



The Art of Hiring an Engineer

5 Ways to Secure Your Next Best Hire

By Jennifer Anderson

Based on over 18 years of experience, it has become evident that hiring an engineer takes finesse, patience, commitment, and creativity – it is more of an art than a science.

For all of the left-brained engineers reading this right now, do not panic when hiring is referred to as an “art.” You do not need to get in touch with your inner poet, but you do need to evaluate how you are engaging candidates. It is the connection of one human being to another that makes or breaks the hiring process.

For all of the potential job-seekers out there, read on. This information will help you to understand the perspective of your next hiring manager!

As an engineer, you may be thinking that you do not want to mess around with all the “people stuff” of hiring. You want it to be easy, mathematical, like an equation – plug in accurate variables to get the right answer – every time. However, my friends, it is not that way. “People stuff” is real. Moreover, do not forget, you are a person too. So, you do have very real experience in how to engage with another human being.

Presumably, your hiring process includes important steps like:

- Asking rigorous engineering questions
- Checking references
- Evaluating past work samples
- Ensuring that your hiring process is organized and efficient

In addition to those key steps, here are five important ways to add finesse to the art of hiring an engineer:

Seek to Understand

Dr. Covey, of *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* fame, was a champion of a habit that he coined as *first seek to understand, then be understood*. (If you have not read that book yet, do it. It will change your world – for the better. Promise.) When you are looking to understand a job candidate, it is important that you get to know that person. You do not need to invite them to your house for a dinner party, although that is an excellent way to get to know people. Seek to understand what is important about that person’s life. Questions to ask might include:



- a) Tell me your “I became an engineer because...” story.
- b) While in college, what was the focus of your project’s team? How did you fit into the group dynamic?
- c) How do you spend your extra time?
- d) To what programs or organizations do you volunteer your time? Why are you involved?

After asking those types of questions, share your own “I became an engineer because...” story. Help that candidate to connect with you as an individual. Remember, your goal is to get to know them on a personal level. Helping them understand your background will allow both of you to relax and enjoy the conversation more.

Eat Together

There is something sacred about eating together that goes back to the beginning of time. We all eat, although we do not necessarily like the same food. Connecting with a job candidate over a meal can be a fun and interesting way to get to know each other better.

Invite the job candidate to a lunch interview, but only after the first in-office interview when you are pretty sure that you want to invest the time to get to know them better. Ask the job candidate to pick an interesting and different restaurant. You may be a steak-and-potatoes type of person, but now is the time to try something new and different. Ideally, have them pick a restaurant they have never been to either. Now, I understand that in some small markets, there are fewer restaurant options, so you may have to eat

somewhere you have already been. However, the point is to think outside the box with this “normal” activity of eating.

The importance of this alternate eating experience is that it will help you connect over something unique and interesting for both of you. Plus, you will get an idea how the candidate handles new and different experiences. Those natural (and often visceral) reactions will give you much insight into that candidate’s thinking, behavior, motivations, and more. The other benefit is that you will both be outside of your comfort zone, so no one has the upper hand. In the end, we all eat, but the experience of eating can help you to uncover characteristics about a job candidate that an interview would not have allowed you to discover.

Spend the Day in the Office

Invite the candidate to spend a day in the office with you. If they are too busy with their other full-time job, you may have to do a half day or an afternoon. An entire day is beneficial because people can be on their best behavior for a couple of hours. It is a lot harder to play nice in the sandbox when you have that afternoon sugar slump.

The technique of inviting someone into the office all day is not something required for every applicant, rather when you are working to impress and win over a particular candidate. “Show me,” do not just “tell me.” Having a candidate in the office all day helps you to engage with them differently than the normal 1- to 2-hour interview. It is helpful for them and your firm.

Obviously, play it safe. Have the candidate sign a non-disclosure agreement so that they can interact openly and respectfully. Include opportunities for private conversations with key team members. As a manager, you may opt not to go to lunch with the job candidate, but rather send him/her to lunch with another engineer. Let them talk without the boss listening in – but, choose which engineer you send wisely.

Network, Network, Network

The best way to find people to join your firm is through networking in-person. Find events that align with your sector of the industry and attend regularly. It is important to make this a priority so that you have the consistency of meeting and re-engaging with people associated with the events.

One thing you need to remember about networking is that you are not likely to walk into a room, meet the perfect candidate, interview and hire them right there at the networking event. Rather, it is going to take time to connect with people. If you are going to get involved with networking, plan for a marathon, not a sprint. If you, or someone from your team, is attending regular networking events, be prepared for being out of the office for a few hours. Do not think

of networking as contrary to “getting work done.” Rather, embrace networking as one of your job responsibilities. It is very important!

Little Things Matter

Remember when your mom told you to write thank-you notes because a hand-written note means much more than a verbal thank you? Well, the same admonishment applies in business. Sending a meaningful, hand-written thank-you note to candidates who interview with your company will help you to stand out. Sure, emails are also great, not to mention easy to finish and send off quickly. However, if you want to make a strong human connection, send a hand-written note.

Another example of the *little things* is business cards. It is always an amazing circumstance when someone does not have a business card for the company for which they work. Why would you not arm your employees with business cards? They are inexpensive and may seem insignificant, but business cards rarely get thrown away. Think outside of the box when it comes to creating business cards too. An unusual and memorable card that the author was given was thin metal etched with a company logo, employee name, email, and cell number of the employee. That is one card that most people probably would never

throw out. The reason you want all of your employees to have business cards is that you never know when they are going to cross paths with someone that could be a great hire. The simple, small token of handing off a business card shows that the company and the person care, and take their business seriously. Arm your people with the right tools as it will make a difference.

In the end, you need an engineering candidate to have the technical skills necessary to get the job done. Vet those skills, put the applicants to the test, and uncover what they know. Beyond math and science, skills required to succeed in today’s business world also include communicating, listening, reading body language, courtesy, respect, and more. Give yourself, and the candidates, the opportunity to get to know one another by allowing the art of connecting on a personal level. Remember, you are both humans. ■

Born into a family of engineers, but focusing on the people side of engineering, Jennifer Anderson (www.CareerCoachJen.com) has nearly 20 years of experience helping companies hire and retain the right talent. She may be reached at jen@careercoachjen.com.

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