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Hiring Techniques for Top Accounting Positions

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Whatever the title of your top accounting position—CFO, Controller, or Bookkeeper—as a business owner you know that this position is the key in allowing you to focus on what you do best: run your business. A talented Controller will do more than just make sure your books are in order. Today's Controller is more strategic and forward thinking—handling everything from choosing accounting software to preparing comprehensive business plans which incorporate financial and industry projections.

The Baker Tilly emphasis on industry specialization prepares us to offer honest, informed ideas and act decisively.

Preparing to hire

The market for talented accounting professionals is H-O-T. Now more than ever before, the most talented individuals have many options. In addition to refining your interviewing skills, you will need to brush up on your sales skills before you will be successful in attracting the desired candidate. Confirm that your salary and benefits package is in line with market and consider what else you have to offer this individual. Be prepared with company success stories including recent growth, top clients, and successful acquisitions. Expect to share, confidentially, your business plan. Make sure you know what it says and be prepared to discuss it. Your ideal candidate wants to be engaged in the business and will have good questions.

Hiring strategies

Our organization uses the “Three S” strategy to identify potential candidates for both ourselves and our clients: smart, successful, and stable. Having the right person in this top accounting position is crucial to your company obtaining the information and financial strategy needed to execute your growth plans. Hiring the right person, the first time, allows you to direct your efforts towards your customers and not the numbers.

1. Smart

“Smart” is different things to different people. The person you hire for this position must know your industry and the accounting field. In addition, the candidate must possess a general business understanding of economic and industry trends and apply that knowledge to help grow your business. Throw in a hefty dose of common sense (which is not that common, believe it or not), and your candidate meets the first strategy. In addition to degrees and certifications (which are important), the candidate must be challenged to provide real life examples of how his technical expertise was used to provide value to his former employer. If the candidate has the credentials, but is unable to provide specific examples of what he made, saved, or achieved in his prior positions, move on.

2. Successful

Human Resources studies have consistently shown that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior. In other words, if your potential Controller has been successful in other positions or in other ways, like collegiate athletics or academic competition, she is much more likely to continue that success with your company. Ask your candidate to provide you with examples of prior successes. Find out what talents and traits she possesses that allowed her to achieve these successes. Are they relevant to what is needed for success in your Controller position? Do they set her apart from others with similar background and credentials? Does she have a proven history of associating with successful people and organizations? If so, she is more likely to bring that success with her to your company.

3. Stable

Great companies hire great people and find ways to keep them! Talented individuals identify companies who can provide them with good career paths, and remain loyal as long as they are provided growth opportunities. The best employees have stable work histories, as they typically research opportunities up



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front and make good choices. They provide value to their employers, who therefore are unlikely to select them/their departments as candidates for downsizing or outsourcing. Be wary of the individual who has been “in the wrong place at the wrong time” too many times. When discussing work history with a candidate, be prepared to ask tough questions about his departure from each position. If downsized, gain an understanding of how many were downsized from the company. How were those to be downsized selected? How is his work being handled now? Do not accept vague answers such as “I left for a more challenging position”. Ask for clarification, and do not be satisfied until you have a full understanding of the reasons for departure. Once you have a complete understanding of his work history, you are much better positioned to make an assessment of his capacity to effectively assess a career opportunity, and to commit to it.

Understanding candidate expectations

Gain a good understanding of your candidate’s career goals. Is career ladder climbing important to her? Does she expect to work 40 hours a week or 70? Does she plan to remain in accounting or is she hoping to gain broader skills? Will joining your company help her fulfill her long-term goals? If not, no matter how much you like and/or respect her, this candidate is not likely a long-term solution for your company. Understanding the long-term goals of your candidates is crucial in finding the ideal person for your organization.

Getting your new employee acclimated

Once you have identified an individual who meets the 3-S Strategy, make sure the tools and information are provided for him or her to be effective in the role. Effective orientation has a high correlation to retention rates, and not just for staff level positions. Work with your Human Resources department or an outside consultant to create a new hire checklist. This checklist should cover supplies, equipment, and training, as well as identifying who is responsible for each task. You, or a long term employee in good standing, should mentor your new employee, especially on corporate culture and unwritten code of conduct. (Imagine your new hire’s embarrassment when, during his first week, he parks in the CEO’s parking spot which everyone else knows is his but is unmarked!) The number one reason a person leaves a company is due to their relationship with their immediate supervisor. And remember, be accessible for questions by setting and keeping appointments for regularly scheduled meetings.

Use the 3-S Strategy to hire right, help your employee meet career goals, and have an open and honest relationship—these are the keys to having a long and mutually beneficial relationship with your ideal candidate.

About the Author: Laura Huggett, Partner with Baker Tilly, joined the firm in 1995 to launch Baker Tilly’s recruiting and temporary staffing business. Today, CFS Baker Tilly is a full service temporary staffing and recruiting service, specializing in accounting and finance. Laura oversees the CFS operations in Detroit, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Madison, and Janesville. Laura gained professional accounting experience working for a national CPA and consulting firm prior to joining Baker Tilly. She has been serving both public and privately owned companies since 1986.

We welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss how we can help you meet your business goals. For more information or any questions you might have on this topic, please contact Laura Huggett by e-mail at laura.huggett@bakertilly.com or phone at 608 240 2357.

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