

Recruiting Passive Candidates — How to Get Top-notch Referrals

Without question, having a large LinkedIn network is a competitive advantage for any recruiter working on hard-to-fill positions and hard-to-find candidates. This advantage is lessened dramatically with LinkedIn Recruiter, since it includes complete visibility to the 70mm+ people in their network. Since this full-visibility product is off-limits to TPRs, it levels the playing field somewhat for corporate recruiters. But this is not as significant a disadvantage as it would seem to those of us who have to find top candidates the old-fashioned way — networking. Getting pre-qualified referrals from people who will call you back is the real secret of recruiting passive candidates.

With this in mind, I'd like to offer a few of my favorite passive candidate recruiting secrets.

Networking Secrets of an Old-time Headhunter

1. **Network in 3D.** While the names on LinkedIn are great to have, getting the names of their best connections is even better. As you begin your quest for great referrals, don't just consider peers. Consider those who these people have mentored, who mentored them, who they most likely worked with on cross-functional teams, and who they regularly work with outside the company, including vendors, customers, and consultants.
2. **Track your effectiveness.** Don't waste your time. Networking is not about dialing for dollars. Instead, track how many people call you back, how many are interested in talking about your position, how many are qualified for your opening, and how many referrals you get per call. If you're not tracking this daily, you can't get any better, since you won't know what to work on. If you do track these metrics, you'll soon discover that great referrals from well-respected people can increase your productivity 5-10X. That's why the first name found on LinkedIn is not nearly as valuable as a referral from one of these people.
3. **Get three referrals on each call.** The most important metric you can track is how many high-quality referrals you get on each call. You need to become adept at getting these names. Make sure you highlight the fact that you don't want to know anyone who's looking. Instead, ask the person for the best person they know who's absolutely not looking, but would be open to discussing a potential career move. Thinking in 3D helps here. For example, I've called buyers at major retailers looking for salespeople, product marketing people looking for engineers, ad agencies looking for product marketing people, and CPA partners looking for CFOs. The key is not to hang up until you have three great referrals if the person you called isn't appropriate for the job at hand.
4. **Don't call people who won't call you back.** Great people will call you back if you mention the name of another great person. That's why step three is so important. Track your callback rates. If you make sure that 80% of the people you call are warm, pre-qualified referrals, your call-back rate will be 75% or better. If you just make outbound cold calls, your callback rate will be closer to 25%. This is a huge difference in productivity.

5. **Only call people who are worthy.** While getting people to call you back is important, if they're not worth talking to, it's a waste of time. That's why it's important that you pre-qualify the referral. Just ask the person giving you the name why the person is a top-performer. As far as I'm concerned, a worthy person is someone who is either qualified for the job or knows someone who is.
6. **Leave professional and career-oriented messages.** Whether it's a voicemail or an email, suggest you'd like to enter into a discussion regarding what could potentially be an important career move for the person. You must include some substantive proof as part of the message, not hyperbole. For example, "You might have heard that we just merged with XYZ Resources, and are looking for a product manager to lead the first integrated development project. I'd like to chat with you to see if this could offer a significant career move for you." If you can mention the name of the person who provided you the referral you will more than double your callback rate. Hyperbole — "the greatest position in the world" — will cut it in half.
7. **Create instant careers.** If you've asked the person if they're open to discussing a possible career move and they answered yes, don't tell them much more about the job; instead, get them to first tell you a little about them. This is essential. As you quickly go through the highlights of the person's work history, look for gaps in the candidate's background your job fills. This could include staff size, scope of the project, impact the person can make, exposure to management, and the like. Mention these as reasons to proceed in the discussion. Of course, if the gaps are too big, or non-existent, smoothly switch your focus to getting three referrals.
8. **Don't take "no" for an answer.** In addition to doing everything described above, you also need to be adept at overcoming objections. These cover the range from I'm not looking, what's the comp, I'm happy where I am, to I'd don't like the industry, your company has a bad reputation, and I don't want to relocate. It's impossible to put 20 years of advice into a single paragraph, other than to say that persistence is the key here. If your position represents a true career move, you owe it to your hiring manager, yourself, and the person on the phone not to give up until the person has the information needed to compare your job to what they're doing today or whatever else they're considering. Don't give up until they do. Even if the person decides it's not a true career move, you'll still be able to get your three referrals.
9. **Recruit first, network second.** You'll increase your networking productivity by directly recruiting the person first, rather than calling the person on some "networking" premise. To me this later approach should only be used when calling someone who clearly is not a candidate for the job. Recruiting the person first allows you to find out about the person's background before revealing much about the job. This allows you to determine if you should recruit the person or get referrals. You also establish a different relationship once the candidate has shared some confidential information with you.
10. **Become SWK (someone worth knowing).** Top prospects want to stay connected with top recruiters who handle important jobs. To become SWK you must know the job, the hiring manager, your company, your industry, and your competition. You need to be seen as a reasonably objective career counselor who is only willing to proceed if the job represents a true career move. You know you're SWK if you get unsolicited referrals from top people in your area of expertise who want to work with you and give you other top referrals.

What's great about LinkedIn and its Recruiter product is it gets you in the major leagues on day one. This is an invaluable gift. Regardless, since everyone will soon have access to the same information, your ability to convert a list of names into hot prospects and great hires is the real difference-maker. In my mind, this is the essence of great recruiting.

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