The Best Job Candidate for the Job
Find the sharpest needle in a haystack, (almost) painlessly.

When John Hulsey lists job openings these days, he’s truly astounded by the results.

“I am seeing candidates with law degrees applying for a receptionist position. I am seeing people apply for any job - any job - no matter what their history is,” the corporate controller for Mantis Financial Group, Inc., in San Diego, Calif., said. “For a receptionist ad on Craigslist, I received 200 responses in a few hours. For an IT specialist ad, I received nearly 100 in 24 hours.” ¹

The hiring experience of late has been similar for Melody McClain, director of human resources for Stearns, a mortgage company in Santa Ana, Calif. As the mortgage industry began to collapse in late 2007, McClain said she started seeing an uptick in resumes. As a privately-held lender not dealing in subprime loans, Stearns didn’t experience the same challenges as some other lenders. Instead, Stearns is thriving, and hiring and the company has been inundated by resumes from mortgage lending professionals who have been laid off. “I was able to get people in receptionist positions who were previously underwriters making six figures. They just wanted to get their foot in the door and hope that something opens up.”

As the trend continued, McClain was forced to change hiring tactics. “I have stopped posting positions for the most part and have gone to other recruitment methods,” she explained. “Because when I post a position I’m getting way too many applicants, and most of them are not qualified or are over qualified.” ²

A changed job market

It’s a sign of the economic times. Since the economic recession began in December 2007 until May of 2009, the U.S. Department of Labor reports that 5.7 million jobs have been lost. This April, nearly all major private-sector industries experienced job losses. Over the past 12 months, the number of unemployed persons has

¹ Hulsey, John. E-mail interview. 14 May 2009.
risen by 6 million, raising the unemployment rate by 3.9 percentage points.³ For employers seeking talented staff, the result is both good and bad.

Hulsey explained, “The pro? I can get a much better candidate for less money. The con? I have to make sure they have a career path identified through my company, or they will already start looking. The other con? The entire hiring process is so much more complicated.”⁴

Companies looking to hire have an enormous field of candidates from which to choose, yet the market is flooded with job applicants, many of them desperate to get work doing something—anything—even if they aren’t remotely qualified.

For McClain, that means a lot of extra work, “We have people applying for positions who have no experience in the lending industry at all. They don’t even read the position description,” she said. “I’ll end up with 340 applications and maybe only 20 actually qualify – so it’s just really too time consuming to actually sit there and look at everyone’s application.”⁵ The result? McClain doesn’t have time to respond to most applicants.

The upward trend in the number of job applicants is affecting both large and small businesses, sending them scrambling for new solutions to finding the veritable needle in a haystack: the best candidate for the job. The question: how?

**Revamping recruitment efforts**

One of the ways companies are getting a selection of highly-qualified candidates is by posting openings with greater discretion. In the past during economically rich times when companies were expanding, job seekers held the cards and companies battled for the best candidates, widely casting their nets. Many companies posted openings on online job search engines, giving hiring organizations access to a pool of applicants of unprecedented proportions. Job seekers found greater convenience in the application process: clicking on a single “apply now” button and attaching a resume allowed them to apply for hundreds of jobs with relative immediacy, without the inconvenience of sending a paper resume and cover letter via U.S. mail.

Kent Johnson, partner of Davinci Search, a talent acquisition company based in St. Paul, Minn., explained why this situation is, in some cases, far less than ideal,
stating that advertising on multiple sites is probably not the best way to promote an opening. "...but some companies feel compelled to spread the word of an opening and are willing to handle the onslaught of resumes. Again, a bigger supply doesn’t mean a better supply. Most experienced recruiters will tell you that you won’t find the best candidates from posting on the average job board, rather your best people come from referrals and targeted recruiting. Most companies would be better served to offer a strong internal referral program versus dumping tons of money on passively recruiting on job boards.”

6 Johnson, Kent. E-mail interview. 14 May 2009.

New technology and hiring

Of course, the job market now is vastly different than it was even five years ago, giving employers a greater selection of candidates with a wide variety of backgrounds, some highly qualified, some without any experience whatsoever and a fat middle section of candidates with average levels of experience. As a result, organizations are looking to rewrite the book on old-fashioned recruitment efforts to produce better results for less effort.

Here are a few ideas for using new technology to your advantage:

• Keep tabs on your association memberships, trade groups and industry contacts. In fact, it might be helpful to keep a master list of industry leaders, fed by colleagues, customers and friends.  

• Tap into the new job search sites. Johnson recommends online business networking sites like The Ladders (http://www.theladders.com/) and LinkedIn (http://www.linkedin.com) as resources for finding applicants for anything but entry-level positions. Some organizations and job seekers alike are finding success with Web sites like TugLink, (http://www.tuglink.com/), an online peer-to-peer job search and referral community that uses a form of crowd sourcing to find the best applicants. Web sites like Guru (http://www.guru.com), a site which matches freelancers with companies, offer a score rank system, matching a candidate’s skill set and experience with a company’s job requirements. The service is being offered in similar forms by many job sites. CareerScribe (http://www.careerscribe.com) enables companies to request candidates create a profile, upload a video introduction, explain their career goals, showcase their accomplishments on a career timeline and upload supporting documents.


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• Don’t forget the old-fashioned power of networking and referrals. They simply take on new form with the help of technology. Facebook (http://www.facebook.com) and Twitter (http://www.twitter.com) can help you tap the vast networks your existing employees have. Chances are they are connected to hundreds, maybe thousands of industry professionals—you just need to create the opportunity for them to refer those connections.

• An electronic resume culling capability is a nice bonus to the new technology available, and some would say it’s now vital to the hiring process. McClain has begun utilizing electronic resume review systems, in this case, Monster’s (http://www.monster.com) resume search option for which they have an annual subscription. The site finds job hunters who fit the skill set the organization is seeking. Users can search for key words and levels of experience. “It shows how well it matches your search criteria, and you can filter through that way. We’ve actually had a lot of luck doing things that way rather than just posting a position and waiting for the avalanche. We don’t have the time to sift through a huge number of resumes, we’re understaffed,” 8 explained McClain, who said she facilitates the hiring process and managers at the organization are hands on in narrowing down the field of candidates. Proactively searching for candidates who fit what they’re looking for simplifies the process on the front end. 9

Low tech solutions
Of course, just like the days before the Internet became the go-to source for worldwide job opportunities, you can still use the power of people to find the right hires.

• **Hire headhunters.** A search firm can be hired to locate and evaluate potential job candidates, whether they are found internally or recruited externally, removing the front-end legwork from your to-do list.

• **Catch, release, then catch again.** You’ve had great employees in the past who have gone on to advance their careers with other organizations. Why let the good ones go, and stay away? Stearns’ McClain said rehiring past employees is commonplace in their industry. According to

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9 Ibid.
Jane Goldner, a talent retention, hiring and business crisis expert, that’s right on target. With a Ph.D. in human resources, Goldner has experience as a consultant to Fortune 100 companies, helping match the right person to key job openings. Goldner suggested seeking to hire those who you’ve worked with in some capacity in the past, so you know their work.

- **It’s who you know.** The old adage is true. Look to people who have been recommended by those you trust. Then, during the interview, Goldner recommended asking about the candidate’s job-related interests, previous work environments and ideal company culture to determine if the individual will fit within your company culture.  

- **Go campus scouting.** Looking for entry-level staff or those with higher degrees? Megan Hendricks, director of employer relations for the University of South Florida College of Business in Tampa, has been assisting companies with their hiring needs for more than nine years. She suggested employers work with a campus or university career center to identify college candidates. “Career center staff are usually more than willing to help employers with their recruiting needs. Often, their job posting systems allow the employer to select specific criteria to narrow down candidates by select criteria. You can also connect with faculty and student groups within individual colleges to promote your organization and its recruiting needs.”

Redefining the role

Hulsey said gone are the days of posting general “help wanted” ads. Employers need to be specific, in order to weed out candidates who don’t have the qualifications. Specific, special instructions help narrow the field even more. “Be specific and clear: ‘To apply for this position, reply with your resume attached and include ‘Receptionist’ in subject line.’ That immediately separates those who can follow directions from those who cannot,” Hulsey explained. “Next up, typos and resumes that look like MySpace pages. Then, candidates who specifically reference a different position - administrative assistant, office manager, executive assistant, etc. And by this point, you have weeded out ⅓ to ½ (of the candidates), easy.” His advice for companies struggling to reign in the number of job applicants is to be specific with what you want in an employee, and write an ad that clearly explains the position and the expectations. “Then, be firm. Don’t let mission-creep take hold,” Hulsey said. “Know what you want and get it.”

Hulsey said it’s also important to choose someone you can truly develop. “If a realistic career path is there, a super candidate may

10 Goldner, Jane. E-mail interview. 18 May 2009.
11 Hendricks, Megan. E-mail interview. 14 May 2009.
start for less to get his foot in the door,” Hulsey explained, pulling from personal experience. “Did I mention, I went to work for my company in December for three days as a temp, but stuck around because they didn’t want to let me get away? And over the next six weeks, was promoted again and again until I was finally the corporate controller? Yep. I took a $12 per hour temp job with the confidence I could find the right company and make something amazing happen. And I did.”

Brandi Britton, regional vice president for OfficeTeam, a staffing service specializing in the placement of administrative professionals, agreed with Hulsey. Finely-tuning job ads can ensure a candidate is a great fit for your company. In addition, she suggested posting ads in targeted places, such as niche publications and professional association Web sites. “It’ll make your job easier because you’ll attract people who show an interest in their field and a commitment to ongoing education.”

In addition, Britton recommends the following:

- **Get help.** A staffing firm can sort through resumes and meet with applicants before informing you of promising candidates. By the time you interview the candidates, you already know they meet your basic requirements. Specialized recruiters will have the specific experience needed to fill jobs in your field. And through their networks they can identify candidates you might not otherwise meet -- highly skilled individuals who may not be actively looking for a new opportunity.

- **Narrow the field by phone.** Following up on promising resumes with a 10-15 minute telephone interview can help ensure that you invite only the best candidates to in-person interviews. This can be a huge time saver since you’ll get an early reading on a person’s interpersonal skills and potential fit with your team.

- **Get the scoop from your admin.** Based on a recent OfficeTeam survey, 61% of executives said that their assistant’s opinion about candidates they interview is important. With exposure to many different project groups and departments, administrative professionals have a good sense of what type of person will fit into the work environment. Also, assistants can evaluate whether an individual matches the boss’s work style.

- **Don’t delay.** Don’t procrastinate when you identify strong applicants. Top performers are in demand in any market. By moving too slowly, you risk losing your first choices -- and extending the hiring process.

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12 Hulsey, John. E-mail interview. 14 May 2009.
• **Do your research.** It’s important to always check references to get background on a candidate’s past job performance. Also consider looking at online profiles to see if any positive or negative information is available that could affect a hiring decision.  

John Younger, president and CEO for Accolo, Inc., an advanced recruitment management system in Larkspur, Calif., said there are several measures a company can take that statistically will yield much more appropriate candidates who produce more and stay with the organization longer. He suggested setting up systems that will allow people to indicate future interest in the company. “The best way to do this is to set-up some way for people to self select to know about future openings at the company. We have some companies with over 4000 people self selecting to know about future jobs.”

In addition, Younger said companies must realize the importance of creating an accurate and compelling job description, to attract the right person. Others expand this thought to the development of your Web site. “Does your ‘Join Our Team’ section of your company Web site tell and even, ‘sell,’ potential employees about the vision, mission, values and culture of your company? Do you present a message about how people are valued? Do you express your commitment to quality and to your customers? If not, you are missing out on one of the most important recruiting tools you have to appeal to prospective high-potential employees.”

And while overtaxed human resources departments may struggle to stay on top of a blizzard of resumes, Younger argued it’s important to give applicants closure, as each person applying may also be a customer, investor and referral source…yet 94% of the people applying to jobs today never hear back from anyone.

**The interview**

So you’ve tapped new technology. You’ve controlled the number of applicants by carefully wording the job description. You’ve strategically searched job sites, sifting through resumes that show a candidate has the skills you need in the person who will fill the role. You’ve eliminated applicants with spelling errors or grammatical mistakes in their resumes or cover letters, and you’ve ruled out those who failed to follow specific directions you established in your request for applications. Say you have a small group of candidates who’ve made the cut to this stage—and it’s time for the interviews. How can you make the most of your time with each candidate?
What questions can you ask to ensure the best candidate rises to the top?

The word that surfaces again and again among business professionals is “culture.” When you can have your pick of talented individuals who have the experience and hard skills to do the job, how a candidate fits into the business culture becomes the differentiating factor.

“Of course when filling a position, the most obvious responsibility is matching the company's job description with the candidates’ qualifications. Unfortunately, so many new hires fail because the effort was not made to match the candidate to the company's culture,” said Barry Wernikoff of One to One Consulting, LLC in Gibsonia, Penn. “Just as much time needs to be taken learning about the culture of the company as well as the job requirements. The owner of the company needs to be interviewed just like the candidate.” 17

The importance of this issue is amplified in a challenging economy. Candidates may view cultural fit as a secondary concern, but fit takes on increased significance for companies seeking the right employee.

McClain said managers do the interviewing at Stearns, and they’re looking for somebody who is going to fit into their group or team. “Stearns is very culture oriented,” she explained. “We want someone who can work without a lot of supervision, independently but also as part of a team. The industry is tough; we don't want someone who has their own dominion or kingdom.” McClain also said they look specifically for candidates who are self-starters. 18

Kent Johnson of Davinci Search suggested the importance of matching soft skills. “What makes great soft skills is like asking what makes great art. The best approach is to gather your internal people and ask everyone what qualities you want in a hire,” he said. “The more you can define the aspects that will make for a better cultural fit, the better you’ll be in the long run.” 19

The following open-ended interview questions can help you determine if the employee is a good fit for the company. 20

- What type of work environment brings out your best performance?
- What type of work environment are you least likely to thrive in?
- What did you like best/least about your last job and why?

17  Wernikoff, Barry. E-mail interview. 12 May 2009.
19  Johnson, Kent. E-mail interview. 14 May 2009.
20  Britton, Brandi. E-mail interview. 14 May 2009.
• Considering your greatest accomplishments in previous roles, what were the factors that allowed you to be successful?
• How would you handle working with multiple managers?
• How do you manage your time?
• Describe an instance when your efforts saved your company time or money.

Welcoming the new team member

Congratulations. You’ve netted the perfect employee. They have the skill set you want, they fit the corporate culture, they’re eager to get started. Now, how to make them feel welcome, to pave the road for a long, successful future together?

Goldner explained, once the candidate is hired, make them feel welcome by creating what she calls a BLC culture: Belonging, Learning, Communicative.

- **Belonging:** People want to belong to something bigger than them. Having a sense of belonging assures commitment. Create a sense of belonging by greeting employees with a “good morning.” Goldner said employees commonly mention their boss does not acknowledge their presence. Managers should be available to talk with employees and get to know them as “whole people,” not just job descriptions. You may also sponsor business functions that include employees’ families—but make them voluntary.

  Hulsey recently hosted a company barbecue at his home, “It’s a chance for people to chat across departments and have fun. Think of it as an informal team-building exercise.”

- **Learning:** Employees want to continue to learn, and in this business climate, it’s a necessity. Support a learning culture by providing performance feedback and coaching on an ongoing basis, not just during year end performance reviews. Send employees to training, but also consider coaching, shadowing, temporary assignments and participation on problem-solving teams as more cost-effective solutions. And, consider delegating responsibilities that have become routine for you, that would challenge your employees.

- **Contributing:** Employees want to know they are making a difference. Provide a sense of what their contributions mean to the organization by

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21 Hulsey, John. E-mail interview. 14 May 2009.
clearly articulating what individuals do contribute to the success of the organization. Also, thank people for a job well done. When individuals go the extra mile, write a personal note to them, take them to lunch, put a memo in their personnel file, recognize them at a staff meeting, present them with a certificate—just to name a few ways.

Britton agreed that orientation gives new hires resources they need to be comfortable in their new roles, and introductions are important on that first day. In addition, she suggested taking the new employee to lunch so you can learn more about them as a person. And, consider finding a guide for them. "Set the individual up with a mentor who can provide guidance as he or she learns the ropes. A new hire will appreciate having someone to approach with inquiries." 22

John Hulsey suggested reviewing the company handbook and the new employee’s specific performance objectives: "Knowing what is expected removes the ‘am I doing the right thing?!’ jitters. And as a small company, we make time for the major players to greet and chat with the new people, whether you are hired as a receptionist or sales or whatever. Everybody meets the managers and knows what they do." 23

Properly welcoming the new hire after the long road the two of you have taken to get him or her in the door, ensures a smooth transition for both of you and paves the way for a long, mutually-beneficial relationship for both of you. And a long relationship guarantees you’ll spend less time on the business of hiring, and more time on your business.

22 Britton, Brandi. E-mail interview. 14 May 2009.
23 Hulsey, John. E-mail interview. 14 May 2009.