

A Set of Master Keys in Words

Keywords are a central feature of our business day. We use them to search our resume databases and to parse through the profiles and resumes posted on job boards and social networking sites. The problem, of course, is that we pesky humans have a bad habit of using different words to express the same idea. That variability in human expression makes it difficult to know which keywords will actually identify the best candidates for each of your openings.

So, what should you do? How can you select the right keywords when there are so many competing alternatives? The answer, I think, is to create a keyword taxonomy—an annotated list of search terms—that is rich in the language of the top talent in the specific career fields for which you are recruiting. Think of it as a “set of master keys in words” that can unlock the candidate databases you are probing.

Creating such a tool is not particularly difficult. Doing so, however, is a departure from the current practice in many organizations. It involves temporarily stepping outside the press of individual, day-to-day assignments and taking a longer term view of how keywords can best serve your recruiting strategy. Here’s what I mean.

The rule of thumb in developing a list of keywords has usually been to rely on the information provided to us in a job description or requisition. The problem with this approach, of course, is that those documents are typically formulated by hiring managers—one of the least articulate populations on the planet. The terminology they provide, therefore, is necessary but insufficient to unlock the best talent in an ATS or job board database. It is a part of the master keyword set, but not all of it.

How can you fill in the gaps?

I suggest you borrow a page from your colleagues in sales and marketing and form a focus group. Such a group is only useful, however, if it is composed of the right participants. You’re trying to uncover the language used by the best talent for your openings, so your focus group should be populated with the same kind of people. And, you have a ready source of such individuals among your organization’s “A” level performers in the career fields for which you’re recruiting. They, better than anyone else, know exactly which terms their peers will use to describe their qualifications.

Top performers are usually very busy, however, so you may have a hard time breaking them free for such an exercise. If that’s the case in your organization, you can also build your set of master keywords by conducting a similar survey with your new hires during their orientation. This approach is clearly more challenging to implement, however, because you will have to base your selection of the group’s participants not on their demonstrated excellence at work, but on your judgment of how they are likely to perform once they are on-the-job.

In either case, your focus group will yield the best results if its work is conducted in three steps.

- **First, build your baseline.** Ask the participants to list all of the terms they would use to describe the qualifications required for an individual to be able to perform their job

effectively. These attributes can include specific skills, occupational and/or industry knowledge, prior work experience, personality and any other factors that would bear on their ability to contribute. If the group has a hard time knowing where to begin, ask them to review one or more of the keyword references that are currently available. These include Google's Keyword Tool, which will suggest keywords based on previous Google searches; Wordtracker, an online research tool; and WEDDLE's 3 volume set, *Finding Needles in a Haystack*, which lists over 25,000 keywords and keyword phrases, across 5400 job and position titles in 28 industries and professions.

- **Second, restate the terms in order of their importance.** Ask the group to prioritize each of their terms according to its impact on an individual's job performance. While there may be some disagreement among the group about the placement of specific terms, encourage them to arrive at a consensus rank ordering of the overall list.
- **Third, group the terms into search baskets.** The best way to probe a resume or profile database is to conduct your search in concentric circles of ever greater specificity. This approach enables you to hone in on and eventually determine a reasonable slate of the most qualified prospects in a database. Therefore, ask the group to break their list into the following categories: absolutely critical, very important, somewhat important and nice to have.

Those four baskets of search terms should then be added to the terms you derived from the hiring manager's job description or requisition. If those documents enable you to do so, assign each of those terms to one of the categories used in Step 3 above. If not, the most politic course to assign them to the absolutely critical category. The resulting integrated list of search terms is your set of master keywords.

The above process is clearly labor and time intensive so think of it as an investment to develop an asset. The product you create—your keyword taxonomy—is just such a resource. It is a state-of-the-art search tool that can be used over and over again by the entire recruiting team. No less important, that tool gives them a genuine competitive advantage because it will increase both their efficiency and their performance. It should, therefore, be password protected and carefully monitored. As with all assets, it will require updating from time-to-time, but the effort involved will be substantially less than of the original development.

Keywords are typically viewed as one of the basic tools in our profession. For better or worse, everybody uses them so it's easy to assume they have little or no differentiating value. When forged into a powerful asset, however, keywords can help an organization unlock talent other employers can't reach. That's why no recruiting team should be without "a set of master keys in words."

Thanks for reading,
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Visit me at Weddles.com

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