

Finding Good Help

by Paul Eldrenkamp

Finding employees — especially good ones — is like going on a blind date: You know what you want, but you're not sure you'll get it. While I can't guarantee you success, here are four approaches for finding employees that have worked for me. I'll start with the easiest and work my way to my favorite.

Help Wanted

Whenever a contractor needs to hire someone, the first call he or she makes is usually to the local newspaper's classified department. I recently hired two good people through a classified ad and will no doubt place classified ads in the future. The appeal is the ease with which you can reach dozens of tradespeople who are looking for work, or even just thinking about looking for work. And the ad will almost guarantee you some prospective hires. The down side is that it's hard to find out much about the applicants who answer a classified ad and, in a strong labor market, the best potential candidates are usually not reading the help wanted pages. But I've discovered a couple of tricks that can increase your chances of finding good employees with help wanted ads.

Ask for a resume. If I'm looking for a journeyman or lead carpenter, I'll request a faxed resume. Applicants who can write a resume demonstrate organizational and communication skills that are critical to maintaining a well-run job site; thus, the well-prepared resume can be a reasonably good screening mechanism. And by asking for faxes, you won't kill a lot of phone time answering questions about the job.

For a less skilled position, such as a laborer or helper, I'll ask prospects to leave a brief voice mail message explaining their experience and interest. The number I give is a job-site phone (we turn off the ringer to avoid constant interrup-

tion), which keeps the office phone free.

The production manager, office manager, and I sift through the resumes and voice mail messages, rating each applicant on a scale from 1 to 5. We don't use a printed evaluation form; instead we rate candidates based upon our subjective evaluation of their experience and how they would fit in with my company. Next, we combine our scores, rank the candidates, and interview in descending order until we find someone who meets our criteria.

Wording counts. Here's a tip for attracting better applicants. From our experience, careful, original wording of a classified ad can yield more careful, original inquiries. An ad that reads, "Carpenter. Own tools and transport. 10 years experience minimum. \$15/hr." will yield one sort of response — usually from someone who's just looking for a job. A more creative ad, such as "Small, innovative remodeling company looking for career carpenters who put top priority on taking care of customers," is more likely to attract a more highly skilled craftsperson.

HELP WANTED

Carpenter. Own tools and transport. 10 years experience minimum. \$15/hr. Call 456-8758, eve.

Carpenter. Small, innovative remodeling company looking for career carpenters who put top priority on taking care of customers. Send resume to P.O. Box 932, Richmond, VT 05477.

Wording makes a difference. The second ad is likely to attract more highly-skilled applicants than the first.

Head Hunting

In this scenario, you've identified a particularly talented carpenter or carpentry subcontractor who works for another company. The advantage of this method is that the carpenter or sub you've got an eye on is a known quantity with demonstrated ability, which reduces your risk. The main disadvantage is that it can be hard to reel in these prospects, especially if they're happy working for their current employer. You also run the risk of irritating other contractors in your marketplace if you approach these prospects directly.

Sometimes a third person can act as an intermediary for you and eliminate conflict with another contractor. For example, on a couple of occasions I've had prospective clients who, having completed previous remodeling with another company, tell me that the lead carpenter was great, but the company owner wasn't so helpful. For follow-up work, these homeowners have often tried to hire the lead carpenter directly, and have already made calls to find out his or her status with the previous company. The lead may have left the company, been on his own for awhile, or be looking to change employers. Coming from a well-known customer, this kind of lead helps me prequalify a candidate.

Similarly, homeowners may also be able to provide some preliminary information about carpentry subs. The advantage of going after a carpentry sub is that they are less likely to be tied to a single contractor, so you don't step on anybody's toes. While it is often more difficult to hire someone who's out on his or her own, it sometimes happens that these one- or two-person subcontracting outfits may be tired of the business end of remodeling and welcome the chance for a regular paycheck and fewer headaches.

Employer Seekers

One of the best ways to find good employees is to have them seek you out. From my experience, the person attracted to your company because of your reputation displays initiative and tends to be more motivated and to have higher standards than the average tradesperson. They're often aware of what's going on in our industry, they read the trade press, and they go to conferences (often on their own time and at their own expense). Typically, this type of carpenter is ambitious, but may also be cocky and have an unrealistically high opinion of his or her skills.

This strategy requires a long-term commitment on your part to market your company so that you attract the kinds of employees you want. If your company works in attractive neighborhoods, specializes in certain types of jobs, or provides an excellent wage and benefit package for its employees, word will get around. Good carpenters keep

their ears to the ground, and the same qualities that attract good clients will attract good employees.

You can also raise your company's profile by writing articles or giving talks. And don't be afraid to engage potential employees. If you see a project you like, stop and compliment the crew doing the work. You never know where a conversation like that may lead. You might even buy a round of donuts next time the snack wagon shows up at the lumberyard while you're there. I've never done this myself, but anyone who bought me a donut would have my full attention — at least until I'd eaten the donut.

Matchmaker

This is my favorite route to new employees. Our plumbers and our painter have each found us a terrific carpenter. Subcontractors typically are the best source for such matchmaking. They get around to a lot of construction sites and sometimes know more than the boss about how good a carpenter really

is. It's not hard to trust their judgment.

Also consider contacting the placement offices of local technical schools. I cultivated a relationship with a prestigious trade school employment counselor, who sent us her very best student one year. Clients have recommended people to us, too, and I've hired clients' kids or friends' kids for summer help before and have been very pleased with the results.

The best way to maximize the potential for people to act as matchmaker is to run as good and honest a company as you can. Treat your subs, clients, and suppliers fairly and hold them to a high standard, and they'll think of you when it matters. It also doesn't hurt to let them know you're open to matchmaking. I frequently tell clients and subs that I'm always open to interviewing potential employees.



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