Catch Those Programmers!
Secrets Of Successful Recruiting

By Amy Petré Hill

It's Friday afternoon and you are up to your ears in work. One phone line carries a constant barrage of technical support questions, while the other holds an impatient end user, demanding to know why the new 1.1 version of the BASIS ODBC Driver™ hasn't been installed at his site. On top of it all, there is a report program you must finish for your most important client by Monday, and you haven't even begun to get started. You need help and you need it NOW!

This kind of human resource crisis brings high-tech companies running to people like Randy Richardson, president of SSCI, an Albuquerque human resources consulting firm. Richardson has helped high-tech companies, from small firms to Fortune 500 corporations, capture employees with highly sought skills for more than twenty years. His experience suggests that when a company really does hit an employment emergency, it needs to stop and plan before launching into an all-out recruitment blitz.

"I have found that it is absolutely essential to have a recruiting plan," Richardson says. "When companies are desperate for people, they tend only look at the company's immediate needs. They see that they need XYZ, but they don't think through what they are going to need six months to several years down the road. They end up not hiring the right person and having to repeat the process all over again.

"Before you create an ad, just take a little time to think through exactly what position it is that you need to fill, and what kind of a person you need for that position," he says. "Then turn the tables and try to look at the job through a prospective employee's eyes and think through what he or she might want out of the position. The time you spend planning will pay off."

Make A List And Check It Twice

Before a company can effectively begin searching for that perfect employee, a complete, long-term job description needs to be drawn up. A UNIX shop may want to consider including Windows development experience in its job description. Other companies may need to include expertise in new languages, such as Java, or a knowledge of multi-tier client/server software systems.

Spend some time brainstorming with the people in your department or company about exactly what the position will require and with whom this employee will have to work. Write detailed lists that not only cover what the position requires today, but also think through

how the position will evolve one year to three years in the future. Once you have a very clear idea of exactly what the new employee will need to do, it's time to move to the next step: define exactly who the magic person needs to be.

That Magic Someone

So you have a list of things someone needs to do, but who is that someone? What kind of experience, temperament, and skills does this person really need to have? The current shortage of experienced BBx programmers makes it essential that companies stay flexible regarding the kind of person the new programmer needs to be.

"Make sure you keep all your options open when you are considering who you need to fill a position," suggests Richardson. "Before making a search outside your company, take a look around to see who you have."

If there is no one in the organization who can move into the position, one option is to hire programmers who do not have BBx experience but bring with them knowledge of the latest languages, programming styles, and web applications. Because BBx is a relatively easy language to learn, a well-qualified programmer can typically go through BASIS training and be effective within four to six months. For a company that needs someone now, the idea of investing six months in training a programmer can be daunting, but this should be weighed against the time it might take to find an experienced BBx programmer.

If a company really does need someone with years of Business Basic experience, that needs to be clearly understood before the employee search begins. Management experience should also be considered. If you know the job position will require an employee to oversee a growing staff of programmers over then next few years, it may be worth spending the extra time to find someone with good management skills. Recruiting a programmer with Business Basic or management skills will be more challenging, and you should be prepared to offer more money and bigger perks.

Don't Just Show Them The Money, Sell Them The Lifestyle

Most companies, even ones with some recruiting experience, stop after they have developed a comprehensive job description and determined the kind of employee they need. They don't take the time to look at the position and their company from a prospective employee's point of view. In today's competitive market, just offering a job is not enough, you have to sell the quality of life that comes with it.

"Most people don't really take jobs for the money; what they are really looking for is a high quality of life for themselves and their

families," says Richardson. "In the case of the BBx market, this emphasis on quality of life becomes very important because programmers are scarce and you may have to entice a programmer to move thousands of miles away to take your position. You have to offer them compelling reasons to move from Los Angeles to Syracuse. You have to sell a quality of life. And the kind of quality of life you need to sell will depend on the 'who' you need for the position. The needs and wants of a middle-aged programmer and a single person out of college are going to be very different."

Experienced BBx programmers are typically middle-aged to older men with families. For them, the resources your community can offer their families can be the deciding factor in accepting or rejecting a job. Does your area have good schools? Is housing reasonable? Are there colleges, parks, and biking trails close by? Any chamber of commerce will have extensive information on the community. Just call and ask for an information package. Then be sure to include the information in any position posting.

Family-friendly company policies can also draw the more talented programmers to your company. Software has traditionally been a "seventy-hour-a-week" industry, but even the most devoted programmers are finding it a challenge to juggle the responsibilities of being a parent, sharing household responsibilities with a spouse who also works, and meeting tight software deadlines. Companies can make the juggling easier for employees and draw better job candidates by offering flexible schedules. Also, setting up a program with a daycare center near your office, or just making it clear that it is okay to take off a couple of hours to go to a child's activities, can make a big difference.

Younger, single programmers are more likely to be attracted to an interesting community with numerous sports and cultural activities. Let them know about the various social opportunities in your community and how close your business is to a major city or wilderness area. If your community has a large, upwardly mobile single population be sure and mention that fact. Additional vacation time is another perk that might bring programmers to your company rather than the competition.

All programmers will also want help relocating. "I find that many companies miss out on great potential employees because they skimp on relocation," notes Richardson. " I suggest that you offer relocation help from the very beginning. If you can help employees not only move, but assist them in finding a place to live and getting their kids into good schools, you will open a door to some of the best candidates. If your company does not have the internal resources to offer this kind of help, there are relocation firms around the country that can."

And finally, you need to make it clear that new employees will be treated well and have an opportunity to grow in your company.

"Turnover in the high-tech world is high," confirms Richardson. "In my work I keep finding that people leave-regardless of pay-for two reasons. They either feel like they are not respected and not listened to, or they don't have the opportunity to grow and take on more responsibility in their job. You can offer people a lot of money, but if a job is too hard on their families or their sense of self-worth, they will leave. On the other hand, if you clearly demonstrate that you treat all your employees well, offer support for a programmer's continuing education, and provide opportunities for career advancement, you can attract and then hold people who will be long-term assets to your company."

Randy Richardson is president of SSCI, a human resources counsulting group. He can be contacted at 505.268.7812.