

Like a lot of construction procedures, hiring practices are sometimes long on tradition and short on critical thinking. At ten a.m., when it's evident that two of your employees aren't going to make it into work that day, it's tough to turn away someone who walks on your site with nailbags claiming to be a journeyman.

But even though most contractors have made hires this way at some point in the past, it's not the best way to swell your ranks. A good hire can mean years of conscientious work from a committed employee with little hassle. But a bad hire can set you back further than you might think. Industry consultant Les Cunningham of Business Networks estimates that replacing a key field position — lead carpenter, foreman, supervisor — can cost you three to four times the annual wages of that employee by the time you repair the damages, find someone new, and spend time training that person.

Where to Begin

Palo Alto, Calif., remodeling contractor Lynn Comeskey doesn't wait until he needs somebody before considering applicants. "I guess you have to be a certain size to do this, but I pursue good people even if I don't need them at that moment. This gives me great personnel — the key to a successful remodeling company as far as I'm concerned — and lets me train them *before* the crisis hits."

Remodeling consultant Linda Case agrees. "If you wait until you're desperate for somebody, it's really easy to settle for the warm body, and then suffer the consequences for months afterward. Since contractors are in the running for world's worst at firing, it makes sense to get what you need on the front end."

The key is planning ahead — not an easy task in residential construction. Most established remodeling contractors and builders look six to twelve months ahead in defining personnel needs. And this should be part of a larger plan that targets size and revenue goals for the company. This helps keep the feast and famine cycles less pronounced, and allows employer and employee to make a long-term commitment.

It's not just a matter of bodies either. "The step most contractors miss is defining what they are really looking for," says Cunningham. He suggests that the owner talk with field supervisors and then write a detailed job description. This not only helps clarify what is needed, but it can be used in the interview and qualification process.

Sources

There are four basic approaches to finding field employees:

- Rely on walk-ons.
- Contact names you've collected in your files.
- Put the word out with employees, subs, and suppliers.
- Use classified ads.

Cunningham suggests checking your records to see where you've gotten your best employees in the past. "If it's want ads, then call the local paper. If it's advice from your mother, call her."

Walk-ons. This traditional source of labor is a favorite for Berkeley, Calif., remodeling contractor David Gerstel. "If they've taken the time to think out how they'll approach me, I take them more seriously than those who use the phone to look for work. It takes some hustle and self-confidence to walk on a job site." Gerstel backs up his contention — both of his foremen were walk-ons. One's been with him for thirteen years, the other for eight.

Familiar names. Most contractors make a note of job seekers that impress them even if they're not hiring, but some builders and remodelers have been established long enough to use these files exclusively. Fourth-generation remodeling contractor Steve Farrell of Los Altos, Calif., stays in contact with tradesmen that first worked for his father. He also collects names of tradesmen that have impressed subs and suppliers.

Farrell will also call a couple of other builders he knows in the area who carry large crews if he finds himself in a bind. "That's just a band-aid, but it gets me somebody I can rely on quickly, and I return the favor when I can."

He also isn't shy about hiring other carpenters away if he feels he can make a long-term commitment to them. "I don't mind offering a dollar or two more an hour, because I know what I'm getting and I'll benefit for a long time." He's found that the promise of steady work and benefits — he will go as far as a no-deductible family health plan for someone he really wants — are even better bargaining items than higher wages.

Word of mouth. Stephen King of Common Vision, a remodeling company in Hamden, Conn., has gotten most of his people by simply putting the word out that he was looking. "In a sense, these workers come prequalified. I found six of my crew this way, and all of them have been with me at least two years. I've never had anyone I hired from an ad last more than two months." King starts by asking his current employees if they know anybody interested, and then asks his lumber dealer about self-employed workers who might need to come in out of the cold. "These guys have already shown that they're motivated."

Advertising. Michael Davis of Framing Square Construction keeps 40 to 50 people busy year around in Albuquerque, N. M. — if he can find that many competent framers. He uses both radio (the local rock station) and print advertising to attract good people. Davis even advertises when he's not hiring. "It has a residual effect," he says.

He's found humor works well when "everybody else is promising the moon." One of his most successful newspaper ads reads, "Framers Wanted: Hard Work, Low Pay, Terrible Conditions." But he also advertises the benefits he offers, and the commitment he has to his people. An ad he ran recently reinforced this concept: "\$5,000. That's how much Framing Square Construction paid this month in bonuses."

Linda Case is a proponent of making a strong pitch for your company. "Small businesses tend to hire with an inferiority complex, as if they didn't have

much to offer. And that's seldom true."

Even among contractors who advertise, there are different styles. Tenhulzen Remodeling in Redmond, Wash., uses a "just the facts, ma'am" approach. Their most recent ad read, "Remodeling Professional. Male/Female. Ten years' experience. Top pay, benefits. Must own truck and tools." Explains Pat Tenhulzen, "All we're trying to do with an ad is generate names. We can screen them once they call."

On the other hand, Michael Markstahler, president of Markstahler Inc., who employs 16 carpenters and two project managers in Champaign, Ill., writes a lengthy, elaborate ad. "I describe exactly what we want and don't want. It's worth the few extra dollars not to have to deal with a lot of people that don't fit my company."

The Right Stuff

Although contractors often complain about the scant knowledge of the typical "journeyman" carpenter these days, technical skill is often well down the list of the qualities they're looking for.

Cunningham says, "If it gets down to a choice between technical competence and personal competence, you've got to go with the 'people' skills, because most of us aren't qualified to teach that."

A sense of commitment is also high on the list, since both builders and remodelers are typically trying to build a company, not just finish a job. Often they are willing to back up their side of it with benefits and the promise of steady work, even in lean times.

Markstahler says, "We look at 20 to 30 applicants for every position because, in my mind, we are hiring for life. That person has to do something terribly wrong for us to end the association. And we look for the same loyalty in return."

Comeskey lists intelligence and creativity as his top requirements. "Interior remodeling requires constant problem solving, and that demands creativity." He also pays close attention to appearances and whether the applicant is articulate. "My customers just don't feel comfortable leaving their homes in the hands of people who speak poorly

Good Help Wanted

A sampling of contractor hiring tips

By Paul Spring

and sport tattoos. You could put most of my crew in business suits and they could pull it off pretty well."

Gerstel and King also look for the "ability to learn." Both have had success hiring non-tradesmen and bringing them along on the job. Gerstel's crews include a former policeman, and King's best carpenter spent twelve years as a butcher. Most remodelers are also looking for workers with at least a rudimentary knowledge of all the basic trades, and the aptitude and willingness to learn more.

Screening

Maybe the most difficult aspect of hiring is finding the right way to measure an applicant's abilities.

Phone qualifying, a process many contractors use to screen potential clients, is common in hiring field people. Tenhulzen asks callers whether their experience is in remodeling or new construction, how far away they live, the type of vehicle they drive, and what tools they own. At the same time, she is gauging their personal skills and attitudes. If she feels good about them, she turns them over to her production manager for a face-to-face interview.

Another standard business screening device is calling references. Most contractors ask for them, but few find it very helpful unless they know the builder or remodeler they're calling. Markstahler couples references and job history on his application form, and requires the stop/start dates with month and year. This gives him something to confirm when phoning references and presents a much more accurate picture of the applicant's experience.

Testing

Markstahler also uses two simple written tests. The first tests knowledge of the building code and basic carpentry; the second is simple mathematics. "It's sad, but most of our applicants have trouble just adding mixed fractions."

Davis' crew leaders also administer a simple test to walk-on framers. The first page covers some of the advantages of working for the company as well as its policies, including warnings about drug and alcohol use. The second asks questions about the applicant's health and any accidents they may have had (according to Davis this page has lowered his workers comp rates noticeably). The third page is a short test that begins by asking the length of a stud and ends with roof and stair cutting questions.

The Green Company, a Massachusetts building and property management company, requires a resume even for carpenters, but stops short of giving a written test. Rick Maranhas, vice-president of construction, explains: "You can get so caught up in things like written tests

that you forget what you're hiring for. As a service business, our first requirement is the ability to get along with people. The cover letter that comes with the resume is our first glimpse at this, and the interview process explores it further."

Interviewing

Most apprentices, carpenters, and foremen are hired on the basis of interviews. They can range anywhere from ten minutes to an hour, and their effectiveness is dependent largely on the skill of the interviewer.

Most contractors who are no longer in the field either include their field supervisors in the interviewing process or let the supervisors do it all since they are ultimately responsible for new employees. The Williams Company in Princeton, N.J., is an exception; their foremen evaluate their crews, but the hiring and firing stays in the office.

Russ Sutton, construction personnel manager for the Williams Company, trusts his instincts — based on over 30 years' experience. In addition to asking them about the tools they own and if they can work unsupervised in various areas of the trade, he gets them talking about themselves. "I check eye contact, and listen to how they tell their tales about what they can do."

King bases his interviews around a company philosophy statement that he and his employees wrote. "In the past we've hired people who can handle the work, but they haven't fit in personally. The philosophy statement gives them something to react to so we get to some of the issues right off the bat."

Gerstel takes at least half an hour with each applicant, asks very broad questions, and then keeps his mouth shut. "If you ask a question like, 'Why do you want to work in construction?', they will end up telling you a lot about themselves. If they are closed or cynical or averse to conflict, you'll find out."

Gerstel couples this interview with a simple test on site. He asks the person to do some rudimentary task, such as moving plywood. "I just watch them, concentrating on their movements. If they're not fluid at a simple task, they're not likely to be the journeyman they claim."

Comeskey presses a bit more. "If I ask a question like, 'What kind of work do you like best?' and get somebody who says they like it all, I ask whether they prefer framing or finish. If they still can't be specific I know I'm talking to someone who isn't big on self-awareness. Qualities like that can make a difference in the remodeling business." ■

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