

# HIRING GEEKS THAT FIT



by Johanna Rothman

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# 1 Develop Your Hiring Strategy

“I wish I’d never hired Zeus. I know he’s excellent at his technical work, but he’s so difficult. He intimidates people, hurling words when he’s displeased. What a mistake.” –Statement from a dissatisfied manager

Hiring mistakes do happen—and we can avoid them. The decision to hire an employee is one of the most critical decisions a manager can make.

You, your team, and the organization will live with the long-term consequences of your hiring decision. With a little bit of planning, organization, and teamwork, you can hire right the first time.

## 1.1 Hire for Attitude—Hire for Cultural Fit

You’ve heard the phrase “hire for attitude.” It’s a great phrase, and it’s almost true. It’s only true if the attitude you are hiring for fits your culture. Hiring for culture is key to solving many of your hiring problems. So consider it first.

Your corporate culture ([SCH10](#)) has three primary components:

- What people can discuss
- What the organization rewards
- How people treat each other

There are other nuances of corporate culture. For more subtleties on corporate culture, see [HOF10](#). For hiring purposes, you want to know if a candidate can work in your culture—if a candidate can discuss or not what others can or cannot discuss. Can a candidate live with your explicit and implicit reward structure? Does the candidate share the same approach to how people treat each other, with respect to meeting participation, language usage, brainstorming, and more?

Successful candidates will adapt to your culture easily. Unsuccessful candidates will never quite fit. They will be like our colleague Zeus, at the beginning of this chapter, not quite fitting in. Zeus was not a mistake from a technical perspective, but a cultural fit perspective. And, yes, Zeus was a real geek, a real person in a real organization.



Cultural fit will trump all technical skills. Every time. It doesn't matter how technically great a person is. If a candidate's cultural preferences do not match your organization, that person will not fit. Do not bother hiring that person. That candidate will not succeed as an employee. Know your organization and know your team.

## **1.2 Identify the problems you need to address with a hiring strategy**

Some hiring managers begin the hiring process by compiling a wish list of technical skills, such as two years of C++, three years of project management, must have game company experience, and so on. Unfortunately, a laundry list of skills listing constrains your thinking, so you don't actually solve the problem you need to solve with a new hire. And, a laundry list of skills can discourage an otherwise qualified candidate from applying for your position.

Instead, define a hiring strategy to start your problem solving. A new hire will help you solve the problems you now have. To know how a new hire will help, you need to understand your problem characteristics and their solutions. That's your hiring strategy.

### **You need additional people**

If you need to hire more people to do the same kinds of projects, put extra emphasis on each candidate's technical skills, if you can find enough candidates. If you can't find technically skilled candidates, then look for candidates who fit into the existing culture or who have demonstrated an ability to adapt and learn—and plan to train your new hires.

Consider whether you need junior-level people, senior-level people, or people who are experienced technical leaders. If you're hiring many people at one time, make sure you don't base your decision to eliminate candidates solely on the fact that they seem

to have too little or too much experience. Junior-level candidates can grow along with your organization, and can be the leaders in a few years. Senior-level candidates can bring significant problem-solving expertise into your organization.

## **Your work is changing focus**

If your team is transitioning to a different kind of work, you may need to add people who are different from those currently on your staff. One test manager told me, “My folks are great at testing the product from a black-box perspective. However, that’s all we do. With this new product, I need to modify the testing to include performance and reliability testing, something people on my staff know nothing about. They don’t have the technical background to know how to perform this kind of testing.”

This problem is especially challenging if you cannot add staff, but must lose current staff to make room for people who are qualified to perform the new assignments. In this case, pay special attention to the required functional skills for the job.

## **Your technology is changing**

When you’re recruiting because your company must make the transition to another technology, consider a candidate’s problem-solving skills, adaptability, and cultural fit for the new organization. Don’t focus on the person’s current technical skills, since you’ll need to train your staff in new skills anyway. Do focus on the candidate’s ability to learn quickly. For example, if staff members in the new technology use a different programming

language from the language used in the old environment, it's easier to assess suitability among candidates who've already learned multiple languages, rather than selecting people who have worked in only one language.

One option to consider when moving to a new technology is whether to hire someone with significant expertise in the new technology to mentor both your current staff and new hires. Keep in mind that in order for this technical mentoring to be successful, the expert will need to build rapport with the team quickly.

If you're adding new technology and still supporting the old technology, don't hire a new team to work on the new products and keep the existing staff working on the old products. The existing team may want to work with the new technology and may become frustrated that new people will have all the fun work. If you break the work up into new (read, "exciting") and old (read, "boring," "technical support," "housekeeping") work, you'll create more headaches than you solve. If you want to retain your current staff members, ask them what work they want, and hire to backfill their current roles so they can move on to do the new work.

## **You're on the cutting edge of technology**

Sometimes, when you're on the cutting edge, you don't know what you need. Here, a good strategy is to place emphasis on a candidate's adaptability, cultural fit, and ability to work in teams. Consider the experience level and the technical leadership abilities of the candidates. Think in terms of what work, call it "X," must be done in your cutting-edge project. That way,

even if you don't know the specific required skills, you can ask candidates to describe their experience doing "X."

Years ago, before configuration management systems were common, I needed to hire a release engineer, someone with expertise in builds, branches, and what we now call configuration management. Since I didn't know precisely what skills would be required, I looked for a candidate who could communicate well with system developers, and who had demonstrated an ability to organize complicated work and run smoke tests. I suspected I didn't need someone with years of experience, but someone who was a great problem-solver. The candidate I hired had only two years of experience, but he'd worked as a programmer throughout high school and college. He was a great release engineer, and now is a highly qualified configuration manager.

## **You're creating a brand-new group**

If you have a newly formed group or are adding people to a group that has not been together very long, the people you add should enhance the group's ability to work together and mesh. They should not prevent group members from working well together. Hiring a personality who doesn't fit will prevent your team from doing the work. An established group, whose members are confident of their abilities, can handle different personalities and challenges to the current work.

In order to be successful, a new group needs to build confidence and develop ways for individual members to work together. You'll want the most experienced people you can afford, because you need people who can manage their work while developing healthy, working relationships with coworkers. For this group,



you need people who are experienced in both technical and communications skills. As your group matures, you can hire less experienced staff.

## **You need to change what your group can deliver**

Maybe you have a great group of developers and it's time to add some testers. Maybe you've got writers, and you need some editors. Maybe you've got manual testers, and it's time to add some automation to the mix. Whatever the case, if you're looking for people to fill a gap, you'll want to consider functional skills, but don't forget to assess each candidate's cultural fit.

Adding people with different skills to your team tests the original team's maturity and adaptability. Your challenge is to overcome the "second-round effect" in which new people join an established team but are not perceived as full partners. Look for people who, in addition to possessing required technical skills, can learn fast and adapt to the team's culture.

I once worked with a manager who brought ten new people into what had been a tight-knit four-person group. He had hired the new members on the basis of specific skills (user-interface development, testing, and so on), but he did not consider cultural fit—how well they would fit into the existing team. After sixteen months, it was obvious, even to an outsider, who the original members were and who'd been hired later. The fourteen-member team couldn't make the project succeed until both the original team and the new members changed their behavior and adapted to each other. If the manager either had hired more adaptable people for the original group or had focused

his second-round hiring on people with better communications skills, the team would have meshed much sooner.

### **Your group must finish a project faster than originally planned**

The good news is that you've got a group of people who work well together, but you need to increase throughput. Sometimes, adding people to a team is the answer to attaining a faster release, but bringing them up to speed may counteract the contribution that additional staff should eventually make.

If the team can increase their throughput productivity by assigning new people to work on parallel projects or if new members can work in parallel with the original staff on one project, and management can handle such a challenge, by all means add staff. If you make the decision to add staff, bring in candidates who fit your culture.

### **You need a few additional people right now, you won't need them forever**

Sometimes, you need people *right now* on a project, but you don't want to keep them in the company long-term. In this case, you might choose to hire contractors. Analyze your immediate, mid-term, and long-term needs to decide which of your candidates should be offered a contract and which should be offered employment.

When you hire contractors, make sure they have excellent "brain-dump" skills. If you don't intend to keep someone around for

a long time, you'll need that person to be conscientious about explaining what he or she does. Especially at the end of the contract, the contractor is capable of handing off the work to other people. I interview contractors the same way I interview permanent staff, although I do give greater emphasis to such areas as their ability to complete and hand off work, and their communications skills. See more detail in [Develop Interview Questions and Techniques](#).

## **You have to fire more of the people you hire than seems reasonable**

If you find that many of your new employees are not successful at their jobs, or that you fire even 5 percent of your new hires, reassess both the content of your interview questions and how you or your interviewers ask those questions. The most effective screening involves behavior-description questions that include some combination of technical-skill and cultural-fit analysis. Do you and your interviewers have enough technical and interviewing expertise to ask the appropriate technical questions and assess the answers? If not, you'll need to change interviewers, and increase the interview team's level of expertise.

If you have to repeatedly fire people because their technical expertise is inadequate, you're not asking specific-enough interview questions. If you have to fire people because they don't fit into your group, you haven't fully identified the kinds of people that best fit your culture. If you have defined the kinds of people you need and you still must fire people because they don't fit into the organization, you're probably not using a consensus-based approach to candidate appraisal. You'll discover more about the

candidate's qualifications and his or her fit with your culture if you invite several people outside of your group to be part of your interview team. When you use a consensus-based approach to candidate appraisals, you develop more of an understanding about what your team wants. I'll discuss this more in [Follow Up After the Interview](#).

## Quick to Judge, Fast to Fire

Fred is a non-technical, quick-to-judge MIS manager. When I first talked to him, he boasted that he could interview someone and know within thirty seconds whether the person would fit into the organization. I didn't hear from Fred again until after he'd fired two people before their three-month anniversary with the company. More than a little rattled, Fred decided to ask for help with interviewing and hiring.

I suggested that Fred recruit people from the rest of his company to help him with the interviewing, and gave him guidelines to follow. He assembled a group fairly quickly that included an MIS technical staff member, the release engineer, the support manager, and a couple of developers—all people who understood the implications of MIS work and who possessed some of the expertise required for the jobs to be filled. Once assembled, the interview team decided in advance about areas and questions they wanted to ask, and Fred agreed to let them go ahead with the interviews. Fred also agreed to withhold rushing to judgment during each interview. Following each interview, the interview team met to discuss the qualifications and suitability of each candidate. This approach enabled the team to find two candidates to replace the fired employees, producing an MIS group that

remains stable and successful to this day. At last check, the new employees were still working at the company, almost three years later.

## **You want to reverse the turnover trend**

If your employees choose to leave after they've worked at your company for only a year or two, maybe they were not the right candidates to hire in the first place. Unless you have defined the job as an entry-level, short-term position, you do not want people to view your company as a temporary job. If you find yourself facing excessive turnover, make sure you are hiring for cultural fit and using behavior-description questions in the interviews.

A test manager stated that she'd replaced five members of her ten-person group in one six-month period. That's a high turnover rate. I recommended that she contact the former employees to retroactively conduct exit interviews to discover why so many people had left. The exit interviews gave her the reason: She learned she had consistently hired people who were risk-takers who enjoyed solving problems in unique ways. The development organization didn't value those testers, and wanted to work with testers who planned testing in a predictable way.

The hiring problem wasn't that she was hiring people with poor technical skills; the problem was that she hadn't given enough thought to the cultural-fit problem: how to hire risk-taking testers who had enough patience to continue working through the changes she was trying to implement. By changing

her cultural-fit questions to identify how the testers tested, and by looking for people with patience for cultural change, she was able to keep turnover to a minimum.

## **You can't find more people**

If finding people is difficult, maybe you're not using enough different approaches or recruiting mechanisms. If you use only one recruiting method, you run the risk of missing out on potential candidates. For example, if you only use classified ads, you'll miss people who only work with recruiters. If you only use your corporate web site or one general-purpose online job board, you'll miss people who use industry-specific sites or geographic sites.

For more details on how to build and use your recruiting network, see [Source Candidates](#). Also, check to see that you're not inadvertently discriminating against people who are different from you. [Review Résumés](#) describes ways to check for your prejudices.

## **You need more diversity**

Sometimes, when a group has been together a long time, its members may start to think alike. The best remedy for this is to add people with different personality types or backgrounds. If you're changing the focus of your product base, you might add people who more closely reflect your customer base. Or, if the team consists of people primarily of one gender, race, or philosophical outlook, hiring people of the other gender, from

another race, or committed to other philosophies will make for a richer work environment.

Technical people tend to value technical skill and expertise more highly than personality, race, or gender. That's not to say there are no bigots or prejudiced individuals in technical groups, but in my experience, most people are more interested in what another person can do than in what the person looks like or his or her personality. Not surprisingly, we tend to neglect considering personality diversity while hiring.

How a person solves a problem or performs an assignment is influenced by his or her personality. You can use that to your advantage in matching a candidate to a job. For example, many people working in the technical field are quick to make decisions, but creative product architects may choose to ponder several designs, looking at the pros and cons before coming to a conclusion. Some testers like to plan their work; others explore a less structured path as opportunities arise. Some people prefer to talk out the issues; others prefer to think about the issues privately and then discuss them.

Look at the range of personalities on the existing team to see whether all team members have one kind of personality. The more diversity you have in personality types, the less likely you are to be blind-sided by a problem no one considered.

Sometimes, diversity can be achieved by mixing experienced workers with entry- or junior-level staff members. Such a mix would have benefited one development manager who told me, "Everyone in my group has at least ten years of valuable experience. Most are designers, but we also have three real architects. Unfortunately, I don't have enough high-level work to keep them

all busy right now. I need junior people to be my senior folks' journeymen, so I have a more natural mix of engineers."

You can hire junior-level people to perform jobs that do not require senior-level knowledge and talent. Allow for the maturity hierarchy of technology skill and knowledge to take a natural path—mix experience and knowledge levels.

## **You need more management capability**

If your group has grown in size, or if you have a start-up group that must make the transition to the next level to become a more productive entity, you may need to hire more managers. The chief technology officer of an online start-up might manage a technical group of twenty software developers, testers, and operations staff members for years with only the help of technical leads in the various functional areas. If the organization decides to hire another five people, then experienced, full-time managers, not just technical leads, will be needed to make sure all of the management tasks will be accomplished correctly, on time, and within budget. In [Hire Technical Managers](#), I provide detailed information about hiring managers.

Sometimes, you have more than one problem to solve. When that happens, rank your problems. Now you can determine the criteria against which you will hire your technical people. You can choose which types of people you need to hire first.



## **1.3 Determine which roles you want to fill first**

When you're hiring more than one person, or hiring into a group over time, decide which capabilities are your highest priorities. Not all roles in your organization are the same. If you need a product architect, then a designer will not do.

You will need to make decisions as you build your list of first, second, third, and so on, hires. Some typical tasks are identified in the Function Role Chart, below, which suggests job titles to fill function areas:

Function to Be Performed	Possible Roles and Job Titles
Requirements Analysis	business analyst, systems engineer, analyst, requirements specialist
Development	systems architect, senior designer, junior designer, programmer, project manager, technical lead
Release Engineering	build engineer, librarian, configuration manager, operations analyst
Testing and QA	automated tester, manual tester, exploratory tester, test project manager, technical lead, metrics gatherer
Documentation	editor, writer, book designer, technical lead, production specialist, graphics artist
Support	tier-1, -2, or -3 support (first-line, mid-level, and senior-level support staff)
Usability Engineering	interaction specialist, designer
Project Management	project administrator, project manager, program manager

Function Role-Chart

## Fill in the Gaps

A chief technical officer of a start-up defined his current hiring needs: “We’ve moved past the initial start-up phase. We have three developers—I guess I’d call them senior designers—and I’ve been doing the architecture. It’s time to bring in a project manager and some testers, so we can ‘productize’ this beast now that we’ve got the funding. But, these people have to work *with* us, not against us. I’m not ready for

formal release engineering, or formal process definition, or formal system tests, but I am ready to start automating tests of the product core. We need a technical project manager, an automation tester, and one more tester who can find the problems we developers don't see.”

This CTO is trying to solve the staffing problem by filling in positions with other skills. Since his group is small, he's considering cultural fit (qualifications he says he is “not ready for”), but the driving force behind his hiring is to bring more people on-board to do different work than is done by the people he already has.

Once you've decided which roles you want to fill first, go back to take a look at your current staff members and the roles they perform. If they perform jobs that partially fill or intersect the problem areas you're trying to staff, include them on your interview team. These team members can provide good insight into how well the candidate will fulfill those roles. If these current staff members can no longer perform the jobs you need done, determine how many of which kinds of new people to hire, and decide how you're going to manage the problem of your current staff's inability to perform the needed work. For more guidance, see [Move Forward](#).

If your hiring strategy includes hiring many people at one time, you may be lucky enough to find candidates for positions you need to fill but weren't planning on staffing until later. If this happens and you have the budget to support these additional employees now, hire them! Then, replan the work your group

will do, and update your hiring strategy.

## 1.4 Plan what you will do if you can't find the right people

Every profession has ups and downs with regard to hiring. During recessions, there may be many candidates from whom to choose. During boom times, the demand for people appears to outstrip the supply. That's when your hiring and management strategies are critical to your success.

You can choose one of several options when you can't find candidates to fill your positions:

- *Expand your search.* Make sure you're taking advantage of all the recruiting possibilities [Source Candidates](#).
- *Change your hiring strategy.* Hire people who have fewer specific technical skills, but who fit the culture and are fast learners or great problem-solvers—and then train them. See [Move Forward](#).
- *Choose which projects you're not going to do.* Alternatively, choose when you will do the projects. See [Move Forward](#).

Take a few minutes, and develop your hiring strategy. You'll find the rest of your hiring easier to accomplish. Use the hiring strategy template to help you develop your hiring strategy:

Problem Categories & Problems to Solve	No	Yes	Problem Characteristics & Solutions
We need more people.			Technical skills, as long as enough candidates exist. If not enough candidates, focus on people's ability to learn and teamwork.
Your work is changing focus.			Functional skills and cultural fit.
Technology transition.			Problem-solving skills, skills learning new technology, adaptability, and cultural fit.
You are on the cutting edge of technology.			Adaptability, cultural fit, and ability to work in teams.
You are creating a brand-new group.			Experience working, experience applying functional skills to new product domain, experience creating a new team, and making the team successful.
We're filling in with other skills to change what we currently do.			Cultural fit, fit with team, expertise in specific functional skills, and ability to apply those skills to new product domain.
We want to finish our projects faster.			Different functional skills, teamwork, and cultural fit.
We need a few people now, but not forever.			Consider contractors with great communications skills so you won't lose their work when they're gone.
We have to fire too many of the people we hire.			Does the interviewing team know how to interview? Do they understand the requirements of the position? Use limited consensus to hire people.
Turnover is too high.			Review cultural-fit needs and verify that interview questions address cultural fit.
Recruiting more people is difficult.			Use multiple sourcing mechanisms. Make sure résumé screening filter isn't too tight.
We need more diversity in our group.			Look for diversity in background, attitude, personality, product experience, as well as race and gender. Look for different levels of experience.
We need more management capability.			Look for management skills along with cultural fit.

### Hiring Strategy Template

Once you've listed your concerns, organize them in order of priority to help guide your job definition, recruiting, and hiring actions. Don't forget to explain your objective to anyone who helps you recruit or interview.

Review your checks in the Yes and No columns in the template above. Then choose which actions to take. The hiring strategy

template and all the other templates are in [Appendix A](#). In addition, they are available in a pdf on my site, [Templates](#), if you want to download and use them as you proceed.

Now you know the problems you need to solve because you have your hiring strategy. You can start thinking about analyzing the job or jobs.

## 1.5 Points to Remember

- Know why you're hiring more people. Define your problems to define your hiring strategy.
- Know what types of roles you require. Do you need more developers, more support staff, or more testers? If you had more writers, could you work differently? Are there tradeoffs you can make to fill a specific role?
- Know how you will decide on which candidates to select for which jobs. Consider consensus-based hiring as the decision-making mechanism.
- Know that you need a risk-mitigation strategy. If you can't find the people you need when you need them, define what you're going to do.
- Re-evaluate your hiring strategy periodically, based on how much hiring you've completed.