Unconventional Secrets to Hiring a Great Team as a Startup

Embrace these counterintuitive tips and build the foundational team that will equip your team for future success.

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Within conventional startup wisdom, the common refrain when it comes to hiring goes something like “Only hire A players” or “Only hire people that raise the bar for your organization as a whole” or “Only hire people smarter than you.” All these neat sound bites sound great on paper – who wouldn’t want to hire a rock star with incredible pedigree for every role in her organization? Who wouldn’t want to surround herself with people with mountains more intellectual horsepower?

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Yet, when the conventional wisdom meets the reality of limited budgets, lack of early traction and minimal brand awareness, those neat sound bites can be all but impossible to actualize. Unless you’re remarkably well-funded, you likely can’t afford the person with the incredible resume who is being hotly recruited by Google or Goldman Sachs. Unless you’re remarkably well-networked, you likely don’t have access to the obviously bar-raising candidates who receive mountains of inbound interest. And unless you’ve been blessed with an underlying business so sexy and novel that you have received early press

and attention, you likely don’t have the brand reputation to attract inbound interest of that talent level. So what, then, are you as an entrepreneur to do?

Fortunately, the answer is not simply “Settle for the talent that is left over from the big guys.” With a little additional work and some willingness to embrace the following counterintuitive maneuvers, you can find talent every bit as good as the candidates going to the big guys while operating within the constraints that go alongside being an early stage business.

Look where others are not looking.

Every venture-funded tech firm is looking to hire engineers from the Stanford computer science program. Every hedge fund is looking to hire professionals who have apprenticed at Goldman Sachs. As a relatively unknown, cash-strapped startup, it’s hard to compete for recruits with the Googles of the world, since you can’t exactly offer the brand, compensation or perks that they can.

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Rather than spend your precious time competing with global leaders as you build your team, look for pools of talent where you can stand out from the crowd. At DojoMojo, for example, my technical co-founder came out of a coding bootcamp (App Academy) where, in truth, had we been competing with Google, we may never have been able to bring him onto our team. Similarly, another of our star engineers started working in WellPath‘s warehouse fulfilling packages before expressing an interest in engineering (and turning out to be a prodigy). Do not dismiss talent just because it is not where you expect to find it.

Understand signaling but don’t become preoccupied with pedigree.

In addition to reviewing a candidate’s traditional qualifications, go a step further by looking for subtle signals that indicate relevant strengths. Another one of our star players was an Eagle Scout. This personal fact, listed almost as an afterthought at the bottom of his resume, was something we believed signaled the high level of dedication and commitment an individual needs to exhibit to persist at any endeavor for the long haul. He was also an avid fantasy baseball player, another signal that he was analytical and data-oriented. While he had not had direct experience in the role we were hiring him to do, we were confident, based on these small clues, that he could accomplish the role. Surely enough, he has exceeded our expectations and then some.

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Find candidates for roles where they can play to their strengths.

Many candidates do not get considered for roles by virtue of a weakness that has little to no bearing on their ability to perform all their major job functions. Just because a brand marketing candidate was not able to answer your brain teaser about the average revenue of a gas station does not mean he is not a good marketer; it simply means he doesn’t think analytically the way a good investment banking candidate would. Engineers who may be extraordinary coders but are too shy to aggressively sell themselves in an interview process can be amazing developers when given an environment in which to flourish and grow even though they may never win any public speaking awards. The point is to be disciplined about not disqualifying candidates based on weaknesses that have little

to no bearing on their ability to do the job for which they are being hired.

Build a place where people do not live for the weekend.

The dialogue emphasizing the importance of culture is nearly incessant, and yet when faced with providing concrete examples of what defines great culture, most people are hard-pressed to provide an easily understandable construct. In part, this is because culture must feel inherently authentic to the organization in which it has been born, making it unique to each organization. You can't fake culture and you can't follow a pat playbook. Instead, you have to find ways to create a culture that makes sense for your company and your team.

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For us, that has translated into our engineering team hanging out some evenings to play League of Legends, or our team members decamping to the bar for a glass of wine while they work into the evenings. Some initiatives, like regular game nights involving Exploding Kittens (not as dark as it sounds) and startup-oriented book clubs (next up, *Shortcut Your Startup*), have also been embraced by our team and have allowed us to build a culture and organization that our employees are excited to be a part of. So much so, in fact, that our turnover has numbered in the very low single digits despite having now built a more-than-40-person team over the past several years. None of these initiatives take a lot of capital, but they almost certainly create a work environment that many people are attracted to in lieu of the traditional corporate structure. As a startup you have the opportunity to forge a place where work no longer feels like *work*. If you are successful, it can be an enormous selling point for your organization.

Strong recruiting is both incredibly hard and vitally important, especially for any new venture. Your first handful of employees can set the tone for those to follow and yet you are faced with the herculean task of finding great employees perhaps without budget, without brand reputation and without an already well-established network. While not impossible, the task requires you to zig while everyone else zags. Embrace these counterintuitive tips and build the foundational team that will equip your team for future success.

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