

# Interviewing the Out-of-Work Candidate

BY PAUL POMPEO

We find ourselves today in a very unusual job market. The lighting industry is currently going through a business evolution, and the look of organizational charts across all segments will change significantly over the next two years. As a result, more candidates are on the market, but are they the best candidates? As more resumes come pouring in, hiring managers must ask themselves, is this “low-hanging fruit” the one I want to pick?

Some of our clients (especially in manufacturing) tell us they are leaning toward hiring people currently employed. Their concern is that employers have used the economic downturn to let go of “non-essential” and lesser-producing employees. This mindset is especially prevalent when hiring sales managers. The perception is that if a company has, say, five regional managers and lets one go, then the one laid-off was the weakest producer. Right or wrong, this perception can be a challenge to the out-of-work sales professional.

## FINDING A FIT

Here are a couple of suggestions than can help you move past pre-conceived perceptions about out-of-work candidates and determine whether they’re the right fit for your firm:

1. **When hiring an unemployed sales candidate, go in with both eyes open.** This point generally applies to candidates in the sales arena more than other disciplines. Engineers or manufacturing professionals can face layoffs simply because a division was shut down or a particular location was closed. Operations and engineering professionals are frequently laid off because their jobs can’t be performed from a remote location or home office. Similarly, professionals in the lighting design and A&E community have also been affected by layoffs. The sales arena—with few exceptions—is quite different. Employees who are proven, consistent revenue producers are often the safest during an economic downturn.

Let’s say you’re an HR manager with a specification fluorescent fixture manufacturer. You’ve just received the resume of someone who, on paper, seems like a great regional sales manager candidate. Here are some suggestions to make sure you’re getting a potentially strong performer:

**A)** Ask detailed questions during the interview about the reasons he was let go: How many other regional sales managers were laid off? What was the criteria for

those lay-offs (e.g., seniority, sales performance, salary level)?

**B)** Ask your candidate to document his actual sales performance for the prior year (as well as current year to date) and how he ranked in meeting sales goals versus his regional manager peers.

**C)** Review the reason(s) that she left her prior company/companies. You can often find a hint as to whether the candidate is a habitual weak or marginal performer. Remember the axiom about those who do not learn from mistakes being doomed to repeat them? In this case, as hiring or screening manager, you want to identify any pattern of weak or mediocre performance before repeating mistakes that your competitor may have made.

**D)** When conducting reference checks, ask detailed questions about why the candidate was let go from any previous company. Would the prior company hire that candidate again? A “no” response (or any response not clearly a “yes”) from a reference check often can be a word to the wise.

**E)** Watch for personality traits that may have caused problems—any inabilities to get along with other people on the team.

2. **Don’t lowball unemployed candidates.** While it’s true that a company can often snag an unemployed candidate at a modest increase from his most recent compensation or perhaps even with a lateral offer, you don’t want to effect a major cost savings at your potential new

employee's expense. The thinking goes something like this: "Well, he is out of work! He can accept our offer and go back to work, or he can pass on the offer and continue to stay home."

But this cost-savings strategy comes with a couple of pitfalls. First, if the candidate has an offer from another company, you can put your company in a position of losing out to the higher bidder. The second risk is that the candidate accepts your offer with mixed emotions. Having a candidate looking over her shoulder after accepting your offer—or using your company as a temporary landing spot while continuing her job search—is not a good omen for a long and happy tenure.

Well-thought-out interview questions and the proper due diligence can help employers determine if the low-hanging fruit that is the unemployed candidate is ripe—or just not right—for their company. After all, you want to make sure to hire the best person qualified, not just the best available candidate—and there's often a big difference.



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