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The Proper Process for Hiring

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Small business leaders wear many hats. With all those hats, rarely are we experts in all areas and that's a big reason we hire other people. But how can we hire other people for key areas of our business when we may not be the experts in the area of hiring to begin with?

As a garden center or nursery retailer, you need people with general retail skills and very specialized plant knowledge. You have to ensure your people have the physical strength to lift heavy bags, the fiscal responsibility to keep track of cash/credit transactions and the ethical responsibility to ensure inventory control. Some garden centers have heavy equipment such as backhoes to load trucks of loose bulk materials for delivery to private homes and landscape companies, or forklifts to move pallets of plants and other product to and from display or storage locations. And not everyone has the interpersonal skills to solve customer problems and ensure a positive customer experience when customers visit your store.

Recruiting top talent, whether seasonal or longer, is a challenge and doing it right requires development of a process to protect your business from compliance risks and increase the quality of people you're hiring. While there's no one-size-fits-all solution, this article should provide you with some very important guidance missing at many garden center and nursery locations. The right process will boost your business!

Process Protects

There are many employment laws that intersect with hiring and a simple mistake can become incredibly costly. The right processes in place will significantly reduce your risk exposure, improving the chances of hiring the right talent.

Among the risks, discrimination stands at the top. Disparate treatment, or discriminating on purpose, is easy to avoid, as this is all about intent. Disparate impact, or discriminating unintentionally, is a bit more challenging and takes a concerted effort to overcome or prevent.

Making sure you have a compliant official internal job description, a well-crafted external-facing job advertisement (do NOT just post the official internal job description!), budget for the desired compensation range and business case for why the role is necessary are crucial before we get into sourcing and candidate flow. They're topics for

another time, but necessary to call them out here as the beginning of your process and key tools for overcoming claims of discrimination.

Sourcing Strategies

Sourcing talent happens in two primary ways—with Push and Pull strategies.

Posting the position on a website is typically insufficient and the least-effective strategy. It's often referred to as "Post and Pray." You put it up and pray the right candidate randomly comes across it and applies. Just because it's the least effective strategy doesn't mean you shouldn't do it. A posting simplifies sharing with others, provides legitimacy for the need in the eyes of job seekers and easily allows you to manage candidate flow. Posting is also the most common form of push strategy.

Other push strategies include placing advertisements in local papers, posting signs outside your buildings or around your property, on association websites, state job boards, use of radio and TV spots, or even sharing the URL of the job posting through social media. Push strategies are all about "pushing the message out" into the wild and hoping the right talent comes across it. They're easy to do and usually take minimal effort. However, to drive the effectiveness, it takes a LOT of pushing out to get it in front of the right people.

Pull strategies are the most effective form of talent sourcing. However, they're also the most labor-intensive. Using job boards, resume databases or even past files of prior applicants are resources used for pull strategies. These strategies require the use of keywords, Boolean search strings or sort/filters on websites and in databases to narrow the pool of prospects to those most closely aligned to the role. With that smaller, likely more-qualified pool of prospects identified, a well-crafted message is sent directly to prospective candidates engaging them in conversation.

Push strategies tap the largest pool of talent, but yields the smallest quality return on the investment of time and energy. Pull strategies tap a much smaller, more-targeted pool of talent with a higher probability of alignment to the role, and yields a much higher quality return on the investment of time and energy, but are a lot more labor intensive.

Both strategies, in balance, need to be tapped in order to succeed at finding the best available talent in a timely manner. Even sourcing with both push and pull strategies, it's easy to make mistakes and risk illegal discrimination. Sourcing is both art and science. While sourcing risks are a robust topic for another day, for now, diversifying the strategies, resources and locations of sourcing will help to reduce some of the risks and are a good place to start.

Candidate Flow

The importance of defining the steps in your candidate flow cannot be overstated. It helps you stay organized and measure the effectiveness of your efforts. Candidate flow is all about keeping your talent pipeline full.

Phone screen: Most candidate flow processes begin with a screening interview usually over the phone. Take the time to speak briefly with the person, listen to their communication style and ask some validating questions to ensure they're able to meet the minimum qualifications of the job—can you get to work, on time, reliably, during the shifts we need, on the days required? Specialized roles will have targeted qualifying questions, but for all roles focus mostly on open-ended questions around the minimum and preferred qualifications from the official internal job description for this call, keeping closed-ended questions to a minimum.

In-person interviews: If the candidate(s) pass(es) the phone screen, advance them to an in-person interview. During this interview, be prepared with questions that touch on the essential duties and responsibilities from the

official internal job description. Behavior-based questions are critical. These questions ask about a candidate's past actions and behaviors they've already performed that align with the essential duties and responsibilities, demonstrate cultural alignment and reflect their ability to grow with your company. Avoid situational "what-if" questions where a candidate has to come up with an imaginary response. Anyone can make up an answer, but if they've never actually done what you need, it'll be obvious from responses to the behavioral based questions.

The number of in-person interviews required is dependent on the level and type of role. Management and executive leadership roles will likely have multiple in-person interviews. Front-line customer service, cash register associates or even general laborers may have only one in-person interview. Professional roles or roles requiring specialized knowledge or skill likely fall in between. Keeping the interview rounds as few as reasonable to make a quality decision is advised. You lose candidates in the process if it's too lengthy. The number of interviews doesn't have to be the exact same for all roles, but should be the same for any given role. This consistency is an important way to reduce/eliminate perceived discrimination in the process. Advance a candidate to the next interview only if they perform well enough to continue the process.

Tests, assessments & screening: Many may feel these are important. There are serious risks of disparate impact if using tools that are not properly and regularly tested for validity or have no real job relevance. Tread carefully and seek guidance from a strategic HR professional before making use of these tools for your business.

Background checks, or even drug screenings, are appropriate for many businesses, but should be performed after offer extension and never before. Offers should always be extended under the condition of successfully passing such evaluations and rescinded if a candidate doesn't pass.
Selection & offer extension: Involving multiple people in the interview and selection process is an important way to reduce/eliminate bias and discrimination in the process. It may be easier to make a quick hiring decision for some roles, but for others it's best to take a thoughtful approach and win others' consensus.

Avoiding analysis paralysis is just as critical as not letting your gut alone rule your decisions. Carefully review the questions asked and responses provided. Let data be your guide even for entry-level positions. When multiple viable candidates reach the end of the process where one or just a few will be hired, rank the candidates in order of preference. An offer extended doesn't always equal an offer accepted. If declined, you should move quickly to extend an offer to the next ranked candidate.

Documenting the differences when ranking candidates and reason for making a hiring decision is as important as documenting the reason for not advancing a candidate. The absence of documentation makes it more difficult for an employer to defend an accusation of discrimination, which often advances purely based on surface evidence (called prima facie in legal terms).

To Wrap Up
The recruitment process doesn't need to be lengthy or complex. Documenting the process and ensuring consistency is important, ensuring fairness while reducing risks. Documentation of decisions, notes, job postings and any other information about the business case, applicants to and selection of a candidate should be retained for at least one year after the hiring decision or close of the posting (if no hire is made). Failure to have these records available in the event of an investigation may pose its own legal and financial risks.

The right process, deploying the right combination of push and pull strategies, that makes use of the official internal job description to develop behavior-based questions, and the evaluation and use of data by the recruitment team will improve the quality selection of talent. In the end, the better your talent, the better your business. People are your

most important asset! **GP**

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