

Tell me about yourself.

Successful retention of staff begins with the recruitment process; early identification of personality traits is vital for finding, and keeping, good staff.

"When Owen Firth was working as a financial controller for a fast-growing IT company, he kept making the same recruitment mistake: not allowing enough time. Now, as the managing director of finance industry recruitment specialists FinanceMark, he sees his clients doing exactly the same thing,

"Everyone recognizes that it's a high priority to find the right person, but they don't block out any time in their diary for it," says Firth, a former Chartered Accountant. "It's such a candidate-poor market now. Candidates have multiple choices, so a delay means you can lose the right person. You have to plan it in advance and commit the time".

The next step is to develop a target profile. Firth says the approach has to be about the type of person you are targeting and what sort of job they are probably in today, rather than 'I'm looking for a financial accountant'. For example, the target may be an assistant accountant in a big company who wants to step up to a higher role in a smaller company. "Too many clients say 'I want someone who has done it all before'," says Firth. "Why would that person come to you? Work out the skill/ competency gaps you're comfortable with, and present it as an opportunity for them."

Pre-Screening

Bob Olivier, a director of finance industry recruitment firm Olivier, says the initial job ad is crucial. "This market is less about screening people out and more about bringing people in," says Olivier, also a former Chartered Accountant. "You don't just write a shopping list of what you want, you have to make the role sound unique and interesting."

He also suggests that once the job ad responses have been culled, an initial telephone 'pre-screening' might reduce the face-to-face interviewee list, by weeding out those who are obviously not suitable within live minutes of talking to them.

Once you've sorted out a short-list of candidates to interview, preparation is the key. Nicole Gorton, a director of Robert Half Finance & Accounting, says this includes: reading the curriculum vitae, knowing in advance what questions to ask; and following a logical sequence. Also, make sure you have a professional environment in which to conduct the interview. (Olivier advised one rather drab insolvency office to put a vase of flowers in reception and paint the walls)

Face-to-Face

When the interview begins, Dominic Moore, the principal, executive finance, for Hamilton James & Bruce, says the most important thing is to try and relax the candidate. "Break the ice by asking for information on a more personal subject, such as sporting interests or hobbies," he suggests. Then set an agenda as soon as the formal interview starts - this will help you both to get as much out of the hour you spend together as possible."

As for what to ask, all the experts

Sample questions to identify specific traits

- > Can you provide an example of an unproductive team you've worked with, and your role in changing or shaping its direction? (Gordon Whyte, Michael Page International)
- > Can you tell me of a time when you had to deal with conflicting deadlines and how you coped? (Dominic Moore, Hamilton James Bruce)
- > Tell me about a specific situation when you had to deliver some unwelcome news. (Nicole Gorton, Robert Half Finance & Accounting)
- > Give me an example of when you've been faced with a moral dilemma in the workplace, and how you resolved it. (Owen Firth, FinanceMark)
- > Tell me about when you have had to display the highest level of honesty in your role. (Mike Ewart, Lloyd Morgan/Parker Bridge)
- > For a reference check: if you had the opportunity to rehire would you do so, and why? (Bob Olivier, Olivier)