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USUALLY, AT THE VERY beginning of a search—whether it’s a sales, marketing, engineering, design or manufacturing position—we will ask a company what product or service familiarity they prefer for candidates to have. Frequently, the president, principal or hiring manager will name their direct competitors—or only companies offering the exact same product or service. However, we will encourage our clients to broaden their outlook, and suggest we not rule out people who might be the best fit in every way except having experience with their product or service.

Ever known a single friend who had a “certain type” of person she or he is attracted to, only to later find that friend very happily in a relationship with someone bearing absolutely no resemblance to those specifications? In that scenario, they married or became partners with someone outside of their “type” and seemed to end up even happier than if they had stuck to those narrow and sometimes superficial restrictions on their qualifications for the “perfect” mate. Hiring is not that different. Except instead of a personal relationship, it’s a professional one. And while many outstanding employees of companies in the lighting field moved over from a direct competitor, just as often the top performers in our business come from a different (though often still related) background.

Overcoming Typecasting

Some managers will resist at first when we present them with the background or resume of a candidate not from their market niche or industry; their resume is “not a fit.” In February of last year, we conducted a search for a director of human resources for a well-known specification fixture manufacturer. The general manager wanted someone from the manufacturing sector, understandably, and someone with experience dealing with unions.

Obviously, the majority of the candidates we presented had both of those experiences. However,

one candidate we presented came from both the retail sector and had no union experience whatsoever. However, after talking with the candidate, it was clear that her style seemed an ideal fit for the company culture, and personality-wise and skills-wise, she fit all the other requirements of the general manager. Still, this didn’t stop our client from being very upset: “Frankly, Paul, I’m surprised you even presented her, when she clearly doesn’t have the manufacturing or union background that is so important.” Not a fun conversation! I then mentioned that, in our 17 years of recruiting for companies, no one has ever hired a resume! This broke the tension, and while the comment evoked laughter, there is real truth in it. Credit the general manager with

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Most importantly, the candidate has since initiated and completed projects that the general manager had only had on his “wish list” the

past few years. Even as recently as the past week, I spoke with other top HR people at the corporate office for this client, and the success of this candidate has not gone unnoticed.

We often find that the employer who is most open on product experience often can hire a higher level of candidate. For example, if a company manufactures emergency lighting, we will try and persuade them to be open to speak with candidates from the lamp or ballast side, or even someone selling switchgear. We find that companies then have a better overall selection of candidates to interview, rather than “over-narrowing” their search and looking only at candidates from other emergency lighting manufacturers. Just as much, the principal of a lighting design firm, when not hiring someone directly from their market or service segment can be rewarded by looking at a higher overall level of candidate quality before making a decision.

Candidates hired from a different, or related product or service niche rather than from a direct competitor often bring new, fresh ideas that a company otherwise wouldn’t be exposed to. This avoids what we call the “in-breeding” syndrome. Filling a position from within your company is always a positive thing to do whenever possible (assuming the candidate is qualified, of course). You then have in your position someone already familiar with your company, its people, and products or services, while sending out a sign to your team that there is room for advancement for those who excel.

However, companies who consistently either promote from within and hire only from direct competitors often miss out on the opportunity to learn and grow from the ideas of the new outside employee. Also, some of the greatest innovations were the products of someone who didn’t know that something “couldn’t be done” and then did it!

Pitfalls of the Perfect Candidate

Considering a candidate from a direct competitor often may seem the best and most natural choice, but it also comes with a variety of potential pitfalls:

1) Often a candidate from a direct competitor is using your opportunity simply to compare against the current position, or, of greater risk, plans to use your

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ultimate offer in attempt to leverage a lucrative counter offer from his or her current company. Keep in mind that candidates who entertain an offer from a direct competitor are much more likely to end up staying with their old company after all is said and done.

2) You end up hiring the “grass is always greener” candidate, who feels that going to a direct competitor is the solution to the woes at their current company, only to find that your company is not that different from theirs, resulting in an unhappy camper, or someone who leaves after a short time.

3) You end up in an unintended bidding contest with one of your close competitors. All companies hate to lose a good person, but we find that if a company discovers that their valued employee has an offer with a direct competitor, they are much more zealous in trying to retain them than if they went to a company with a different type of product.

4) In some cases, blatant hiring of more than one person from a direct competitor resorts in “retaliatory” behavior from that competitor. Companies are usually more territorial and aggressive in trying to retain.

5) You may end up constantly trying to “teach an old dog new tricks.” And we’re not talking age here. Fresh ideas come from people regardless of age or number of years of experience, and are often a matter of a person’s outlook, personality and a background that’s different from the company they are joining. By hiring an “industry insider,” you may find you have to unteach some bad habits.

Hiring someone from a product or service niche not directly competing with yours does have its downsides; you usually have a longer learning curve

for that new hire, with more time (and money) spent on training before they become productive. Also, there is always the chance that they don’t “take”—that the candidate from the design firm never makes the transition successfully to a manufacturer; for example. Or the person from a fluorescent fixture manufacturer has great difficulty transitioning to work for a key distributor he or she called on for years, due to differences in the way manufacturers and distributors often operate.

However, we find that the rewards for thinking creatively and outside of the box when interviewing people far outweigh the risks. And, as the lighting and electrical business continues its growth, maturity and evolution, bringing in fresh ideas, fresh outlooks and the very best candidates to our industry becomes even more essential.

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