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Smart Leaders Building an Exceptional Team

How to make good hires who will fit with your team

By Mark Scott

Smart Business Northern California | December 2009

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Amar Panchal, founder and CEO, Akraya Inc.

Amar Panchal doesn't give employees a blank check to come work at Akraya Inc. But the founder and CEO of the staffing solutions firm will pay for talent.

"A lot of times, entrepreneurs follow job regulations that say, 'This is a certain pay scale that I have,'" Panchal says. "If somebody is beyond that, they will not consider the person. I feel if you have the right person, having some flexibility on compensation is worthwhile."

This flexibility became a potential issue when the recession hit.

"It was fairly gut-wrenching for the first two or three months," Panchal says. "The biggest question was, 'Are we doing the right thing having increased our expenses to the level we have?'

Panchal decided to ride out the storm, and while he instituted a pay freeze, he did not lay off any of his 250 employees.

Despite the end-of-year struggles, Akraya reached \$28.2 million in 2008 revenue.

Smart Business spoke with Panchal about how to find and build a valuable team of employees.

Don't pass the buck. The first step to building an exceptional team is recognizing that it's your responsibility to build that team, not just giving instructions to a recruiter and saying, 'Hire these kinds of people for me.'

I've succeeded because I've taken on that responsibility myself, even if it's getting down and rolling up my sleeves and sourcing for those people. Exceptional people are not going to be looking for jobs. You have to find them, you have to entice them, and you have to attract them to join your organization.

When I'm looking to fill a critical role, I will spread the word around within my network. I will try to have a fairly wide pool of candidates from which I will make a selection rather than just seeing who is available.

Before I call anybody, I've eliminated a lot of people. Just looking at their profile and using some of the social networking tools, it's fairly easy to understand the profile of a person to a large extent today.

I would have seen who or how I'm connected to this person. If we share a common connection, I would have spoken to the common connection and asked them informal questions about the person and done some level of blind reference checks even before bringing the person in. So there's a lot of qualifications I do before making the first contact with the candidate.

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Find the motivation. My first call with a candidate is not to find out whether or not he is the right fit. My first call is to sell him or her on how great Akraya is and how great the opportunity is. I'd rather be in a position where the candidate wants to join us, but he may or may not be the best fit for this role than the candidate is an extremely good fit for this role but does not want to join us.

I'm really trying to understand what would the motivation be to leave whatever role they are in and work for a company like Akraya?

I put myself in the potential candidate's shoes and try to think of this from his or her perspective. Understand how he or she perceives this role and how he or she would compare it to what they are currently doing or the other alternatives they may be considering.

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Website Development: Veridean Technology Solutions, LLC.



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Look for active people. If we still decide this looks like something we are both interested in, then we really get into a formal interview process.

I'm trying to find people who have experience in larger companies and who have worked at enterprise-level organizations so that they can bring in the processes and the ability to scale an operation. At the same time, I'm also wary of those people who need an entire team of people in order to do anything.

Would this person roll up his sleeves and lead by example? Or would this be more of a manager who is only going to manage but not do? On the sales side, has this person been successful because he or she worked for a well-known brand that does the selling? Or can he or she represent a relatively unknown company and be confident, positive and enthusiastic about establishing a brand?

I'll ask the person to describe to me what a typical week looked like for you last week. If a lot of time is spent talking about how well they managed people and how many meetings they attended, those things are certainly important. But I'm also looking for more hands-on activities that they may have done.

Use your resources. Although I am the CEO and I may make the final call, I do value the opinions of the people that I have on the interview panel. It's not just for formality that I have them in on the interview. I truly value their opinion.

So if somebody does not feel strongly about a candidate, I take that very seriously. The process we typically follow is once the interview process is done and everybody has met with the candidate, we get together and have each person that was part of the interview give his or her opinion.

The emphasis in getting the feedback is not how they felt about the person but to try to be more objective. What were the traits they were looking for? Are they able to substantiate why they thought the person was not the best fit? I typically reserve my opinion for last. If I give an opinion, I don't want the rest of the team to give me what they think I want to hear rather than what they really thought of the candidate.

Don't rush it. We've made the mistake of hiring in a rush. It's better to not have somebody on board than to hire the wrong person. We would rather not hire than hire somebody we are not 100 percent confident about.

How to reach: Akraya Inc., (408) 907-6400 or www.akraya.com

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