



Be Excruciatingly Specific

And Other Lessons to Help You Recruit a Great Startup Team

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Introduction

In the fall of 1997, I decided to leave McKinsey to seek my Internet fame and fortune. Instead I became a recruiter and entered a profession not widely revered. But when you think about it, I'm in good company because you're a recruiter, too. In fact, one of your most important jobs as a startup CEO is recruiting.

[Fred Wilson](#), the co-founder of [Union Square Ventures](#), argues that [one of the three most important things a great CEO does](#) is "recruit, hire, and retain the very best talent for the company." [Andreessen Horowitz](#), one of the preeminent Silicon Valley venture firms, has 23 staff dedicated to recruiting for their portfolio companies. That's right; 23 staff dedicated *just to recruiting*. And legendary venture capitalist, [Vinod Khosla](#), in a TechCrunch interview entitled [I'm a Glorified Recruiter](#), said that "The biggest problem companies have, and the biggest limitation to their success, is hiring talent."

Despite its importance, recruiting is not well understood. It's not taught in business schools. It's not a popular topic in academic research. It's not the subject of best selling business books. The common wisdom seems to be that you either have the recruiting gene or you don't. If you have it, you can spend five minutes with a candidate and quickly determine whether or not he's a good fit. If you don't have it, you are doomed to a lifetime of hiring mistakes.

But in my experience, good recruiters don't possess mystical powers or special genetics. Good recruiters approach recruiting in a thoughtful, consistent, systematic way. Recruiting is really just a process – a process that can be learned and refined over time to produce consistent results. The purpose of this whitepaper is to introduce you to an effective recruiting process that will help you avoid hiring failures, hire the best person for the job, and drive your company toward success. Here's a preview.

1. **Prepare.** Adequate preparation forms the foundation of a successful search. Errors and omissions propagate to impact the quality of hire.
2. **Source.** Sourcing is a team sport and involves leveraging your team and investors, as well as going beyond your existing network.
3. **Interview.** Avoid common interview pitfalls by knowing what you're looking for, using a structured interview process, and conducting thorough reference checks.
4. **Close.** Use trial closing to identify issues, and collect real-time data to calibrate compensation.

1 - Preparation

Preparation is boring. And it's not much fun. It's so much easier to skim over or skip preparation and start talking to candidates. But just like in software development, errors and omissions early in the process can cause huge problems later. Adequate preparation includes defining the job, allocating enough time and resources, and crafting a compelling pitch.

Define the Job

Failure rates for new executive hires range from 56%¹ to 81%², and the most common cause of executive hiring failures is inadequate job descriptions.³ A staggering 93% of searches that result in new executive failure make this mistake. Job definition is the first step in the search process. Errors in job definition propagate, impacting all subsequent steps. If the job definition is unclear, it's difficult to source the right candidates, and it's hard to interview candidates effectively.

Use Deliverables to Define the Job. The best way to define a job is in terms of *quantifiable, time-based deliverables*. I suggest at least three but no more than six. Consider deliverables for 6 months, 12 months, and 24 months. Here's an example of a quantifiable, time-based deliverable for a VP Sales: *drive revenue from 15M to 25M in Europe over the next 12 months by developing new partner relationships with three regional systems integrators*. Compare that to a more typical description: *drive revenue growth in Europe*. Notice that the former example gives you insights about types of experience relevant to this position.

Get a 360° Perspective. Solicit input from your executive team, board members, advisors, and direct reports for the position. [Appendix A](#) is a list of questions you can use to stimulate discussion. If you find people shrugging more than answering as you move through these questions, you may not be ready to launch a search. If you uncover different views of what the job requires, especially from board members or executives who will be part of the interview process, resolve differences now rather than later.

¹ (Deutsch n.d.)

² (Murphy 2015)

³ (Boydell, Deutsch and Remillard 2006)

Use Feedback from Candidates to Refine the Definition. It's important to define the job before talking to candidates, but it's also important to realize that your perspective on the job may evolve during the course of the search. If you're sourcing the right candidates, you'll be talking to people who likely understand the role better than you. Listen to what they say. The best candidates will dig deep during the interview process and develop their own point of view as to what the job involves.

Allocate the Time and Resources

Most searches take 8-12 weeks. When a search goes beyond 12 weeks, it gets stale. The best candidates will start to drop out, either because they've found other opportunities, they've become concerned about your ability to make decisions, or they're wondering why no one wants the job. Allocating sufficient time and resources will help keep the search on track.

Allocate Time for Interviews. Assuming you have an adequate flow of qualified candidates, the thing that most impacts the duration of a search is your availability and your team's availability to meet with candidates. Allocate enough time for candidate interviews, especially during the first few weeks when the top of the funnel will be full and toward the end when you'll need to go deep with final candidates. Decide who will be part of the interview process, and give them a heads up well in advance. You may want to enlist investors, board members, and/or advisors for final interviews. Have everyone check their vacation and travel schedules to minimize no-shows.

Allocate Time for Feedback. Quality of interview feedback declines precipitously after 48 hours.⁴ Best practice is to allocate time soon after the interview to collect your thoughts and document your feedback. Likewise for other interviewers. Set the expectation that feedback is due shortly after the interview, and follow up if necessary.

Make Someone Responsible for Scheduling and Administration. Keeping candidates moving through the process includes scheduling, interviewing, collecting feedback, and deciding who to advance to the next round. It involves lots of administrative and detailed-oriented work. Ensure you have someone in place to assist you. Scheduling alone can take 5-10 hours per week.

⁴ (Schmidt and Rosenberg 2014)

Rethink the Job Spec

Job specs are useless. Their intent is to filter out unqualified candidates and discourage them from applying. They focus on required qualifications (i.e., minimum 10 years sales experience) or desired characteristics (i.e., must be a team player). Not only do they fail to attract strong candidates, but unqualified candidates apply anyway. A great job spec should attract the interest of the best candidates. Here's what I suggest.

Focus on the Opportunity. 80% of the job spec should describe the opportunity for the company and the position. Think of the job spec as an investor pitch deck and not a list of qualifications and requirements. What's compelling about the industry, company, product, or technology? Discuss recent progress. Do you have a disruptive solution? Are you gaining traction after a pivot? Do you already have the foundation of a great executive team? What is it about your company and this job that will be of interest to great candidates?

Describe Success. The rest of the job spec, the other 20%, should describe what success looks like. This will be straightforward if you've already defined the job in terms of quantifiable, time-based deliverables. This is a great place to address intrinsic aspects of job success. What are the learning and growth opportunities? What is the potential impact? How does success in this job support the broader mission of the company?

Inform and Educate. The tone of the spec should be educational. Sales speak doesn't resonate well with top candidates. Include links to resources that support your pitch and highlight the opportunity. Analyst reports, whitepapers, and press releases are good examples. Consider videos, articles, and blog posts. The use of charts, graphs, or diagrams is informational and helps the spec stand out.

2 - Sourcing

There are three proven ways to source candidates for a search.

- **Advertise the position**, either on a job site such as Monster, CareerBuilder, etc., on your company's website, or through social media.
- **Leverage your network**, the networks of your team, and the networks of your investors to identify candidates.
- **Reach beyond your network** and the networks of your team and investors to target specific candidates who are not already known to you, your team, or your investors.

Most CEOs understand that posting executive jobs is a waste of time. The best candidates aren't trolling online job sites, and the last thing you need when you're looking for a needle in a haystack is more hay. Most CEOs source candidates by leveraging their networks, but they don't do it effectively. Few CEOs recognize the importance of reaching beyond their existing networks to target specific candidates.

Leverage Your Network Effectively

Sourcing candidates through your network and the networks of your team and investors is a great way to identify candidates. However, the way most people do it is ineffective. Here's what happens. You've got 25 people in your network you want to source. You could schedule coffee or lunch with each of them, describe the job and opportunity, and then ask them for recommendations. You don't have time for that. Maybe you could schedule a 30-minute call instead. That may get you half a dozen conversations, but what about the other 19 people? You call a few people you know well and send emails to the rest. You get some names, but none look like viable candidates. You realize later that most of the referrals were either actively looking for a new job or just recently had lunch with your contact. To leverage your network more effectively, *be excruciatingly specific* when sourcing, and make sure to source people on the periphery of your network.

Be Excruciatingly Specific. Google discovered that their employee referral program was generating people who were mostly "top of mind." Asking more specific questions ("Do you know anyone who would be a good salesperson in New York?") instead of general questions ("Do you know any good sales people?") resulted in more and higher-quality

referrals.⁵ As Eric Schmidt put it, "Get the best referrals by being excruciatingly specific in describing what you're looking for." Instead of asking your network for VP Sales recommendations, here are a few ways to be more excruciatingly specific.

1. Who are the three best VPs of Sales that you know?
2. Who are the three best sales executives you've worked with directly?
3. What companies in the (insert your industry here) segment hire the best sales executives?
4. What companies in the (insert your industry here) segment have experienced the greatest revenue growth over the last 5 years?
5. Do you know any sales executives who have grown revenue in Europe?
6. Who are the best sales executives in (insert your city here)?

Many of your sources will provide names of candidates who are unemployed or actively looking for a new job. Make it clear that you are also looking for candidates who are gainfully employed and not actively looking. Many candidates who appear happy are secretly looking. In one survey, 85% of people who classified themselves as absolutely not looking for another job and highly satisfied were open to exploring new job opportunities.⁶

Source Weak Ties. In the late 1960s, [Mark Granovetter](#), a PhD student at Harvard, conducted research to better understand how people find jobs. He published his results in a paper entitled [The Strength of Weak Ties](#), which has become the most cited paper in sociology research. Granovetter discovered that most people found jobs through networking and of the people who found jobs through networking, over 80% found jobs through people with whom they had only a cursory relationship (weak ties). Granovetter also found that groups comprised of people with strong ties tend to be insular.⁷ If you source mostly people you know well (strong ties), you're more likely to get candidates you already know. To source more effectively, contact people who are *not* part of your inner network. Their networks are more likely to have less overlap with yours, and you're more likely to find candidates previously unknown to you.

Reach Beyond Your Network

I'll let you in on a little secret. Most of the candidates recruited by retained executive search firms aren't sourced from their database. Despite the fact that many large search

⁵ (Bock 2015)

⁶ (Adler, Are Your Best Employees Thinking About Leaving? 2013)

⁷ (Granovetter, The Strength of Weak Ties 1973)

firms with large databases tout their databases as a source of competitive advantage, they aren't. A former colleague tracked the source of placements at one of the largest global search firms and found that less than 10% of their placements were sourced from the firm's database (which contained over 75,000 executives and was regarded as the best in the industry). Effective sourcing is less about the size of your rolodex and more about using the right sourcing techniques. One of the most effective sourcing techniques is to target specific candidates, regardless of whether or not they are known to you (or your team or investors).

Here's another way to look at it. Leveraging your networks involves trying to answer the question, "Who might we know who could do the job?" A more empowering question is, "If we could hire anyone, who would it be?"

Professional recruiters try to answer the latter question by developing a target list of companies where they're most likely to find exceptional executives with relevant experience, and then researching the company to identify prospective candidates. You can do the same using Google and LinkedIn. Once you've identified interesting prospects, there are three ways to initiate contact.

1. Contact directly yourself. Professional recruiters do this routinely. If done correctly, it results in a higher response rate than you might imagine, typically over 50%.
2. Get a warm intro. Use LinkedIn to identify common connections, or see if anyone on your team or any of your investors can facilitate an intro.
3. Outsource. Hire an in-house recruiter or external search firm to solicit the interest of these candidates.

3 - Interviewing

No part of the hiring process has been the topic of more research than interviewing, and most of it paints a bleak picture. A Harvard University study concluded that up to 80% of employee turnover is due to interviewing mistakes.⁸ A University of Michigan study indicated a success rate of only 14% for traditional interviewing.⁹ Interviewing can be fairly straightforward if you define the job well, use an effective framework, and follow a structured approach.

Evaluate Candidates Across Three Dimensions

Evaluating candidates against a laundry list of generic skills and competencies doesn't produce great results. To recruit effectively, a simple but powerful evaluation heuristic is needed. One useful framework is evaluating candidates across three dimensions: *relevant experience, ability and potential, and overall fit.*

Relevant Experience. In high-tech startups, relevant experience is important across one or more of the following areas: industry, function, vertical market, size of company, growth rate of company. The degree and type of experience required for a specific role is subjective, but clues can be found in the job definition. If you're looking for a VP Sales, and your company sells exclusively into the higher education vertical, relevant vertical market experience may be critical. If your company is a rapidly-growing SaaS company in a niche industry selling into a niche vertical, experience in a rapidly-growing SaaS company may outweigh industry and vertical experience. In high-tech startups, prior startup experience is almost always important.

Ability and Potential. Experience alone is insufficient to perform an executive job well. The best candidates have strong cognitive ability and the potential to learn and grow. Some companies do cognitive ability assessments, but history of career success is often a strong proxy for cognitive ability and potential. In general, strong candidates will have worked for successful companies and demonstrated a history of promotions into more important roles. Ability and potential is particularly important in high-tech startups. Companies pivot, strategies change, and often the job itself changes. Those with strong cognitive ability have a better chance of learning quickly and adapting.

⁸ (Yager 2012)

⁹ (Schmidt and Hunter 1998)

Fit. Although less tangible than experience, ability, and potential, fit is often of equal importance in hiring success. Fit goes beyond cultural fit. It also includes career fit (does this job make sense for this person at this point in their career?), geographic fit (is there a commuting or virtual office situation involved?), and motivational fit (is this person excited about this job and the company?).

The key to the three dimension framework is *looking for candidates with the minimum experience required and the maximum ability and potential while ensuring there is a reasonable fit.*

The most common hiring mistakes are:

- Hiring the most experienced person, but one without much ability and potential
- Hiring the person with the most ability and potential, but one without enough relevant experience
- Ignoring the importance of fit

In 2007, Google revised their interview framework based on analyzing the over 10,000 people they had hired as well as the hundreds of thousands they had not.¹⁰ Google now evaluates candidates across four categories: role-related knowledge, general cognitive ability, Googleness (cultural fit), and leadership. Google defines leadership as the ability to work effectively in cross-functional teams. Working in cross-functional teams is more relevant to larger companies than startups.

Structure the Process as Well as the Interviews

In the context of interviewing, *structure* means consistency. A structured process means all candidates go through the same process, the same set of interviews. Structured interviewing means asking all candidates the same questions. Structuring makes it easier to compare candidates and make the right hiring decision.

Step 1 - Resume Review and Preparation. Prior to your first interaction with the candidate, spend 30 minutes to an hour reviewing the candidate's resume and LinkedIn profile. Familiarize yourself with each of the companies for which the candidate has worked. For recent positions, research the organizational structure and determine the candidate's boss, peers, and direct reports. If you know any of them, make a note. Research the success of recent companies, noting exit outcomes and investors. Check

¹⁰ (Bock 2015)

common connections on LinkedIn and review the candidate's skills rankings. LinkedIn's skill rankings have become a useful crowdsourced assessment tool. A checklist is provided in [Appendix B](#).

Step 2 - Phone Screen. Use a 30-minute phone screen at the top of the funnel to quickly qualify candidates for a more in-depth interview. Don't try to determine whether or not the candidate is a finalist; just decide whether or not to advance the candidate to the next round. Ensure the candidate has seen the spec and had a couple of days to do research before the call. Then use the guidelines in [Appendix C](#). Use the phone screen to ask about disqualifiers such as non-compete agreements, relocation (if required), and timing constraints.

Step 3 - Chronological In-Depth Structured Interview. The chronological in-depth structured interview (CIDS) was developed by Dr. Brad Smart and popularized in his best-selling book, [Topgrading](#).¹¹ It's chronological, starting with education and ending with the current job. It's in-depth, digging into the details of every job. It's structured, using the same set of questions for every candidate. I have found CIDS to be an effective antidote to the dreaded confirmation bias.¹² Understanding a candidate's entire career history and asking probing questions is often enlightening and may result in a new perspective on a candidate. A "lite" version of CIDS is included in [Appendix D](#).

Step 4 - Final Interviews. Final interviews should include yourself as well as peers, direct reports, and investors/advisors. Share your thoughts on the finalists based on your prior interviews, suggesting specific areas to probe. Consider having finalists present a 90-day plan. Whenever possible, take the candidate out to dinner before or after the interviews. See [Appendix E](#) for final interview guidelines.

Step 5 - Reference Checks. Always do reference checks, and always go beyond given references. Ask the candidate for two bosses, two peers, and two subordinates; the more recent, the better. If you've done your preparation and used the [TORQ technique](#) during the in-depth interview, you will already have several names. Look for obvious reference gaps. For example, if the candidate's last two bosses are missing from the reference list, ask why, and ask to speak to them. Use given references to obtain additional references. Use LinkedIn to identify common connections who could act as

¹¹ (B. Smart 1999)

¹² Confirmation bias is a tendency to search for or interpret information in a way that confirms one's preconceptions. Research conducted by Frank Bernieri showed that impressions are formed during the first ten seconds of an interview, and the rest of the interview is spent trying to confirm whatever impression the interviewer formed.

references. Consider having your investors talk to investors who know the candidate. Allocate at least five hours of your time and at least one week to complete reference calls. If you're not used to going beyond given references, expect some negative feedback. Anyone who has spent time as an executive in a high-tech startup will likely have detractors. Ask detractors for specific examples, and probe further with positive references to get a balanced perspective. [Appendix F](#) contains an example reference check template.

4 - Closing

Excitement is often high during the close. It's important to stay diligent and resist the temptation to skip steps and ignore red flags. It's not unusual to learn as much about the candidate during the close phase as you have up until that point. Behavior during negotiation and close is a proxy for behavior on the job.

Always Be Trial Closing

"Always be closing" is the mantra of the ruthless, money-driven style of sales person depicted in David Mamet's 1984 Pulitzer Prize winning play and 1992 movie, [Glengarry Glen Ross](#). "Always be closing" typifies the hard close. "Always be trial closing" is my mantra, and it's different than the hard close. Always be trial closing means you are always asking the candidate the following question:

"What else would you like to know, or who else would you like to talk to, so that you can make an informed decision about this opportunity?"

There are several reasons to always be trial closing.

1. Builds trust with candidates.
2. Candidates appreciate the transparency.
3. Possible objections and/or issues surface earlier in the process.
4. Specific areas of concern are identified more clearly.
5. Helps eliminate the need for a candidate to get more data or talk to more people at the last minute.
6. Allows you to gauge a candidate's level of interest. Candidates with no questions are unlikely to be seriously interested.
7. Provides you with another opportunity to see how a candidate thinks.
8. Gives you a chance to collect the information the candidate needs.
9. Provides a natural way to initiate compensation discussions.
10. Creates a reason for you to follow up with candidates during the process.

Strong candidates with a sincere interest in the opportunity will have thoughtful and probing questions. They will likely want to talk to the most people to get a 360 degree perspective. They won't be shy about asking to speak to customers and/or investors,

and they won't be shy about asking to speak to the same person again if they feel the need to dig deeper.

Variations of the trial close that I use early in the recruiting process are, "What did you learn from your meeting with Mr. CEO, and what questions did you not get a chance to ask?" or, "What have you learned so far, and what do you hope to learn during the next round of meetings?"

Don't Get Stuck on Comp

The best candidates may cost more, but they're worth it. The top 5 percent of the workforce produces 26 percent of the output.¹³ The more complex the work, the bigger the difference between top and average performers. The best developer at Apple is nine times more productive than the average software engineer at other technology companies.¹⁴ Top performers are a great value, too. Even though they are 400 percent more productive, their salaries are less than 20 percent over average. Not only are top performers more productive themselves, but they tend to elevate the performance of those around them and make it easier to attract additional top performers. Top performers generate higher-quality candidate referrals.¹⁵ Here's how to not get stuck on comp when negotiating with top candidates.

Be Willing to Pay More. NFL General Managers understand the value of top performers and pay more to get them. The average salary for an NFL quarterback is \$3,840,017, but Aaron Rodgers, the top NFL quarterback, makes \$22,000,000, more than \$18,000,000 more than the average. Too many CEOs try to negotiate compensation based on salary surveys or average salaries. They invest three months of their time, and they find an awesome candidate. Their salary survey says the candidate should make 175K base, 30K bonus, and 1% equity. But their prize candidate is currently making 195K base, 40K bonus, and 1.25% equity. They go back and forth, and the deal eventually falls apart. Or worse; the candidate takes the job with a cut in pay and then leaves six months later when someone offers them a better package.

Determine Market for Your Specific Candidate. Salary surveys do *not* represent market for a specific candidate; they represent the market average for all candidates. And the surveys I've seen are dubious. Market salary for your prize candidate is his/her current compensation or other offers he/she has on the table. If the candidate is currently

¹³ (Ernest O'Boyle Jr. Spring 2012)

¹⁴ (Mankins, Bird and Root 2013)

¹⁵ (Sullivan 2013)

making 195K base, 40K bonus, and 1.25% equity, and he/she has an offer on the table for 205K base, 50K bonus, and 1.4% equity, then the candidate's market is 205K base, 50K bonus, and 1.4% equity.

Develop your own market data in real time. Collect real-time compensation data from all of the candidates you meet during the process. That will provide a better sense of market compensation than salary surveys.

If You're Unsure, Get More Data on the Candidate. I'm not suggesting you overpay for a candidate you don't think is great. If you're unsure about a candidate, do more diligence. I'm not suggesting that compensation is the only factor, or even the most important factor, that will influence a candidate's decision. If you believe that top performers are several times more productive than average candidates, you should consider paying "over market" to add top performers to your team. If you're on the fence, spend more time with the candidate, or do more reference checks, preferably with people not on the candidate's list of references.

Celebrate the Win to Lock the Candidate in

An investment banker is rumored to have said, "The only things that can happen between the time a deal is agreed to and formally consummated are all bad." If you've ever had a deal blow up at the 11th hour or a candidate not show up on the first day of work or lost a candidate to a counter-offer, you can probably relate. Here's my formula for locking in candidates and keeping bad things from happening.

Negotiate Verbally. Verbally negotiate salient deal points before putting anything in writing. If you find a candidate you like and who likes you, consummate the deal quickly while the candidate's excitement level is high. Presenting an offer verbally reinforces excitement. Presenting an offer in writing attenuates excitement. In addition, the back-and-forth nature and duration of negotiating in writing creates fatigue, further impacting excitement levels. Negotiate salient deal points verbally to get an agreement quickly, and *then* put the offer in writing.

Celebrate the Win. When you reach verbal agreement, celebrate the win. Even though you still need a written agreement and may need to involve attorneys, celebrate the win with the candidate as if it's a done deal. Congratulate the candidate and let them know you're excited about having them join the team. Have your investors and team members make congratulatory calls. Lock in the candidate emotionally, and let the attorneys hash out the final details.

Begin Onboarding Immediately. As soon as you have verbal agreement, start the onboarding process. Don't overburden the candidate with too much real work prior to the official start date, but start building engagement immediately. Consider inviting the candidate to a staff meeting, a board meeting, or a customer call. Send the candidate relevant information you may not have shared during the interview process.

Conclusion

Investment bankers run a process when they are trying to sell a company because a process generates more buyers, maximizes valuation, and helps find buyers with aligned interests. Savvy recruiting professionals run a process when they are trying to fill a key executive position because a process generates more candidates, uncovers the most qualified candidates, and provides the perspective needed to select the best candidate.

Too many CEOs don't run much of a process when recruiting. They approach recruiting arbitrarily, and they get arbitrary results. Use this whitepaper to develop an effective recruiting process for your startup. Get the best executives on your team.

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Appendix A - Job Definition Questions

Use these questions to discuss job definition.

1. What is working well today with regard to the company, organization, or job in question?
2. What is *not* working well today with regard to the company, organization, or job in question?
3. List the three biggest opportunities for
 - a. the company
 - b. the business unit, division, or group, etc.
 - c. this specific job
4. For each of the biggest opportunities, what must:
 - a. the company do to capitalize on the opportunity?
 - b. the business unit, division, or group, etc. do to capitalize on the opportunity?
 - c. the person who gets this job do to capitalize on the opportunity?
5. List the three biggest challenges for
 - a. the company
 - b. the business unit, division, or group, etc.
 - c. this specific job
6. If this person is successful, what will they have accomplished over the next
 - a. 6 months,
 - b. 12 months,
 - c. 24 months,
 - d. 36 months?
7. If this job existed before,
 - a. What did the previous employee do well?
 - b. What did the previous employee not do well?
8. What are the three most important constituencies interfacing with this job?
Consider other internal groups or organizations, customers, external groups or organizations, shareholders, partners, etc.
9. Vis-à-vis this position,
 - a. What will this person's boss do?
 - b. What will this person's peers do?
 - c. What will this person's subordinates do?

Appendix B - Resume Review Checklist

Use this checklist to prepare *before* your first interaction with the candidate.

- Review resume (or LinkedIn profile) in chronological order, starting with education.
- Note degrees and institutions and dates. Lack of dates may indicate gaps in early career experience or sensitivity to age. Note which degrees overlapped with work experience.
- Familiarize yourself with each company the candidate has worked for.
- For recent companies, get a sense of revenue, growth rate, and events (such as an exit or IPO). Check the executive team and investors for possible connects.
- Note gaps in resume.
- Check common connections on LinkedIn.
- Check skills on LinkedIn; do they align with job titles and job definition.
- Note how well the resume is written. Are there grammatical errors? Formatting errors? Are responsibilities clear? Are accomplishments quantified?

Appendix C - Phone Screen

Use this 30-minute phone screen to qualify candidates for a more in-depth interview.

Introduction (2 minutes)

Start upbeat and with a couple of minutes of small talk. Don't go too long or start talking about the job.

Question 1 (5-10 minutes)

What can I tell you about the company or the opportunity? Ask the question, listen carefully. The best candidates will have done some research and have insightful questions that demonstrate they've done similar jobs. The best candidates will be skeptical; they'll need to be sold. Less qualified candidates will have superficial questions or immediately start selling themselves without a thorough understanding of the job. Resist the temptation to go into sell mode yourself. You're selling the company and the job by answering the candidate's questions.

Question 2 (5 minutes)

How do you think about what's next for you? I'm less interested in a candidate's long-term career goals, they often change. I'm more interested in what they want to do next. How focused are they? Do they have a strong sense of what they're good at? Do they talk mostly about money and titles? Are they only interested in a career move? Do they talk about building great products or learning and growth or impact? Ensure the next step for the candidate is aligned with the job you have to offer.

Question 3 (5-10 minutes)

Tell me about your current situation at XYZ Corp. Why are you leaving? Was the company successful? Were you asked to leave? If so, why? Do you hear too many excuses?

Wrap Up

Use the last few minutes to ask about disqualifiers such as non-compete agreements, relocation (if required), and timing constraints.

Appendix D - In-Depth Interview Guide

The original CIDS interview process in [TopGrading](#) can take as long as 5 hours and involves an extensive pre-interview work history homework assignment. It was originally developed to be used with a captive audience to evaluate existing executive teams. A lite version of CIDS works better in recruiting situations.

Introduction (5-10 minutes)

Introduce yourself and review the agenda for the meeting, giving the candidate a sense of how you'll spend the time and a chance to relax. Provide a brief overview of your company's history and why you are excited about its prospects.

Initial Candidate Perspective (10-15 minutes)

Spend a few minutes, and get the candidate's perspective on the opportunity. You might pose the question: "What are your thoughts about this deal so far?" Use this question to evaluate how the candidate thinks strategically and whether or not he/she has done enough diligence to have a point of view. The best candidates, with limited information, will have a decisive perspective on the company. They should be able to quickly summarize the market opportunity, the company's position vis-à-vis competitors, what needs to be done (a high-level plan of action), and possible exit strategies. They may need to make some assumptions to do this. Pose the question and just sit back and listen, with minimal prompting.

In-depth Interview (50-60 minutes)

Start at the beginning and work your way forward through the candidate's career. Quickly probe choice of colleges and majors, and then jump into to career experience. Spend more time on recent and relevant career experiences. For each position the candidate has held, ask the following questions.

1. Describe the company and its products and/or services. Sometimes I'll ask about competitors and how they were positioned.
2. How big was the company (revenue and employees) when you joined?
3. How big was the company when you left (or changed positions)?
4. What was the organizational context? Who did you report to (and who did he/she report to, up to the CEO)? Who were your direct reports? How many

total staff? *NOTE – The names you collect during this process become the list of possible blind references that will be used later. Ask for specific names and clarify spelling. The best candidates will be forthcoming with names – less qualified candidates will become uneasy during this process and may try to avoid answering the question directly.*

5. When did you join the company?
6. Why did you join the company? Were you recruited? If so, by whom?
7. What were you hired to do?
8. What was the condition of the company (or of your organization) when you joined?
9. What did you accomplish during your tenure in this position?
10. How did you do it?
11. What was the end result?
12. Why did you leave?
13. What was your compensation (base, bonus, equity)? I typically ask this question only for recent positions.
14. What did you learn?
15. What were the low points?
16. When I talk to your boss (or peers or subordinates), what is your best guess as to what he/she will say were your strengths, weaknesses, and overall performance?
NOTE - This is also known as [TORC](#) (threat of reference check). The best candidates will be forthcoming and offer thoughtful and balanced insights into their strengths and weaknesses. They understand who they are and what they want to do. Less qualified candidates will often go into sell mode and avoid answering the question directly.

As the candidate discusses various jobs, their energy level will fluctuate. Take note. Candidates will exhibit higher energy around positions they enjoyed the most and in which they performed the best.

Summary and Questions

At this point, turn it over to the candidate and entertain questions. Avoid discussing next steps in the interview process, leaving things open-ended pending discussion with other candidates.

Appendix E - Final Interviews

Final interviews are used to select the best candidate from 2-3 final candidates. Use these guidelines to structure final interviews.

Who. Final interviews should be 360 interviews; they should include yourself, investors/advisors, peers, and subordinates (direct reports to the position you're filling).

Interview structure. Ensure the same people interview the final candidates the same way. Interviewers can use CIDS, do a deep dive on one or two companies using the CIDS questions, or probe specific areas that are particularly important or that merit more probing based on earlier interviews.

Logistics. For non-local candidates, schedule all interviews back-to-back during a single day. For local candidates, do the same, or schedule individual interviews, if more convenient.

Timing. All final candidates should complete final interviews during the same week if possible, so that candidates can be compared while impressions are still fresh.

Options. Consider having finalists present a 90-day plan. This can be a formal prepared presentation or a whiteboard interactive discussion. Take the candidate out to dinner, either after the interviews or in the not-too-distant future.

Appendix F - Reference Guidelines

Use the following template for reference calls.

Background:

1. How did you come to know John Doe?
2. If at a place of employment, what was your reporting relationship with John?
3. What is the nature of your relationship today: professional, social?
4. Do you keep in touch with John?

Strengths:

1. What is John really good at? What does John do well? What are John's professional strengths? Ask for examples.

Weaknesses:

1. What is John not so good at? Ask for examples?
2. Who were John's harshest critics at Company ABC?
3. What would those critics say about John?

Accomplishments/failures:

1. What was John's title? What was he hired to do?
2. How did he perform? Ask for quantitative examples.
3. What was John's most significant contribution to the Company?
4. What was John's biggest failure/disappointment? What do you think he learned as a result?
5. Why did John leave Company ABC?

Management style:

1. Describe John's management style? Ask for examples.
2. What type of person does John work best for?
3. What type of board does John work best for?
4. What type of person would John likely clash with?
5. What type of board would John likely clash with?

Personality:

1. What adjectives would you use to describe John's personality?
2. What role does John play in a company staff meeting?

3. What role does he play in a social setting?

Summary:

1. What would be the ideal opportunity for John: title, role, type of company, etc.?
2. Describe your company and position to the reference and ask whether they think John would be a good fit and why.
3. Would you consider working with John again in the future? If so, in what capacity?
4. Who else might you recommend I speak to about John?

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Notes

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