

The Difficult Hire in the Public Sector

Dennis Doverspike, Ph.D. & Rhonda Tuel

Note: This paper is based on a talk given at the 2000 IPMAAC Conference and on the book *The Difficult Hire: Seven Recruitment And Selection Principles For Hard to Fill Positions* which is available from Impact Publications via the [IPMAAC Bookstore](#). For more information, contact Dennis Doverspike at DennisDoverspike@aol.com.

Recruiting is a function of attitude. It is a function of your attitude as a recruiter. It is a function of the attitude of anyone who works for you as a recruiter and anyone in your organization who takes on the role of a recruiter. And it is a function of the attitude of job candidates.

Performance, in recruiting or any other task, is a function of ability and attitude. Most books and articles on the market deal with recruitment techniques or recruiting knowledge. For example, today internet recruiting is hot. Well, technique and knowledge are important, but as in many areas of life, attitude and motivation are as important or probably even more important. Think to yourself, most people you know, why do they fail, because of a lack of ability or because of a lack of motivation or having the incorrect attitude? Many times, the answer is attitude. Thus, in recruiting, what matters is your attitude, the attitude of the people who recruit for you, and the job candidate's attitude.

We believe that to recruit successfully for hard to fill positions, the recruiter, whether by profession or training, must understand the psychology of the job candidate. The recruiter must understand why people take jobs with organizations and what makes the difficult hire possible. Most of all, the recruiter must believe that they can make the seemingly impossible become a reality and, over time, change the very nature of the organization by hiring high quality employees.

Now, in dealing with recruiting, you will see a lot of people today who draw an analogy between recruiting and selling. We are not major proponents of the view that recruiters must sell the job and organization to the recruit, especially if that involves a hard sell or if it involves making selection as pain free as possible for the job candidate. This is not to say that the sales analogy cannot at times be useful, especially when applied to writing the position advertisement or to closing the hire. However, people value what they believe is hard to get. That is basic human psychology. Effective recruiting requires making the job and the organization something to be desired. A mark of successful recruiting is when the new hire can brag to their friends and family about how proud they are that they got a job with your company. Of course, this process works at peak efficiency when both the recruiter and the recruits truly believe that the job and the company are to be valued and that the new hires have proven their mettle to the company.

Thus, the basis of our philosophy is that recruiting becomes much easier, especially for hard to fill

positions, when a perception of value and a *climate of achievement* is created. A climate of achievement is created by making the job something to be valued and by placing the job candidate in a position where they have to work hard in order to earn the job. By managing perceptions, the recruiter can make the difficult hire a possibility.

When people hear the term *difficult hires*, there is a tendency to think of hiring for a position such as a Ph.D. in polymer chemistry, an expert in the latest computer software, or an international business manager who can speak 20 languages and is familiar with cultural habits throughout the world. Well, those are all difficult hires. However, difficult hires also occur in much less exotic professions.

What makes some hires so difficult? Why are some positions so hard to fill? There are some obvious, fairly concrete reasons which we could cite, including:

- S Jobs which require skills which are in short supply, such as in areas of emerging technologies.
- S The company is in a location where there is a shortage of labor and attracting employees to the area is difficult.
- S The salary for the job is below market or not competitive.
- S The benefits are below market or seen as not competitive.
- S The company has just gone through a well-publicized restructuring or series of layoffs.

The above factors are, of course, important reasons. Unfortunately, they may also be pretty much outside of the control of the recruiter. Why, even when faced with similar circumstances, do some companies find it easier to recruit than others? We believe that it is because of additional factors which are basically perceptual and can be altered by the recruiter or the organization. Difficult hires may also occur because:

- S The job candidate's experience with the recruiter is a negative one. The recruiter creates a negative first impression of the job and the organization.
- S The job has a negative or a poor image. The job is seen as undesirable due to unpleasant working conditions or undesirable hours.
- S The company or the industry has a negative image or is seen as undesirable for some reason. For example, some sales areas -- automobiles, encyclopedias, vacuum cleaners, insurance -- have a negative stereotype associated with the occupation.
- S The recruitment process and/or the job itself fails to meet the basic needs of the job candidate.

The positive side of recruiting for the difficult hire is that the four factors listed above are basically perceptual. In that they are perceptual, the recruiter can change or affect the job candidate's attitudes through the application of certain basic principles.

How can you change these perceptions, by relying upon a set of basic principles:

Basic Principle 1. You are the most important factor in filling the job. Your approach to recruiting and hiring - initial contact, screening, selling - is the most important factor in filling the job.

Basic Principle 2. You must stay in control. During all interviews or communications with the candidate, you must stay in control of the conversation.

Basic Principle 3. You must put the job and the company on a pedestal.

Basic Principle 4. Perceptions are everything and you can change perceptions.

Basic Principle 5. You must control the negatives.

Basic Principle 6. You must fulfill the individual=s needs. You must understand the psychology of the job applicant and work to fulfill the individual=s needs, especially their need for achievement.

Basic Principle 7. Even with hard to fill jobs, set and keep your standards high.

It should be noted that the issues involved in recruiting for the difficult hire in the public sector do appear to be substantially different from those encountered by private organizations dealing with hard to fill positions. The problem for public sector personnel management professionals is often one of how to deal with too many applicants, rather than too few. Although the methods may vary between the public and the private sector, the underlying philosophy which must be adopted by the human resource professional is the same. Thus, the basic principles remain the same, even if the methods for implementing or improving the recruitment process change.

In order to be an effective recruiter, you need to believe in yourself and your organization (or, if your organization currently has problems, then at least what you see the organization becoming in the future). The image the job candidate develops of the company and the job will depend upon you and your attitude. You are the most important factor in recruiting and in making those difficult hires.