

# Hiring Experienced Structural Engineers

By Michael "Batman" Cohen

STEM jobs (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) are on the rise, and STEM degree programs and graduates are on the rise too. So, why are Structural Engineers so hard to find, particularly mid-level engineers with a few years of experience? Several reasons are essential to understand if we are going to create strategies to find and attract that elusive talent.

Finding entry-level engineers is not a problem for most firms but a mid-to-senior level? Incredibly challenging. Here's why:

- 1) Structural Engineering (SE) projects last longer and are more complex than many other STEM professions. Unlike most other non-research-based STEM jobs, the project lifecycle for an SE is much longer, which leads to higher job loyalty and retention for the employer.
- 2) There are less drastic changes in the SE space than other STEM fields, and most clients have SE firms sign NDAs limiting the ability to talk about your exciting or unique projects.
- 3) In an industry that is not considered a hotbed for recruiting and hiring, many of the best practices, tooling, and cutting-edge approaches have been missed.

There are three ways to overcome each of these obstacles:

## 1) Lengthy and Complex Projects (most last 6 – 24 months)

- a) Reach out to candidates when they have been at their current firm for three to six months. By this time, they have been integrated into their teams/organizations and started working on their first project(s). This is the time when candidates are getting over the honeymoon phase and are starting to assess if this company/role makes sense for them and their careers. A great time to get on their radar.
- b) The next opportune time to reach out is in the 18 to 24-month range. They will have finished or be finishing their first or second project, and it could be a great time to touch base with a more exciting opportunity/project.
- c) The other best times to reach out are at anniversaries and birthdays – these are two times when people are naturally thinking about change. They, like New Years Day, are a time where

people reflect on their future, ask questions of themselves, and make new goals/strategies.

## 2) Selling Your Organization

- a) Unlike other STEM fields, technology is not as rapidly advancing for SEs, so other details have to be taken into account when reaching out to sell a candidate on working for you. Remember, "Everyone is working on exciting projects with cool clients," – so be SPECIFIC! Share details they cannot easily find on their own.
- b) Overcoming NDAs can be tough, and, if not thought out ahead of time, reaching out to hire top talent can be a difficult challenge. Try having an internal conversation with the business team about getting some flexibility with your firm's NDA – perhaps being able to list and share certain details about the project (location, structure type, length of project, and other interesting details) that could help sell the project to potential candidates.
- c) Find better specifics to use to reach out – Universities or past companies shared with hiring managers or team members, personal interests of hiring managers shared with candidates (found in LinkedIn Groups, Meetup Groups, etc.), or any other interesting similarities that may not *just* be based on what they do and what you are hiring for someone to do.

## 3) Best Recruiting Practices in the STEM Field

- a) Finding Candidates – Use Natural Language Processing (NLP) in your search to find relevant people. This means searching using words/phrases the same way a candidate would use them in their profile. Example: "Bridge Design" OR "Designed Bridge" OR "Designed Bridges" OR "Responsible for Designing" OR "Responsible for the design of" OR "Managed Bridge Design" OR "Designing Bridges." The capitalized word "OR" is a Boolean Operator used as a conjunction to combine keywords in a search, resulting in more focused and productive results.
- b) Messaging Candidates – Subject line less than 38 characters. This parameter allows the subject to show up on cell

phones. Communicate in short one-to two-sentence paragraphs. Include relevant links (projects, coworkers, managers, etc.). It is okay to be funny and be yourself. Authenticity comes through in an email. If you want to test your authenticity, read your email aloud (to yourself or a colleague) – does it sound very natural and reflect how you usually communicate?

- c) Qualifying/Screening Candidates – An important thing to remember for the phone screening is to have a predetermined list of information you want to gather every time. Our best practices consist of using an acronym to help remember it every time as a makeshift "checklist," so we do not end the call until we have all the data we need. Conversely, it is important to be conversational, do not be an order-taker! If you want to see how much of an order-taker you are (we all have it in us), try the following easy exercise (I encourage EVERYONE to try this – it is very revealing, both professionally and personally). Go through a qualification call with a coworker or friend. Notice what your "filler word(s)" is/are. This is the word you say after a candidate answers a question and you want to move to the next one. Typical examples: "Cool," "Awesome," "Got it," etc. The fewer of these filler words you use, the less of an order-taker you are! Practice makes perfect.

All companies are struggling to find top talent – it is the nature of having a low unemployment rate and a boom in STEM industries. Every company has a "great reason for candidates to work there." But the company who will have the most hiring success and, as such, the most growth and market share increase will be the one who adopts these best practices and modernization of the recruiting organizations. After all, the companies that can hire enough people and hire the best people will always be the most successful. ■



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