

Fahrenheit212

10 HOW TO HIRE INNOVATORS

THE BANJO LESSON AND OTHER TALES
FROM THE INNOVATION FRONTLINE



Boiling Points
INNOVATION PERSPECTIVES

THE POINT: Every company is looking for Innovation but recognizing what makes a great Innovator is a tricky proposition. The discipline is new and the types of attributes that can regularly deliver transformative thinking are diverse and difficult to recognize. In our work as an Innovation consultancy, we've picked up a few tips.

HOW TO HIRE INNOVATORS: THE BANJO LESSON AND OTHER TALES FROM THE INNOVATION FRONTLINE

Everyone wants innovative teams. But how do you recruit innovative people? And once you think you've found strong candidates, how do you judge whether they'll be great travelers along the innovation path? How do you know they're capable of delivering the next big wow?

At innovation consultancy Fahrenheit 212, we have wrestled with these questions while scaling our team, and learned from a few missteps along the way. What we've found may help you raise the stock of your innovation talent from both inside and outside your organization.

TOUGH TO SPOT

Why is innovation a difficult talent to recruit for? The skills and attitudes that lead one to excel are hard to gauge. They're not easily certified. No Six Sigma Ninja, Marketing 101, Supply Chain Best Practice, Technical Doctorates necessarily signal that you have found the correct skill sets.

Innovation as a separate and discrete element of a business is also a relatively new discipline that has not yet standardized an expected skill set. There is no Innovation University or Dial-an-Innovator service.

And the talents critical to delivering breakthrough innovation are diverse and unusual combinations that in most instances will require more than one person. Innovation, unlike entrepreneurship, is very much a group activity.

PAST PERFORMANCE NOT INDICATIVE OF FUTURE RESULTS

Taking a class at Harvard Business School on Innovation Best Practice is not the same as having a genuine capability for creating and understanding the new. Intellectual firepower certainly helps solve thorny problems, but an ability to dazzle at exams doesn't predict how someone will respond to an innovation challenge, a blank page or a team of expectant peers.

Choosing people who have already practiced innovation, pre-qualified as it were, was not as simple as we hoped. We have hired strategic consultants, branding experts, industrial designers, and media planners, all of whom could credibly claim innovation experience. What we found is that only some have the ability to leave their past behind and deliver the marriage of creativity and commercial strategy (what we call Money and Magic) that is key to unlocking big, fast and doable ideas that work in market.

What about seeking entrepreneurs who've successfully delivered innovations? We've found their skills are often up to snuff, but the entrepreneurial mindset can be a poor match for the team dynamics needed to make breakthrough innovation a replicable outcome rather than a serendipitous event.

However, after much trial and error, we did land upon an approach that's served us well.

HIRE QUALITIES, NOT QUALIFICATIONS

We look for restless, enquiring minds. We seek those with proven excellence in one area but openness and interest in others. And we pursue candidates who demonstrate collaborative, congenial personalities that thrive on teams. How?

We read the whole resume, including the “Interests” section. That’s not to say a love of synchronized swimming wows us. But in talking to prospective hires, we find that pushing into the realm of their passions is critical in understanding what makes them tick and how they might respond to the structured stimulus of innovation.

INNOVATORS ARE...

- **Passionate, interested, curious.** Whether an analyst hired from a bank, a great graphic designer or a key support role, innovators love to ask questions. Innovators devour new information, constantly seeking insights, stimulation and opportunities.
- **Travelers.** Restless people take holidays in unusual places and come back to share what they’ve learned.
- **Ex-Pats.** People who’ve lived abroad are, by definition, confident risk-takers who share that ex-pat sensibility of looking to see what’s around the corner. Understanding different cultures fuels an ability to understand what people might want.
- **Omnivorous eaters.** People who explore new foods, restaurants and concepts are curious seekers.
- **Constructive critics.** Folks who are fascinated by and opinioned about films, architecture, fashion, hotels, and web sites are interesting and important to conceiving innovative solutions.

- **Readers.** Look for those people who walk down the street reading. They know stuff you don't, but should.
- **X Factor.** Be alert to the unusual quirk that catches you off guard and suggests that the box you might expect them to be in is not all it seems. A passion for acting, bagpipes prowess or being a leading expert on poodle behavior indicates commitment. An important corollary: Verify these intriguing bits of information.

One fellow we recently interviewed put “plays the banjo” on his resume. Little did he know he’d picked the one office equipped with a banjo. Sadly, we were not treated to a bluegrass medley, let alone the theme from “Deliverance.” We do, however, often refer to this great moment in our HR history as the banjo lesson.

Play well. Hire better.

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