

Max Messmer, Editor

Avoiding Today's Top Hiring Mistakes

The pressure is on for accounting managers these days. With vacancies to fill, many have begun hiring. Yet with numerous competing work demands—including monthly financial analyses to prepare for executives, internal control systems to evaluate, and employees to

supervise—plans to add new staff may not always receive sufficient attention. This often leads to recruitment challenges and, in the worst-case scenario, poor hiring decisions.

Everything from the way you determine your personnel needs to how you evaluate applicants can play a role in the success of your staffing efforts. Here are some of the most common hiring mistakes and advice on how to avoid them.

Filling vacancies automatically

Before you begin the recruitment process for an existing opening, take the time to look for possible skill gaps in your team. You may find there is a greater need for filling a different or entirely

new position. For example, if your group seems to be struggling to keep up with reconciling general ledger accounts, you may want to shift your hiring efforts toward a staff account-

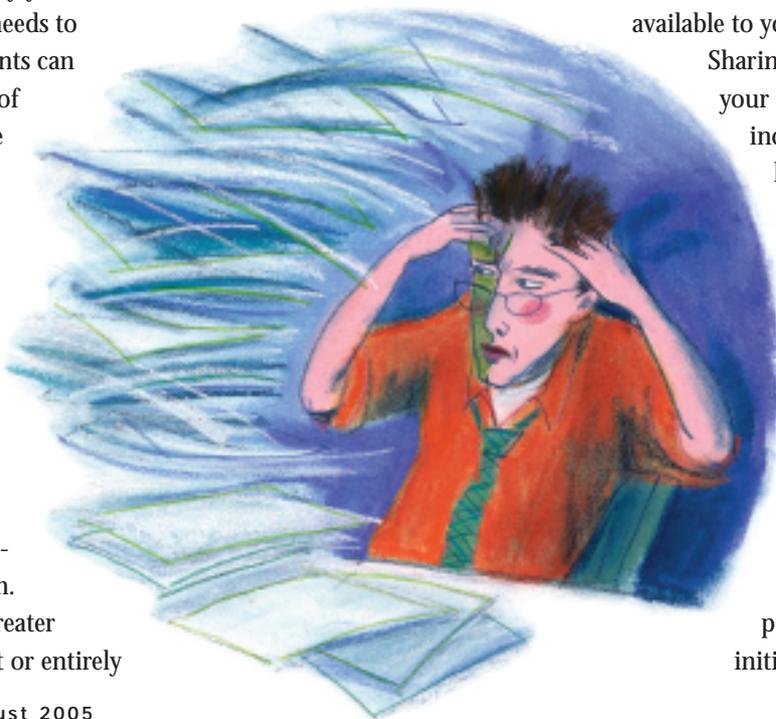
ant instead of a more senior accounting professional.

Ask your financial staff for their thoughts on where the hiring need is greatest. They are on the front lines and often may notice gaps that aren't apparent to you.

Failing to use your network

You may think of networking as useful when you're looking for a job, but are you also using it when recruiting candidates? If not, you're failing to take advantage of one of the most effective hiring resources available to you.

Sharing the news within your circle of contacts—including friends, colleagues, neighbors, and vendors—that you are adding staff can help you learn of potential applicants you might not otherwise find, including currently employed professionals who are willing to consider new opportunities but haven't initiated a formal job



search yet. Your network can also prove invaluable in pre-employment screening. A quick e-mail asking if anyone has a contact at an applicant's former employer might help you uncover additional insight into an individual's on-the-job performance.

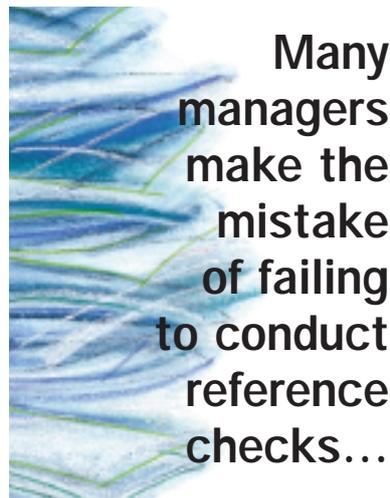
Making rushed decisions

As demand for accounting professionals intensifies, securing top talent becomes more challenging by the day. No one wants to lose leading candidates to another job offer simply because the hiring process took too long, so many managers take it to the other extreme and rush the decision. Rather than having applicants go through standard procedures, such as two interviews followed by reference checks, they might extend an offer as early as during the initial meeting.

While streamlining hiring procedures may be beneficial—for instance, having a promising candidate attend a second interview the same morning as the first—skipping stages altogether can be risky. As much as you may need a position filled right away, you'll lose time and money in the long run if that person proves to be a poor match to the job and company. Be sure you know as much as possible about the candidate you are hiring before making your final decision.

Falling victim to the "halo effect"

The halo effect happens when you are so enraptured by one particular aspect of a candidate—credentials, specialties, important contacts, interests, and so forth—that it affects all your other judgments. The person may have attended your alma mater or hold a particularly desirable professional certification, for example,



but you shouldn't allow that factor alone to tip the scale in his or her favor.

Instead, create an up-to-date job description that conveys the essentials of the position, including primary and secondary responsibilities, skills and attributes essential to perform the job, experience required, and preferred educational background. Then use this document as the basis of your hiring criteria. With a clear checklist in mind, you can evaluate applicants more objectively.

Skipping reference checks

Many managers make the mistake of failing to conduct reference checks because they are either in a hurry or believe previous employers may not

be forthcoming about employees no longer with their firm. This may be true in some cases, but firms that are hiring can invite subsequent problems by not seeking feedback from others about prospective employees.

Tell finalists that candid references will play an important part in final hiring decisions, and ask them to encourage their references to provide honest feedback about job performance. And you don't have to be limited to the references applicants give you. You can also call your counterpart at the candidate's previous company or ask references who they think might serve as additional sources of information. If you speak with someone who is reluctant to help, explain that his or her comments can help you make sure the individual is an ideal fit for the position. Acknowledge that no one wants the applicant to be unsuccessful in a job.

Avoiding these common mistakes can greatly improve the results of your hiring process. You'll locate potential employees more efficiently and make better choices about whom to hire, which will give you an advantage in today's increasingly competitive employment market. ■

Answers to puzzle on p. 64.

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Max Messmer is chairman and CEO of Robert Half International Inc. (RHI), parent company of Robert Half® Finance & Accounting, Accountemps®, and Robert Half® Management Resources. RHI is the world's first and largest specialized staffing firm placing accounting and finance professionals on a full-time, temporary, and project basis. Messmer's most recent books are Motivating Employees For Dummies® and Managing Your Career For Dummies® (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.).