search mode.
- Never attempt to go around a recruiter to the company, especially with a retained firm. A retained recruiter is on the company payroll, if only temporarily. They have the right to end your candidacy for any reason, and the client will back them. A serious breach like this would be unforgivable. If you do this to a contingent recruiter, the client will eliminate you.
- If you wish to refer a colleague to a retained recruiter, do it because they are a good fit for the job. Many contacts have sent me the resumes of friends whom they state fit my search. I have then learned they are merely trying to help an unemployed associate who is a poor fit. This wastes time and helps no one. It is better to ask the recruiter if they wish to be made aware of a top executive who may have value in a future search. Let the recruiter decide.
- These are stressful times. People under stress may act in a less than professional manner. This includes hiring executives, recruiters and job seekers. Many of you are struggling financially. Try to avoid showing this to the outside world. Companies hire executives who act out of confidence, not desperation. Don’t send your resume to every job listing you see, hoping to get lucky. Exercise some quality control.
- The entire selection process can be painfully unfair. Why should it be any different than life itself?

There are no easy answers to the fit question. I feel that IT people are some of the best and brightest in the business world, but they are risk averse and sometimes lacking in common sense. No one is born with job skills. They learn them along the way. On many occasions, I have seen a better person overlooked for the “been there, done that” candidate, which is the typical IT hiring method. I realize that this is all perception. The “do it yesterday” pressures of today’s business world allow little time to find the water cooler before you impact the bottom line. The hiring executive is the buyer and is free to choose whom they please. But sometimes the candidate who is an exact fit has no challenge doing it again, or they bring their own biases to the process that ultimately conflict with the hiring executive’s expectations. Many candidates, who are exact fits fail, leave or are fired for these reasons. Moreover, I frequently question a company’s determination when a job is unfilled for an excessive period of time. If no perfect fits surface within ninety days, then perhaps someone who has sixty per cent of the qualifications, who is smart, well educated, energetic and motivated will be more

successful. They may bring some new ideas to the job and make greater contributions, since the company is investing in them.

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