



Businesses don't do business.
People do.

HIRING TOP PERFORMERS

Quality service, a good reputation, and strong financial performance are all important, but your human capital holds the key to sustainable, long-term growth and success.

Who matters most? Your top performers. They provide the energy and insights that improve processes and services, increase productivity, and move your company forward.

BY CHRISTINE CORELLI

Six Winning Strategies

Unfortunately, top performers are rare and hard to attract. To recruit the best, you must first prepare for interviews with potential employees. These six winning strategies will help you select the best candidates:

1) Identify Strengths

Obviously, candidates must be well-versed in accounting. But, you may also need someone experienced in job cost accounting, risk management, or fleet depreciation. It's also important to think about a person's values, character, and work ethic. Remember, you're looking for a candidate who will make a significant contribution to your department and your company.

2) Establish Core Competencies

Make a list of the job's core competencies for use during the interview. Involve current employees and executives in this process. Think of every accounting competency you need, as well as such valuable characteristics as leadership, teamwork, and strong communication skills.

3) Outline the Hiring Process

Many managers post an ad in the paper or on a Web site, ask people to submit a résumé, and wait for the résumés to pour in. A good hiring manager, though, thinks through the process more fully.

Before the résumés land on your desk, consider how you will evaluate the candidates. How will you contact them? How will you notify the prospects you eliminate? How long will you accept applications? When will you make your decision? Will anyone else be involved in the hiring decision? How will their input be used? A comprehensive, detailed process will often impress top performers.

4) Prepare Interview Questions

Don't just wing it! Often, CFMs who are short on time don't generate a list of interview questions. They sit down for the interview, look over the résumé, and then ask a few questions about work experience, background, and goals. After the interview, they sometimes realize that they haven't asked enough solid questions to make an informed decision.

Questions should elicit responses that do more than restate or expand on the achievements in a prospect's résumé. (See Exhibit 1 on page 20.)

There's nothing wrong with such challenging questions as, "Out of all the people who have applied for this job, why should I hire you?" Top performers will be primed to answer the "Why you?" question.

5) Discuss Your Company & Its Culture

Use the interview to learn more about your candidates and to talk about your company. You want top performers to feel comfortable with your company and to recognize that employees are rewarded for hard work and results.

Talk about your company's mission or vision statement. *Top performers look for companies driven by values, vision, and vroom – or forward momentum.*

What does your construction company stand for? What are your ethical standards and code of conduct? How do you treat customers and each other? If your company doesn't have these principles and standards formalized, consider drafting them. Not only will they help attract top performers, they will also guide your entire staff.

Also, talk about your company's future. Let prospects know that your company has a strategic plan with measurable and accountable goals. When you do, you convey that achievement is recorded – and achievers are rewarded.

6) Sell the Positive

While candidates typically don't ask, they often wonder, "Why should I work for this company and for you?" Answer this question, even if no one asks.

Remember, top performers evaluate you while you evaluate them. Is your salary competitive? What kind of benefits do you offer? Do you have opportunities for advancement? Will they have the opportunity to lead projects?

Can they apply their skills toward interesting activities? Explain why they should choose your company instead of a competitor or another industry, for that matter.

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FINDING TOP PERFORMERS

Once you are prepared for the hiring process, consider how you will find your top performer.

Advertise the Opening

As you know, trade associations are a good source for candidates. Place job postings in association magazines or Web sites. To reach a wider audience, advertise in newspapers or with your local CPA society.

Engage a Placement Agency

A reputable placement agency that specializes in construction or financial management can reduce the time you spend locating top performers.

Exhibit 1: Sample Interview Questions

- What influenced your choice of college or university?
- Why did you choose _____ as your major?
- What courses interested you the most?
- What courses have you taken since graduation?
- How did you get started in this line of work?
- Can you describe your current (or last) job in detail?
- Why do you want to leave?
- How would you describe the culture of your present company?
- What do you like about your current boss? **Dislike?**
- Does your boss encourage you to share ideas and help solve problems?
- Were you satisfied with your rate of advancement?
- What have you done while unemployed?
- What are the major accomplishments in your career and your life?
- Do you prefer to work alone or in a group?
- Do you consider yourself to be self-motivated?
- Are you a team player?
- What are your greatest strengths? **Weaknesses?**
- How will your strengths help you on this job?
- Why are you interested in this job?

Also, remember to ask additional questions relevant to your construction company and contractor type.

Once you tell the placement agency about the job requirements and your desired qualities in prospects, they will pre-screen applicants and present only the candidates who meet your specifications.

Tap into Your Workforce

Go to other top performers in your company. Ask them if they know an accountant looking for a position. Referrals from your best employees can be an excellent source for exceptional people.

Swipe from Competitors

All's fair in love and business, right? But, make sure you do this in a highly professional manner. For example, say, "I've heard such great things about you from your peers. If you are ever interested in changing employers, please let me know."

The Hiring Process

PRE-SCREENING FOR TOP PERFORMERS

Next, you'll need to sort through the résumés carefully to find the top performers and pre-screen them. Begin with the obvious – move your trash can closer and sort them into three piles:

1) Those who are not suitable. Right off the bat, you should be able to identify those people who don't fit your profile of the ideal employee. They don't have the right credentials, they don't have the experience you need, or their career interests lay in another direction. Eliminate these candidates from further consideration.

2) Those who have most of the qualifications. It's common to get top performers who don't have all of the qualifications you seek. Maybe they don't have experience with tax law, joint ventures, or equipment costing. Or, maybe they haven't led major projects or teams.

Many future top performers come with a strong, basic set of skills and – more importantly – the ambition to learn new ones. So, don't automatically eliminate them from consideration. Put all candidates with potential in this pile.

3) Those who have all of the qualifications. Chances are, this pile will be the smallest. It's difficult, but not impossible, to find people who have all the skills, competencies, and qualities you desire. These are the candidates to consider first.

After you pre-screen the applicants on the basis of their

résumés and applications, pre-screen them on the phone. You're not looking to make a final decision here. Ask them a few of the questions generated for the interviews and, as you talk to them, remember your company must hire the best to be the best. Listen for:

- **Communication Skills/Grammar** – In the course of daily work, your new hire will probably communicate with contractors, subs, government officials, and suppliers. At a minimum, ensure that candidates communicate effectively.
- **Confidence** – Do prospects sound poised and self-assured? Do they seem confident, but not arrogant, about their abilities and background? Top performers believe they can do the job well, but are humble enough to realize they can always learn from those around them.
- **Desire** – Your candidates should be enthusiastic, but not overly enthusiastic; they shouldn't sound insincere or desperate. Or worse, prospects shouldn't sound apathetic or indifferent. You want people who are eager to do well. Top performers are looking for careers where they can make a difference.

THE INTERVIEW

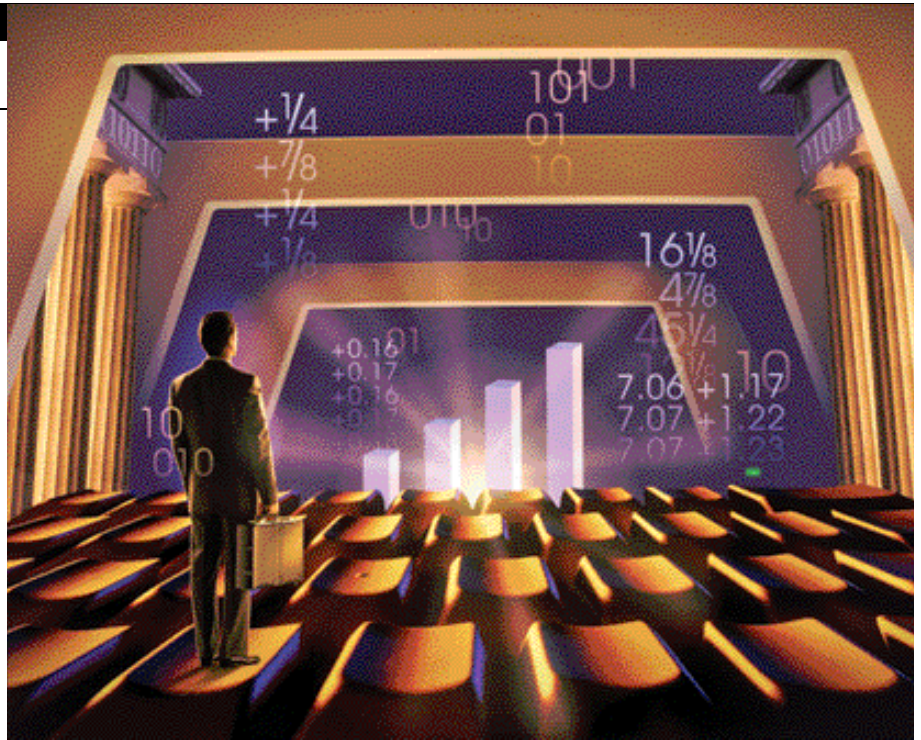
Finally, you're ready to interview candidates. During the interview:

- **Ask your prepared questions.** Now, listen with your head and your gut. Have they given intelligent, sincere answers?
- **Observe their body language.** Do they make eye contact? Do they wring their hands? Does their posture convey self-assurance? Do they have a confident handshake?
- **Describe your company's organization and culture.** Sell your organization, but don't sugarcoat the truth. Tell them about your company's positives – and negatives.

For example, acknowledge that year-end is stressful, explain that the new software implementation might require some overtime, or discuss how an out-of-state job could affect them.

MAKING THE DECISION

Unfortunately, there's no hard-and-fast rule to help you hire that top performer. But, by the time you finish interviewing your candidates, you should have a good feel for prospects who could rise to the top of your organization and who, at best,



will be average. As you evaluate the candidates, ask yourself:

- Did they go the extra mile on their last job?
- Did they have a genuine desire to be helpful?
- Did they have a genuine desire to excel?
- Do they really want the job?
- Will they mesh with our culture and team?
- If applicable, will they relocate?
- They may be likable, but can they do the job? Are they competent?
- Who are their references? Are their references valid?

Answer the questions above, then involve your accounting and management team in the selection of the final three candidates. This way, you will learn which prospect best fits with the team.

How to Attract Top Performers

So, you've pre-screened, interviewed, and finally discovered your top performers. But, how interested are they in your company? Here are 10 secrets to recruit, and retain, your superstars.

- 1) **Compensation Package** – While top performers evaluate more than just salary as they assess their working environment, a competitive wage is important.

If you value your top performers, make it a practice to evaluate their wages against your direct competitors. (Payscale.com is a good source of compensation information.)

- 2) **Work/Life Balance** – Studies prove that the most productive people work hard and play hard. They value their

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personal lives.

If you and your company demonstrate that you respect this philosophy, you will land your top performers and encourage even better performance. Organize events that include families and, whenever possible, be flexible when employees need to go to the dentist or to their child's school play.

- 3) Accomplishment** – Top performers are driven by success, and they derive satisfaction from a job well done. In some organizations, a lot of time is invested in busy work or projects that are abandoned before completion. In this environment, top performers become frustrated, and sometimes decide to search for companies where they can make a difference.

So, if you ask a top performer to explore new ways to contain construction costs, be prepared to act on the recommendations, and don't cancel the project because a new priority pops up.

- 4) Interesting and Challenging Work** – Let's face it, there's a lot of routine work in construction finance. However, many top performers thrive on tasks that encourage initiative. So, vary routine work with more interesting and challenging projects.

For example, your might ask them to help formalize joint venture agreements, create annual budgets, or improve productivity, profitability, and morale.

- 5) Opportunity** – While some top performers are satisfied with excellent performance in their current roles, others look for advancement opportunities.

Many top performers like to learn new skills and expand their job responsibilities. Find opportunities for them to do so. When possible, look for assignments that will prepare them for leadership positions. For example, let them head the new internal audit team or lead that project re-examining accounting methods.

- 6) Rewards and Recognition** – We all like to be recognized and valued for our work, and top performers are no different. Recognition comes in many forms: a cash bonus, a gift, or simply a thank you note.

- 7) Training** – Top performers like to keep their skills current, to be proficient in their jobs, and to learn about trends in the industry. Are there important tax law changes? How will Sarbanes-Oxley affect the industry? Will new technologies make accounting practices easier? Top performers want to know.

- 8) A Great Boss** – Set the tone for your organization. Be

the example for your people to follow. Treat them with respect, and don't criticize. Be a coach.

- 9) A Great Company** – Top performers want to work for a great boss and a great company. They like a well-run organization. They want an environment with well-defined roles and responsibilities, where others support them and they can excel. They want to know that the company will eliminate any process or procedure that stalls or inhibits flawless execution.

- 10) Information** – Communication is always critical, and a company that keeps its employees informed will generate greater loyalty. Communicate the company's mission, standards, and goals in compelling terms. Clarify that people understand what you've told them, and follow up on any additional questions they may have.

Conclusion

As you go about your day-to-day duties, never lose sight of this: Being a great boss, creating a great place to work, and keeping your people motivated is one of the best things you can do to improve your company's bottom line.

Choose them well, lead them well, and treat them well – and they will become one of your greatest weapons against the competition. For now, simply ask this question, "Would you work for you?"

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Christine holds a BA from the University of Illinois. She is a member of the National Speakers Association (NSA) and a highly rated presenter at CFMA's Annual Conferences & Exhibitions.

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