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Executive Recruiting Guide

How to find the ideal hire

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Here at Serent Toolkit, our operations experts from our Growth Team share their strategies, stories, insights, and best practices used while working to equip high-growth and fast paced SaaS and tech-enabled service companies for success..

Serent's Growth Team is here to help founder-led, growing companies reach their goals.

Having the right talent in place at the right time can be the determining factor in scaling successfully. In this guide, we'll discuss tools, tips, and tactics that CEOs and first-time executive hiring managers can use to find the ideal hire for your growing executive team for today and the future.

Let's get started.

Prital Kadakia
Partner, Serent Capital

pritaI.kadakia@
serentcapital.com

LinkedIn

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How to find the ideal hire

Running a successful interview process—one that yields the best hire possible—is a challenge. And it becomes even more challenging during an executive-level search. Making a set of interviews an iterative and revealing series of conversations is the key to finding exceptional talent and cultural fit that will drive impact over the long term. That means planning ahead, communicating with all the stakeholders, and having a ***flexibly structured*** plan for every step of the process.

Interviews are by no means a perfect method to identify talent, but they are simply a baseline requirement for recruiting."

In this three-part series, we will share what we think helps ensure a productive interview experience from start to finish:

Part I: Defining the need

The best tool to begin an executive recruiting process

Some hiring managers start the hiring process by jumping straight into writing the job description, or worse yet, asking someone in Human Resources (HR) to write it for them. Most people dread writing a job spec. It can feel overwhelming to put pen to paper and write a compelling description of everything the organization needs and what this role will need to accomplish. Remember that a job description is really more of a marketing document to attract candidates and help them get a basic understanding and potentially envision themselves in the specifications.

Before anyone can write a job description, though, it helps to define the goals. As the Hiring Manager, start by asking yourself one critical question:

If the placed candidate hits it out of the park in their first 12–18 months in the role, what do the success outcomes look like?

Defining the need is the most important step of any recruiting process. You may be feeling a lot of urgency about getting a new Chief Operating Officer or Head of Marketing in the door as soon as possible. But to find the right hire, it is essential to be strategic and know what you are looking for before you start to search for it.

Just like building any new strategy, it is best to **start with a plan.**

By defining what success looks like and then crafting a matrix of the must-have, highly desirable, and nice-to-have requirements to achieve those goals for the role, you can create a ***scorecard*** that will be the framework for the role.

Using a scorecard to define the job qualifications

With those bullets in mind, the job description should essentially write itself once you add verbiage about the company. In addition, you will have done the heavy lifting already to clearly communicate year one goals to the new hire, which will feed into the performance management process.

To begin designing your scorecard:

1 Start by thinking through what success will look like for the best hire 12–18 months into the role

Define what the 3 to 4 key success outcomes are that this candidate needs to focus on, and specify how will success be measured in the first 12–18 months:

- For technical roles, this could mean faster dev cycles, shorter outages, and better customer Net Promoter Scores on the product;
- For sales roles, it could be hitting revenue generation financial targets, lower team turnover, and improving Employer Net Performance (eNPS) scores to improve team morale.

2 Lay out specific Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) you want your new hire to meet at the outset for each of those success outcome goals

Get as objective, granular, and measurable as possible. You want a clear idea of what it would look like for them to knock it out of the park. This step will save you time when you get the hire onboard because this set of KPIs can serve as the performance management criteria, so consider it a wise investment of time. Examples could be:

- Improve Customer or eNPS by X points
- Lower turnover by X%
- Lower average system outage times by X hours
- Achieve revenue goals of $X by Y date
- Note that not all outcomes may have numerical KPIs, but they may have timeline KPIs, like *complete hiring or current org plan by Q2 of 2022*

3 Identify what skills (extrinsics) and characteristics (intrinsics) someone will need to achieve that success

- **Extrinsics** are tied to job skills or career experience. These could be years of experience in a particular industry or role, such as *5 or more years of people leadership and experience building a sales team of at least 10 or more*. This can also be having specific technical knowledge such as *web and mobile software architecture*.
- **Intrinsics** are personal characteristics or traits that this candidate will need to succeed in the role and within the organization. If one of the success outcomes is tied to leading cross-functional teams, an intrinsic criterion you may want is they have a *track record of actively breaking down silos and fostering cross-functional collaboration and teamwork*.

Creating a requirements matrix

Once you have identified the areas on the previous page, it becomes far easier to craft a matrix of the requirements for the role—both extrinsic skills and intrinsic characteristics that will serve as a ***scorecard*** through the interview process.

1 Summarize your success outcomes

This summary can help your interviewers shape their questions to focus on the essential areas of the role and the company.

2 With the success outcomes in mind as the end goal, define 3–9 extrinsics and lay them out in a matrix that allows you to rank the importance for each extrinsic within this role

A common ranking system is ***must-have**, **highly desirabl**e,* and ***nice-to-have**,* but you must be disciplined to have no more than 3–5 ***must-haves***. Beware of the temptation to define ***the perfect person*** where everything is a must have and the bar is so high, essentially no one human being will likely possess everything. This should feel like an exercise in ruthless prioritization so that you hire someone who possesses the most important criteria for the role. Aiming to hire a unicorn is never a realistic goal!

3 Repeat the matrix exercise with the intrinsics, with the same emphasis on prioritization and defining what the role MUST HAVE versus what would be nice to have

That way, you avoid the set of interviewers falling into the ***Goldilocks trap*** where it is too easy to find fault or gaps in every candidate you meet.

A common **ranking system** in a requirements matrix:

- *Must-have*
- *Highly desirable*
- *Nice-to-have*

Writing the job description

From that set of requirements, it will be so much easier to write a compelling job description. Your job description will typically start with a standard description of the company, followed by a brief description of the role's responsibilities that is simply an expansion of the success outcomes. But the bulk of the job description is specific job requirements which you can pull straight from the matrix/scorecard. In practice, it can look like this:

1. **Responsibilities**

   The summary of success outcomes you identified.

2. **Experience**

   The skills or extrinsics needed for this role.

3. **Personal attributes**

   The intrinsics or personal characteristics needed to be successful in achieving the success outcomes.

Start the process and download your scorecard now

Writing the job description is a critical step in finding the ideal hire.

By strategically crafting a scorecard, you will be one step closer to hiring the right executive for your company.

Part II: Designing the process

Three essential components you need to set up a successful interview process

You've completed your job description, and the next step is to design an interview process that will help you find the ideal hire. As early as possible, plan out your hiring process by using these three components:

1 Who will be involved

You want stakeholders who need to cast a vote vs bystanders who will weigh in an opinion.

2 Set your timeline

Be mindful of scheduling challenges, holidays, and planned vacations etc. Most executive recruiting processes take 60–90 days.

3 Schedule time with key stakeholders

Be proactive by placing holds on calendars 2–3 weeks out so that you can easily offer times to candidates as they progress.

Get stakeholders involved

At one point or another, you may have been part of a disorganized hiring process. Scheduled interviewers dropped out and you got pulled in to interview someone at the last minute with no context. You may not have even known who the candidate is or why you were asked to interview them—*right*?

Running a smooth hiring process is the key to avoiding this, which means getting the right people involved early and explicitly getting their buy-in to make this a priority.

Hold a quick Search Kick-off meeting to get everyone on the same page:

Align expectations

Explain the purpose of the search and the key criteria your new hire should meet to ensure alignment—review the key steps in the process.

Define team roles

Highlight who will be involved at each step.

Set the schedule

Schedule proactively right away to ensure that you avoid last-minute dropouts.

Outline communication requirements

Set the expectation that participants will write up notes and send them within 24 hours of each interview.

During the kick-off meeting, make it a priority to get aligned on the job description and the KPIs you want the new hire to achieve. Unless you take time to get aligned on what you are looking for, your team members will more than likely come back to you with irrelevant feedback that stays on the surface and can be influenced by unconscious biases. If you want a new head of sales to grow enterprise sales by 50% over the next twelve months, you will not get much insight into how a candidate would perform if your interviewer tells you, *"they are really likable, and would be a great fit here."*

Schedule interviews

Order of interviews

Be deliberate in the overall plan. Have a mix of interviews that have different purposes: data collection (career history, compensation expectations, timing considerations), selling to the candidate, technical vetting, culture fit (link to other article), rapport building, and finally selling once you get to offer stage.

Every interview should have a different purpose

For instance, one interview might be a technical screen, while another could focus on leadership skills, and a third could zero in on culture fit. There is no point in having a prospect sit down with five different stakeholders and give their ***tell me about yourself*** speech over and over again.

Planning a varied mix of interview formats and time blocks is important

Offering shorter interviews can give your prospect a break from hour-long conversations and takes into account that they likely have a ***day job*** that they need to work around. And longer conversations allow an opportunity to dive deep into their expertise. Plan a mix of 30, 60, and 90-minute sessions over the course of a search.

Change up the **number of panelists**

With specialized sessions like a technical screen, it can sometimes make sense to plan for a 2-on-1 interview. This allows interviewers the chance to compare their reactions to what was said and also can give you an opportunity to help more junior members of your team develop their skills as interviewers.

Objective assessments

Objective assessments give you a standardized way to evaluate candidates' knowledge and skills, so you can take the guesswork out of the hiring process.

Many HR tools can often provide a helpful way to assess candidates for personality skills and leadership potential. Examples would be tools like DISC, CCAT, Hogan, or Caliper. The key to using assessments is to use them consistently for all hires, typically at the same stage of the process.

Look at assessments as one more data point about your candidate — not a test intended to disqualify candidates. And above all, **be consistent**. If you rely on assessments selectively, allowing certain candidates to opt-out when they seem a cut above the rest, you will not get the full picture you need to make an informed choice and you run the risk of a discrimination claim.

Working sessions

Working sessions have become increasingly popular in executive searches and for good reason—executives are presented ahead of time with data and prompting questions about realistic situations and problems they will encounter in their future role.

The candidate prepares a deck to discuss in a live working session with 3–4 key stakeholders to cover topics like a financial analysis, SWOT analysis, 30-60-90-day plan, etc.

Running a **working session enables you to open up a dialogue with a candidate** and learn what it would be like to work with them ***in real life***. By talking through their plan and engaging in a true dialogue you will discover a lot about their communication style, influencing abilities, analytical thinking and overall rapport with you. While it does require work from the candidate, they will learn what they can realistically expect from working with you and often times the exercise increases the candidate's motivations to take the job.

To make the most of working sessions, get an NDA from your prospective hire so you can share meaningful information with them and given them at least a week to prepare their thoughts and materials. By doing that, you can give them an honest look at where things stand in your business, they have plenty of time to prepare, and neither of you will run into unexpected surprises if you move forward.

Download your sample interview schedule

Part III: Designating the responsibilities

The critical role that the Hiring Manager plays in the interview process

As the hiring manager, you ultimately are in charge of keeping up the momentum of the search. That means you have a relationship to build, responsibilities to handle and details to address along the way.

Establishing relationships

- **Preview the process from the outset.** Prospective hires spend most of their job search waiting and wondering. You can alleviate some of that anxiety by giving a clear preview of the process. Get on a short 30-minute call at the beginning to outline the steps they can expect.
- **Stay in touch.** Share your contact info with prospects. Be friendly and invite them to stay in contact with you — a simple *"here is my number, feel free to call or text whenever"* works well. Reaching out at key points in the process to ask how things are going does not just show you care. It gives you critical feedback from candidates you can use to improve your process.
- **Keep it personal.** Show personal concern for your candidates. When the Baylor Bears win the championship, and your prospective hire is an alum, send a quick text to send congratulations. Little personal interactions take you beyond *"nice meeting you"* and help you to stand out in the mind of the candidate.

Bringing a stellar hire on board means **building great relationships** with your prospects.

Build momentum throughout the process

As the hiring process proceeds, take steps to ensure that everything is progressing smoothly.

1

Provide context for the interview

Preparing prospects for meetings can make everything run more smoothly.

For example, you might say to the candidate:

"You are about to meet the head of sales, and here is why she will be a key stakeholder in the relationship. She can be a bit prickly at first, but once she warms up, she is really easy to talk to, and you both share a passion for skiing, so maybe that will come up."

2

Be transparent about the process

Always keep candidates informed about where they are in the process.

Be honest and direct. Avoid overpromising or creating false hopes. Let them know that you appreciate the time and energy they are putting into the process and tell them how delighted you are to get to know them however things turn out.

3

Consider things from the candidate's perspective

What seems fast from an HR perspective can seem like a lifetime from the viewpoint of the candidate.

As an HR manager, you might check in with your candidate on Monday—and before you know it, it is Sunday already, and you need to send an update. Meanwhile, your candidate has been checking their email ten times a day, looking for updates. Keep your candidate in mind and let them know when they can expect to hear from you.

Checking references

With executive searches, formal reference checking once a finalist is identified is more about onboarding and confirming what you already know. Formal references are ones that the candidate gives you formal permission to conduct. Formal references will want to tell you what is great about the candidate, so you really have to dig to get constructively critical feedback.

Getting constructive feedback

If you are speaking to a candidate's manager, ask them:

- How they rated them in annual performance reviews and what areas of development they worked on with their former employee?
- Who they had tough working relationships with?
- What customers did not work well with them, if any?
- How did they manage their team?
- What was their NPS score within their team?

When conducting references:

- Block out enough time to make 30-minute calls to 5 to 10 references with a mix of managers, peers and direct reports.
- Ask a set of consistent questions of all of them, and then ask topically relevant questions depending on what their working relationship was with the candidate.
- Listen with an open mind, noting positive and negative information. And no matter how well the process has gone so far, do not be afraid to eliminate a candidate if their references are weak.

As much as it is tempting to hear what is great about the candidate since you are likely considering extending an offer, the real objective of formal references is to learn what development areas they have so you can get ahead of any problems and help them develop. No one is perfect—every executive has areas to work on—you just want to know what you are getting when you hire someone.

Backchannel references

While formal references are a must-do step as a matter of course, you are likely to get better, deeper and more insightful feedback from backchannel references that you conduct earlier in the recruiting process. However, backchannels require a delicate touch:

- Tools like *LinkedIn* and general network effects in today's small world make it easier than ever to **figure out who you know in common** with a candidate.
- It is wise to start backchannels as early as possible, but it is also important to **be protective of the candidate's privacy** and current work status when you call people they may know without their permission.
- Limit the communication over email and instead, call your shared connection and **have a live conversation** in real time.
- Emphasize that this is a **confidential** backchannel, and that the **candidate did not suggest them as a reference** and that you are early in the process.

Making the hiring decision

Ultimately, the hiring decision rests with you. You will manage this person going forward and if they end up failing in the role, the buck stops with you. Whether you decide to move forward or not, make sure the hiring decision is one you can stand by.

Ensure a smooth onboarding

Before your new hire comes on board, continue to stay in touch. Build relationships by setting expectations for the first 90 days and make introductions to other key stakeholders.

To set your new hire up for success, ensure that little things are already taken care of. Make sure their computer is already set up. Add them to the important email lists that they will need to be a part of.

And ideally, choose a Thursday or Friday start date. Starting your new executive on a Monday is a common error that makes for a long, exhausting first week. By starting midweek, you let your new hire spend a couple of days just getting oriented. That way, they can take the weekend and come back on Monday ready to really get rolling.

Conclusion

Interviews will never give you a perfect picture of a candidate's skills and qualifications. But done right, a strong interview process is the best way to find a stellar candidate who can help you nail the specific KPIs you are looking for—and start building a relationship that makes them eager to work with you.

Download the *Your Hiring Manager Checklist*

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If you would like to learn more about what it means to partner with Serent Capital to grow your company, we would love to hear from you. Get in touch!

SerentCapital.com

Serent CAPITAL

info@serentcapital.com

LinkedIn