



Thinking Differently: Recruiting Scarce Skill Sets

“Moneyball” Strategies for Engaging Diamonds in the Rough

This white paper covers:

- Today’s hottest IT skill sets (and unemployment rates that will shock you)
- Strategies for attracting, hiring and retaining a first-class team
- How to identify unconventional top talent through your interviewing process
- Three keys to help new hires quickly become productive

Introduction

In 2011 Brad Pitt starred in the Oscar-nominated blockbuster, “Moneyball,” based on a true story first told in Michael Lewis’s book, *Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game*. “Moneyball” shares the story of Oakland Athletics general manager Billy Beane and his untraditional and controversial – but ultimately successful – method of building a competitive baseball team.

One of the major themes of “Moneyball” centers around bucking tradition and taking the road less traveled. When it comes to trying a new approach, this theme is especially relevant to revamping the traditional recruiting and hiring processes for IT professionals.

For decades companies have clamored for top talent, wooing them away from their current jobs with promises of higher salaries and better benefits. Difficulty recruiting rare IT skill sets is not a new challenge and the battle for IT talent continues to grow.

When recruiting candidates with high demand skills, traditional methods may not be sufficient. This white paper will discuss the most in-demand IT skill sets and unconventional strategies for attracting, hiring and retaining these candidates in today’s IT environment. It will also cover traits to look for during the interview process and tips to ensure your new hire will thrive.

“80% of CEO’s are concerned with uncertain or volatile growth of the economy – 50% will grow but only 30% say they have the talent they need.”

- Barry Asin, President, Staffing Industry Analyst

What Skill Sets Are in Demand in 2012?

As businesses ramp up investment in technology to boost productivity and gain competitive advantage, there is a surge in demand for IT skills.ⁱ

According to a Computerworld Forecast survey of 353 IT executives, nearly 29% of the executives polled plan to increase IT spending through summer 2012ⁱⁱ. They also listed nine skills that would be in demand: programming and application development, project management, help desk/technical support, networking, business intelligence, data center, web 2.0, security and telecommunications.



Information technology staffing growth update – March 27, 2012

Unemployment trend data for information technology occupations

- The unemployment rate for the broad category of computer and mathematical occupations decreased from 4.5% to 4.2% when comparing median rates for the four quarters ending in 2Q11 versus 4Q11. The rate for computer programmers decreased significantly from 4.5% to 3.6%. A low unemployment rate often indicates a skill shortage that can be beneficial for staffing firms.

- The two occupational categories with lowest unemployment rates in information technology are database administrators with a 1.9% median rate for the four quarters ending in 4Q11, and computer network architects with a 0.5% rate.

Unemployment rate by occupation (%)

	4 qtrs ending 2Q11 Median	4 qtrs ending 4Q11 Median	Difference	Employment (thousands)
Computer and mathematical occupations	4.5	4.2	-0.4	3,570
Computer programmers	4.5	3.6	-0.9	462
Computer systems analysts	2.5	2.5	0.0	445
Computer support specialists	7.4	7.2	-0.2	443
Network and computer systems administrators	4.7	4.6	-0.1	211
Web developers	5.0	5.0	0.0	199
Operations research analysts	3.5	6.8	3.3	120
Database administrators	1.9	1.9	0.0	112
Computer network architects	0.8	0.5	-0.3	92

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics and Staffing Industry Analysts

If your organization's search for a hard-to-find skill set isn't turning up the results you would like, then it may be time for a "Moneyball" approach to outsourcing and recruiting: taking a second look at unconventional candidates.

When Hard Skills are in Short Supply: Be Flexible to Find the “Perfect” Candidate

In a perfect world, recruiting candidates to fit a technical job opening would follow a predictable routine:

A job description is written with a perfect balance of the job’s “requirements” in addition to “nice-to-have’s.” It’s handed off to HR or your preferred recruiting firm who soon presents several pre-qualified candidates with impressive resumes. After interviewing the top three picks, the best candidate is brought back for another interview. An offer is made and promptly accepted...

In the real world, the process of finding top technology talent rarely goes so smoothly. Most companies are lucky to keep the candidate engaged in the interview process and more often than not, are competing with one or more other offers that the candidate is contemplating. This is especially true when a unique, competitive set of technical skills is needed.

What do smart managers do when they are faced with a list of solid candidates who just don’t look perfect on paper? Answering that question requires looking further into the age-old debate: what’s more important—hard skills or soft skills?

“Companies need to drop the idea of finding perfect candidates and look for people who could do the job with a bit of training and practice.”

- Professor Peter Capelli, *Wall Street Journal*

Soft Skills or Hard Skills? What Sets Superior Performers Apart

Start by defining both the hard skills and soft skills required to do the job well. Soft skills include a collection of personal, positive attributes and competencies that enhance relationships, job performance, and value to the market. Hard skills are a specific set of trainable abilities needed to carry out the technical requirements of a job. A balance of both hard and soft skills is essential for success, but sometimes it’s hard to find a match to your precise requirements.

When finding a candidate with the right hard skills becomes a challenge, be open to candidates who may not be the most experienced but who have the technical foundation and the potential to be a good overall fit.

Hard skills can be taught. So if your organization is unable to find a very specific technical skill set, find a candidate who is enthusiastic, trainable and eager to learn. If the skills can be developed with a little training and mentorship, then hiring a solid, intelligent candidate is a smart move.

If You Can't Find an Exact Skill Match, What Soft Skills Should You Look For?

According to a *Wall Street Journal* article,ⁱⁱⁱ *Why Companies Aren't Getting the Employees They Need*, writer and Professor Peter Cappelli states that companies "need to drop the idea of finding perfect candidates and look for people who could do the job with a bit of training and practice."

If a candidate is truly talented but doesn't fit the ideal model, take a look at their soft skills and think twice before dismissing them. Look for soft skills that show promise and potential for a candidate to develop in the position.

The most impressive soft skills job candidates can possess are^{iv}:

Preparation	Professionalism
Initiative	Body language
Sense of humor	Longevity
Passion	Communication
Confidence	Attitude

Additional soft skills and characteristics demonstrated in superior performers include:

- **Intelligence:** Does the candidate have the ability to apply themselves and what they've learned? Can he or she acquire and utilize knowledge and skills?
- **Sense of ownership:** Great candidates have a good idea of what they're capable of and how that fits into an organization. He or she should be able to communicate this trait through stories and examples.
- **Analytical:** Can the candidate grasp and process information quickly? Understanding and applying information in a tactical and strategic manner is an extremely important attribute.

In the end, if your organization has found a solid fit with a candidate who is eager to learn, possesses intelligence and is teachable, then make the hire.

Looking for a Needle in a Haystack? Tactics for Finding Hidden Talent

What happens when the traditional methods of finding qualified applicants—searching databases, the Internet, or social media—are not yielding results? If advertising jobs online, Tweeting out openings and doing endless Google searches has failed to yield results, it's time for a new approach.

Finding hidden talent today calls for adding unconventional tactics to the mix. It requires the use of different channels, devices and strategies. Here are a few tips for finding hidden talent:

- **Find out where the talent congregates:** Scout spots like co-working spaces and coffee shops. These locales can be a haven for undiscovered technical talent.
- **Look beyond the currently employed:** Consultants, freelancers, and solo business owners are great resources for untapped potential. If you can't woo them away directly, chances are they'll have a few leads in their network. Don't hesitate to reach out to the so-called "non-employed."
- **Think beyond traditional industry associations:** Talented candidates may not be networking at the most obvious industry association gatherings in town. Maybe they prefer smaller, niche events. Check out unconferences, Meetups, or tweet-ups.
- **Read popular industry blogs:** Who's producing provocative thought-leadership blog posts on relevant topics? The blogger himself may not be interested in your job opening, but perhaps knows someone who would be. You can also read through blog comments and look for commenters who contribute intelligently to the discussion.
- **Use LinkedIn differently:** Instead of just posting job openings to LinkedIn or perusing possible candidates in your network, go a few steps further. Look for experts answering Q&As, or who participate in dialogues and discussions.
- **Dig deeper on Twitter:** On Twitter, go beyond pushing out job leads. Reach out to experts or industry superstars on Twitter. See if they'll put the word out to their community. Also, look for active participants in relevant Twitter chats or who post with topical #hashtags.

By expanding your reach, you may find a bigger pool of potential candidates. The next step is identifying the future stars in that mix.

From Good to Great: How to Identify Future Stars

Through years of successfully placing high-potential candidates, Agile has developed a reliable list of star qualities consistently found in top performers. We recommend you look for these attributes to help identify future stars:

History of Success: Does the candidate have a history of promotions, awards and recognition in prior roles?

Professionalism: Is their first and last impression memorable? We find that good follow-up, such as a timely thank you note and delivery of commitments like promised materials (the “last impression”) is as strong an indicator as your impression upon first meeting a candidate.

Stability: Does the candidate have 3 or more years in their previous positions, or at least a 6-month contract history?

Education: Ability to complete a degree shows persistence and commitment. Does the candidate have a Bachelor’s Degree or higher from an accredited university?

Other: Extracurricular activities like community service or sports show the ability to work as a team in addition to possessing a positive personal character.

It’s easy to find out about a candidate’s experience, but don’t stop there. It is also important to look at past performance indicators. See what results they have obtained and make sure the candidate has the ability to repeat their successes.

Interviews, of course, can give you an immediate feel for whether the candidate is a good fit or not. But to really extract the information you need to make an accurate assessment, ask open-ended questions like:

- “Tell me how you lead daily? What do you look for in a leader?”
- “What books or publications are you currently reading?”
- “Describe the best business result that has ever come from your technical work.”
- “Tell me about a time you disagreed with your boss or coworker. What did you do about it?”
- “How much structure, direction, and feedback do you generally prefer on a day-to-day basis?”
- “Do you more often ask for permission or forgiveness when making decisions?”

Today's IT job market requires being on the constant lookout for sharp, new talent. When you find that talent, you must be able to move quickly, making a strategic hire even if the timing is not perfect. You may need to create a position or accelerate a project to snatch up someone with great potential.

Once you have this individual on board, the following techniques will help ensure your star becomes a productive member of the team.

A Hiring Manager's 3-Part Plan to Ensuring New Hire Success

After the candidate has accepted the offer, a new challenge presents itself: acclimating the new hire to the company, the job, and the team. It's critical to ensure sure the new employee is satisfied, motivated, productive and stays with the company a long time—especially after all the work that's been done during the hiring process. Getting the new employee up and running smoothly requires putting together a smart strategy.

Even if the HR department has New Hire policies and procedures in place, it still helps to go the extra mile. According to the Aberdeen Group, "the relationship between the new employee and the manager is the determining factor in whether the new employee stays with an organization." First impressions mean everything when it comes to the first few days on the job, and your responsibility entails making sure your new employee's experience is nothing less than stellar.

It's also important to reset expectations of the team and the manager. It's not realistic to expect a new employee to start performing on Day 1. Do your homework to set a plan for three important areas: orientation, setting up a buddy system, and establishing training expectations.

"Only 59 percent of employees believe that their orientation was adequate."

- HR Solutions Research Institute

1. Lay the Groundwork with Orientation

For many companies, orientation is a half-day event where new employees fill out paperwork and review the employee handbook. That's a missed opportunity. Onboarding can—and should—be so much more than that.

The orientation process should begin before the new hire's first day. Getting an early start is the best way to ensure a seamless transition. Before orientation—even before the first day—do the following:

- So simple, and often missed: Have the employee's computer, phone and materials for ramping up on their desk and ready to go.
- Plan the employee's first lunch (who will participate).
- Provide the employee with a first-day schedule.
- Schedule a company or facility tour.
- Email the team who will be working with the new hire and cc the employee to facilitate introductions
- Clear your schedule as much as possible, but especially at the beginning and end of the day, so you can spend time with your new employee.

Make sure orientation covers everything that will make the employee feel self-sufficient and comfortable in their new role. The early days should reinforce your new hire's feeling that his decision to join the team was the right one. The more you can make the employee feel like an insider, the faster he'll get to doing his job effectively.

2. Employ the Buddy System

Pairing a new employee with a company veteran is not only a good idea, but also strategic. Your new hire may be hesitant to ask questions. She'll most likely feel more comfortable talking with a peer. And in the event the new employee does run up against a challenge, an encouraging buddy might get her through the problem and empower her to seek solutions independently or collaboratively.

Keep in mind that a buddy is not a substitute for a mentor, boss, or HR professional, but part of the overall support system.

3. Put Together the Training Plan

Training: it's the last piece of the puzzle needed to get the new hire up and running in a reasonable, productive timeframe.

During the interview process you should have already assessed any technical gaps or deficiencies that need to be addressed so the new employee can do their job well. Create a plan to close these gaps with proactive training, and try to complete it during the employee's probationary period rather than waiting.

Make sure the employee clearly understands the parameters around his training: what he's expected to learn, how long he'll be in training and if he'll be tested or evaluated further.

While technology can be one of the best methods to meeting training needs, also consider traditional classroom training within or outside of the organization. Better yet, rounding out a training curriculum with active and hands-on learning will be even more effective.

Remember, your new employee's success is the organization's success. Set expectations, communicate regularly, make yourself available and never assume anything.

Conclusion

When looking to fill some of the in-demand job positions for 2012, be prepared to try new strategies. Using the "Moneyball" approach of applying unconventional thinking to solve a common problem like recruiting hard-to-find skill sets is a smart strategy to incorporate.

To build a world-class technology team, adopt a flexible mindset. Accept non-ideal candidates, get creative in order to find hidden talent, understand what to look for during the interview process and acclimate the new hire accordingly.

About Agile

Agile is an innovative IT staffing and consulting firm that speeds time to talent by matching great people to great opportunities, enabling our clients to drive business results and create competitive advantage. Agile has consistently been recognized as one of the fastest growing companies in the U.S. by Inc. Magazine, Staffing Industry Analysts and the Atlanta Business Chronicle. In 2014, Agile received the City of Alpharetta's Business of Excellence Award. In 2012 and 2013, Agile was named as one of the fastest growing staffing firms in the nation by Staffing Industry Analysts. Agile was recognized with a 2013 Pacesetter Award and ranked # 8 in the Top Ten Fastest Growing Women-Owned Firms in Atlanta by The Atlanta Business Chronicle.

Founded by Tricia Dempsey in 2003, Agile is a values-driven organization committed to community involvement and charitable causes. Through *Agile on the Green*, the firm's annual golf tournament, Agile has raised more than \$270,000 for Komen for the Cure - Greater Atlanta Affiliate. Agile is a certified woman-owned business (WBENC). For more information, visit www.GoToAgile.com or call 866.513.4703

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Endnotes

ⁱ Monthly Hiring Trends, Association of Professional Staffing Companies (APSCO), June/July 2011

ⁱⁱ “9 Hot IT Skills for 2012.” Computerworld Annual Forecast Survey. September 26, 2011

ⁱⁱⁱ “Why Companies Aren’t Getting the Employees They Need.” *The Wall Street Journal*. October 23, 2011

^{iv} “The Wow Factor: Impressive Job Candidate Qualities.” MSN Careers. March 2, 2011

