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It's a hirer's market; pick those who define success

Denver Business Journal - by [Stephanie Klein](#)

If you've been waiting to grow your staff and add some talent to your company, the time is now.

Great workers are everywhere, if you're willing to sift through an avalanche of résumés to find them.

Thanks to a brutal recession, droves of talented professionals who have created a lot of success for previous employers haven't held a job in six months or longer.

You probably have more than a few friends who fall into this category: solid performers having much more difficulty finding a job than they would if the unemployment rate, and shortage of companies generating new hires, weren't so high.

The unemployment rate has decreased slightly, but there are still many talented workers pecking around for a good job. It is still a hirer's job market, but this window of opportunity is starting to close.

It's an extraordinarily good time to beef up your staff with unemployed stars, or other talented people who are employed but burned out at their current jobs and ready for a fresh start.

The challenge of the moment for hiring managers is to separate the unlucky from the unemployable. (And it's a new challenge. Most recruiters and hiring managers never have been through anything like the past 1½ years.) Here's how to make the most out of recession-era recruiting:

• **Find out how the candidate has used their time of unemployment** — Self-improvement is valuable, but it doesn't seal the deal.

When you're considering whether you should interview a candidate, a great place to start is by looking at what she's done since she last held a job.

While this isn't a deal maker, it's a good indication of her work ethic, level of industry engagement and ability to manage herself through crisis.

If a person was laid off because his company fell on hard times and chose to use that opportunity to enroll in a class on management strategies while he looked for his next position, good for him.

It shows initiative and suggests his skills are probably up to date.

Unemployed workers who stay active by taking classes, volunteering, attending networking groups or setting up informational interviews have a better chance of staying sharp and making contacts that can lead to a new job or assist them when they start a new one.

However, hiring managers shouldn't assume that unemployed people who take courses are a catch.

Some layoffs are about cutting great talent a company simply can't afford while other companies used this recession to clear out the least-essential and least-effective people on their rosters. The candidate who just completed the management class may have been laid off because they're unproductive, and no adult education class will change that.

If you're unsure about whether the candidate is unlucky or unemployable, you've got to ask smart questions.

• **Screen for success** — The key to making sure candidates with impressive résumés are simply unlucky, and not unemployable, is to invite them to answer questions that make them identify past successes.

Ask them to talk about a project they handled that turned out perfectly. Ask them if they've been a leader on a team that turned an impossible task into a great accomplishment. Ask for several examples of each. Ask them to tell you about their failures, and what they've learned. Finally, ask them how they would solve a current problem or two within your company.

The best candidates prove themselves in a job interview by talking about how they've succeeded at previous jobs, detailing how they overcame obstacles on important projects and offering ideas about how they'll succeed if you hire them. They know what success is and they can articulate it.

An unemployable candidate can't do this, no matter what classes she's taken and how presentable her résumé looks. She won't be able to answer these questions; she won't have compelling stories about important tasks she's done well. The difference between unlucky and unemployable will be as clear as a bell if you force the candidates to talk about success.

• **Fresh talent** — Great workers don't lose their value, especially if they've spent months diligently calling employment agencies, attending networking groups and volunteering at a local nonprofit.

A good candidate has a track record of success, no matter how long they've been laid off.

If anything, long-term unemployment sharpens a person's professional personality once they find a new job.

Driven, creative workers will be so thrilled to be back at work that they'll be dying to take their drive and creativity for a spin again.

Find an unlucky star performer who's a smart fit for your company, train them well, and stand back and let them help drive your business past this recession.

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