

What Is a Candidate of Choice?

They are the elusive goal of every recruiter. They are our candidate of choice. And yet, there is no common or generally accepted definition for them. That fact is made clear every day in the variety of different terms we use to describe them. Some call them “top talent.” Others prefer “the best talent.” Still others refer to them as “A level candidates.” And the sports enthusiasts among us think they are “all stars.”

Despite this lack of a common vocabulary, however, most of us believe we know them when we see them. And that may certainly be true. The term of art is less important than the attributes it defines. As long as we clearly understand the qualities for which we’re looking in our candidates of choice, we can figure out where and how to recruit them. No less important in these days of recruiter layoffs, such an understanding also enables us to establish reasonable and appropriate measures of success for our work.

So, what are the qualities of a candidate of choice?

One author developed a list of eight characteristics. She describes these individuals as people who:

- are well-rounded so understand the business as well as their field of work;
- get results, often in innovative ways;
- are builders who can help an organization grow;
- are flexible and can succeed in a range of roles;
- are open and willing to accept the ideas of others;
- keep their commitments and deliver what they promise when they promise it;
- are team catalysts who support group work and accomplishments; and
- are respected by their peers and the people who work for them.

It’s a comprehensive list, and that is both its strength and its weakness. Clearly, a person who has those attributes is a valuable employee. In fact, they may also walk on water. The list sets the bar so high, we would be hard pressed to find anyone on earth who measures up. Indeed, if this list ever fell into the hands of hiring managers—people who already have champagne tastes and beer budgets for their staff—our jobs would be incalculably more difficult to perform and our prospects of success significantly less likely.

So, what we need is a more realistic set of qualities to help us identify a candidate of choice. It has to be a list we can work with, something we can use to fulfill our obligation to the organization. All too often, however, we get suckered into using a list similar to the one above, a list designed to help managers and supervisors do their job. And when we let that happen, we quickly find ourselves saddled with impossible requirements and, as a result, set up to fail in the organization.

The best way to develop an appropriate set of attributes, therefore, is to focus on who does what in the organization. Our role is to bring the right individuals in the door—the organization’s candidates of choice; it is the hiring manager’s responsibility to transform those candidates into

effective workers—the organization’s employees of choice. We must focus on individual readiness; hiring managers necessarily focus on individual performance.

A Definition That Makes Sense

When we search for a candidate of choice we are hunting for a person who is ready to perform. And, individuals who are ready to perform have at least two of just three attributes:

- They have a hard-to-find skill that is critical to the success of the organization; and/or
- They have a track record of sustained superior performance in their field; and
- They have a personality and outlook that aligns with the culture and values of the organization.

An individual can have either or both of the first two attributes, but they must always have the third to be a candidate of choice.

This attribute set recognizes the central reality facing every employer today. What differentiates successful organizations from all others is not talent. It is “accessible talent.” Candidates must have the ability to make a meaningful contribution on-the-job and they must possess a mindset that predisposes them to do so within the context set by an employer. They must, in short, be ready to perform, and that’s what makes them candidates of choice.

You can call such individuals whatever you like, but to be an optimal employment prospect, they must have attributes that represent real potential for your organization. For in essence, that’s what we do. We recruit real potential. It’s the hiring manager’s job to turn that real potential into reality.

Thanks for reading,

Peter

Visit me at Weddles.com

Peter Weddle is the author of over two dozen employment-related books, including *Recognizing Richard Rabbit*, a fable of self-discovery for working adults, and *Work Strong, Your Personal Career Fitness System*.

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