How to Hire Great IT People Without Spending a Fortune
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Most companies at least saw one silver lining in the recent economic downturn: They got to hold on to their best employees for a lower cost than would’ve been possible in a healthier job market.

But that’s no longer the case – at least not in IT. According to Bureau of Labor Statistics data from March 2012, the unemployment rate for tech professionals stood at just 3.8%. That’s a big drop from the 5.3% recorded a year ago, and much lower than the overall 8.3% unemployment rate in the U.S.

Companies in many industries are reversing cuts made during the recession and now need more IT talent to catch up on projects that were put on hold over the past few years. In a Robert Half survey, 77% of IT managers said they were optimistic they’d get funding for new IT investments in the second quarter of 2012. And in another survey, Gartner found that twice as many CEOs said they’ll increase IT spending in 2012 compared to those who will decrease it.

That’s leading to increased hiring, according to Robert Half – and a lot of new competition for IT talent. The majority (65%) of IT managers said they were having a hard time hiring qualified employees. That was a higher number than in any other business area looked at in the study.

Hurting the bottom line

Finding skilled tech employees isn’t just a problem for the IT department – lacking the right people in IT can kill productivity throughout the company and have a big impact on the bottom line. Nearly all organizations (93%) say their IT departments lack some necessary skills, according to a recent survey by the Computer Technology Industry Association. Those skills gaps have been hurting several areas, including employee productivity, customer service, new product development and overall profitability, survey respondents said.

Of course, that doesn’t mean IT has an unlimited hiring budget to go and find the best people with perfect skill sets – especially not when most competitors are trying to do the same thing.
What it does mean is that IT managers need to get creative and learn how to bring in the best IT talent without spending too much.

To do that, here are five steps IT departments can take:

1 | Look in Different Places

One tactic many recruiting experts recommend is looking for talent among pools of potential employees that might be overlooked by competitors. Two big ones right now for tech workers: current college students and older workers.

With students, IT departments have had success using internships to bring in young IT professionals. That can help organizations get temporary relief from understaffing at a bargain price as well as giving them early access to potential full-time employees.

Many management experts also encourage companies to get over their fear of hiring “overqualified” employees. This crop of potential employees can include people who switched job areas and are moving back up the ranks in the tech field, or those who found themselves out of work during the slow economy and are willing to take a step back on the corporate ladder.

While managers often fear those people will be dissatisfied in their jobs and bolt for the exit as soon as a new opportunity opens up, smart hires can be found in this talent pool.

Best bet: During the interview, probe to find candidates’ reasons for wanting the position, what they want from the job, and what it will take to keep them there long-term.

2 | Improve Communication with HR

Most often, a company’s HR department is the first step in the job applicant filtering process. The HR manager or a recruiter looks at resumes and forwards qualified applicants to the hiring manager.

Usually, that works – but it can be a problem when it comes to IT hiring. As much as HR folks know about recruiting, they aren’t tech experts. That can lead to great resumes ending up in the trash, or the hiring manager being inundated with unqualified candidates.
The solution: IT managers must give their organizations’ HR department more guidance. For each open position, IT should provide documentation with key words and phrases to look for.

One thing to keep in mind: Be specific and cover all your bases, including both acronyms and the phrases they might replace.

3 | Be Flexible

When hiring for an IT position, flexibility will come in handy both to help the hiring process along and to convince a fence-sitting candidate to accept a job offer.

As any IT manager knows, people who work in technology are extremely busy, and scheduling interviews can often be difficult. Therefore, if the company really wants to hire someone, an IT manager should be willing to schedule interviews at unconventional times, including evenings or even weekends.

That will help get the person in the door quicker, which may let your company hire the person before a competitor does. Also, it can show candidates how much they will be valued if and when they start working.

It’s also a good idea to emphasize the flexibility of the job itself – recruiting experts recommend companies offer flexible scheduling and telecommuting options when possible. That’s a no-cost benefit that can mean a lot to potential employees, especially busy IT professionals.

4 | Emphasize New Technology and Cutting Edge Training

IT professionals are constantly struggling to keep their skill sets up to date. Not only must they stay sharp on basic IT functions, such as networking and desktop support, but there are always new areas that must be learned – including recent trends like cloud computing, big data and mobile development.

That means training and experience in those IT areas can be a low-cost, high-value benefit to offer potential employees. When interviewing candidates, make sure you discuss any aspects of the job that will involve hands-on experience with cutting edge technologies.
Also, tout any training opportunities the company will offer and emphasize the organization’s commitment to helping employees advance and improve their skills.

5 | Hire for Attitude

Offering those learning opportunities to potential employees is not just a benefit that can help recruit talent. It’s also a key way to bring in the best kind of employees: those who have the right attitude and a desire to learn new skills.

While some positions will have a clear requirement for candidates who possess certain skills or experience, many recruiting experts argue that companies focus too much on the skills listed on a resume when they should care more about the attitude of the person they’re hiring.

The reason: Skills can be taught, but attitudes are often set in stone.

Attitude is the main culprit when new hires don’t work out, according to research and training firm Leadership IQ.

The firm tracked 20,000 new hires at various companies and found that 46% of them failed within the first 18 months. And in the vast majority (89%) of cases, attitude was pinpointed as the main problem. Lack of skill was considered the cause in just 11% of the cases.

What it means for IT managers: You may be able to bring in a better hire – and at a lower cost – by finding someone who might not have all the experience and certifications you want, but who expresses a strong desire to acquire new skills and will fit in with your department’s culture.

Conclusion: Hire Right

Finding qualified IT employees is a challenge right now – and it’s only going to get tougher in the coming months as more businesses make new IT investments and need additional tech staff to support them.

But the organizations that beat the competition and win the talent war will be those that look for hires in the right places, focus on low-cost benefits employees want, and improve their recruiting process to make the best hiring decisions.