The right way to hire an SEO

The stakes for hiring an SEO are high. The right person can help put your business on a path toward significant organic visibility and revenue growth. Yet, the wrong person could have little impact – or worse, reverse your existing organic visibility and revenue.

Between a lack of familiarity with the disciplines involved in SEO and inexperience in hiring for SEO roles, it's easy for businesses to make hiring mistakes. If you're looking to hire an SEO, here's what professionals with years of experience have learned about how to prepare, where to look and how to vet successful SEO candidates.

Before starting your talent search

"Too many companies hire an SEO without knowing which SEO skills they need in their core competencies," said Jessica Bowman, founder and CEO of in-house training and consulting firm SEOinhouse.com, adding, "Some sites struggle with technical SEO, and if that's the case this is what you need."

SEO spans numerous disciplines, such as technical, content, analytics, link building and so on. Identifying which areas of your site need the most attention can help you make better hiring decisions. In addition to knowing what's holding your site's rankings back, you should also be aware of what's holding back your SEO efforts at an organizational level, Bowman says.

"One of my clients realized they needed someone who could navigate their organization, build relationships and keep investigating until they found who to work with," Bowman said. "When it came time to hire, I interviewed candidates for technical SEO skills because they were a complex enterprise-level website with a lot of problems. In the end, they hired

someone who had the ability to navigate the organization, but lacked the technical skills . . . In this organization, their greatest need was a core competency to manage SEO operationally."

Download the Periodic Table of SEO Factors

For businesses that are new to SEO, it can be difficult to determine what the hiring priorities should be. "I would strongly encourage companies to either hire an anchor SEO to let that person advise them on how to build out an SEO program," said Dana Tan, senior manager of global SEO for sporting apparel brand Under Armour, "or hire a consultant that can help them navigate the hiring process and guide them on how to find the right person for what they are trying to accomplish."

Finding viable SEO candidates

Once you know what skills your organization needs, the next step is to entice the right person for the job.

Create an attractive, descriptive job listing. Your job description should be treated as a piece of marketing collateral advertising your company. It should be written with a target audience or persona in mind, speak to their needs and show off the advantages of working for your organization.

"Because different SEOs inherently have different skills, our hiring needs are often dynamic, and we modify job descriptions and even job titles," said Lily Ray, director of SEO at digital marketing agency Path Interactive, who sets a baseline of expectations for each role within her department but also adjusts job listings to reflect what her agency is looking for at the time.

Researching how other companies are conveying duties, qualifications and responsibilities can also help you compose

your job listing. “I especially study the SEO job postings from companies with known ‘best-in-class’ SEO programs,” Tan said.

“Ensure you’re writing a description for someone with political savvy and the ability to present and communicate with executives and other teams,” Bowman recommended. Whether you’re hiring to fill an agency position or looking for an in-house SEO, the candidate must be able to effectively communicate what they’re doing and why it’s valuable to stakeholders. “Otherwise you may get an amazing SEO in terms of knowing what needs to be done, but they cannot represent SEO well throughout the organization,” she said.

Know where to look. “I went to conferences and talked to people at lunches, at after-parties, etc.,” Tan said, “I built a network of people, including colleagues and co-workers – I still reach out to that group when I am hiring for a new role.” Your professional network can be a good place to source candidates with a proven track record.

“I’m hearing people talk more about LinkedIn job postings, so make sure you look there,” Bowman said. “Also, recruiters should consider reaching out to SEOs that they think might be a good fit… they may not be considering a leap, but for the right job they might,” she added.

How to screen an SEO candidate

“It can be difficult to know an SEO professional’s real chops from the interview alone,” said Ray, pointing out that it can take months of working together to realize that you may have made a hiring mistake.

Interviewers can’t be SEO ignorant. “Furthermore, SEO candidates may do a good job of reciting ‘SEO trivia’ during an interview, such as having memorized the names of algorithm updates or listing off new Google features; but this alone

doesn’t indicate that they will do a good job communicating with clients, problem-solving, developing the right strategies, knowing how to make sense out of the data, or being able to focus on clients’ most important goals and objectives,” Ray said.

Interviewers have to be knowledgeable and be able to thoroughly assess candidates’ responses. If you don’t have those skills in-house, look at bringing on someone who is to help with the vetting process.

Communication is as important as what’s being communicated. “I’m a huge fan of Bradford Smart’s 4-hour interview process,” Bowman said, noting that the entire interview does not need to be conducted all at once nor by the same person. “The key is that you ask questions that reveal patterns in their behavior,” she said, adding, “I may also show mockups and ask them to tell me the SEO requirements – of course, you need to know what they should be so that you can tell if they are missing anything.”

In addition to answering knowledge-based questions, you can also have candidates explain case studies of work they’ve performed in the past and ask to see deliverables they’ve created. “Using this approach, I have received deliverables ridden with spelling and grammatical errors from otherwise seemingly qualified candidates, whose resumes did not contain these types of errors. The more information you can get your hands on about the candidate’s approach to SEO, the better,” Ray said.

“I am rarely looking for any specific answers; I am more interested in what that individual comes up with on their own, and how effectively they communicate a plan,” said Tan, who also recommends that employers assess how effective potential employees are at communicating the value their work carries for the business.

“Many SEOs just haven’t mastered the ability to present well and write with an executive/authoritative tone for a corporate environment,” Bowman said. “In the end, this keeps the SEO team stifled in the organization rather than rising to gain visibility with other departments and garner their respect – both are vital for SEO success because at the end of the day, the SEO team directly moves very few levers that will actually improve SEO.”

Demonstrating skills. Tan also creates a “homework assignment” related to the specific role she’s looking to fill.

Including a skills demonstration component in your interview process can provide candidates with the opportunity to distinguish themselves and save your organization from unnecessary churn, but it’s important to keep requests appropriate for the hiring process.

“I’m seeing a lot of interviewees being asked to audit the site, though it’s controversial because sometimes it feels like a company is asking for a free audit,” said Bowman, who recommends that if your organization goes this route, to pay attention to how well the candidate organizes their points and communicates SEO requirements in addition to their site recommendations.

The “X” factor

“It’s more important that the individual has a strong work ethic, an ability to problem solve and think critically, good communication skills, and a passion for what they do,” Ray said.

Her stance was also echoed by Tan, who listed a natural love for puzzle solving, creative thinking and a high tolerance for change as some of her top considerations when hiring for an SEO role.

“Some of our best professionals started at our agency as eager interns with barely any exposure to the SEO industry, but because of their innate curiosity and insatiable desire to experiment and learn new things, they have become some of the strongest members of our team in just a few years,” Ray added.

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