Top Ten Candidate Sourcing Best Practices

I firmly believe that candidate identification is the most critical step in the talent acquisition / recruiting life cycle – you can't build a relationship with, receive a referral from, network with, or hire someone you haven't found in the first place.

From the very beginning of my recruiting career, I've leveraged technology for talent identification, and I've learned that searching databases, the Internet, and social media offers intrinsic advantages over other methods of candidate sourcing, and I've compiled a list of what I believe are the top 10 best practices for searching for candidates.

So whether you're searching your own proprietary databank, LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, Monster, your ATS/ CRM, or you're Googling for candidate leads on the Internet – following and integrating these search best practices into your candidate sourcing routine can dramatically increase your ability to more quickly find more of the right people.

In no particular order:

#1 Think Before You Search

"Give me 6 hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first 4 hours sharpening the axe." – Abraham Lincoln

That's become one of my favorite quotes to use when stressing the importance of thinking before throwing some keywords together and hitting "search."

Too many sourcers and recruiters are unknowingly picking up dull axes and begin taking swings. I'm not sure if you've ever tried chopping down a tree with a dull axe, but it's neither efficient nor effective, and requires considerably more effort than necessary. If you just take the time to think, develop some semblance of a search strategy, and experiment with various searches (sharpen your axe!) – you can get to more relevant results more quickly.

For many hiring profiles, you should spend **at least** 10 - 20 minutes thinking about and researching your search strategy, as well as experimenting with search strings and reviewing the results for relevance before you start using the results to begin making calls.

Here is how you can sharpen your axe before you take your first cut:

1. Analyze, interpret, and fully understand the job opening / position requirements

2. Adhering to the Cardinal Rule of Candidate Sourcing, take your understanding of the position and intelligently select titles, skills, technologies, companies, responsibilities, terms, etc. to include (*or purposefully exclude!*) in a query employing appropriate Boolean / Extended Boolean operators, query modifiers, and semantic search techniques

3. While reviewing the results of your initial searches to assess relevance, scan the results for additional and alternate relevant titles, search terms, phrases, and companies that you can incorporate into your next search

4. Based upon the observed relevance of and intel gained from each successive search, modify the search strings appropriately and run them again

5. Repeat steps 3 and 4 until an acceptably large volume of highly relevant results is achieved

You should always take time to analyze your search criteria to assess the possibility that your search terms may not find all qualified candidates, and in fact might actually be eliminating viable candidates. I have found that the more time I spend on the front-end of a search, the more relevant my results become, which in turn increases my productivity by enabling me to find more and better candidates more quickly. Imagine that!

Here are a couple of examples of applying the Cardinal Rule of Candidate Sourcing: #1 Searching for Java Developers with JMS, and #2 Searching for LMS Plateau professionals.

#2. Do Not Overanalyze Resumes

Chances are that the people you are trying to find and recruit are not professional resume writers. Whether they are software engineers, lawyers, physical therapists, project managers, or database administrators – they are NOT professional resume writers, nor do I think we should expect them to be.

Writing a great and 100% complete resume isn't easy. What IS easy to forget is some of your responsibilities and every little detail of your professional experience (applications, environments, etc.). Candidates may not think to express every last bit of their experience in their resume – and if you're looking specifically for one of those little bits and it's not there – it's all too easy to assume that the person who wrote the resume doesn't have the requisite experience you're looking for. Don't make assumptions about candidates from their resumes – give them the benefit of the doubt. Ever hear the phrase, "Don't judge a book by its cover?" Resumes are by nature imperfect and are poor representations of a person's experience and capabilities, so I suggest you apply what I call the "10 second rule:" Don't *read* resumes – scan them. If you can't absolutely disqualify / rule out a candidate based on reviewing their resume in 10 seconds, pick up the phone and call them.

You'll be pleasantly surprised. You'll call people you would not likely have called before, and you'll find out that some of those candidates actually DO have the skills and experience you need – it just wasn't obviously or explicitly expressed in their resume.

Always remember – you (and/or your clients) hire PEOPLE, not PAPER.

#3. Do Not Run Overly Generic / Basic Searches

If you run generic searches with perhaps 1 title and a couple of basic keywords – you'll be sure to get correspondingly generic and basic results. I've heard many a recruiter complain about getting "too many results." People making this mistake unknowingly increase the size of the Hidden Talent Pool of candidates they don't find.

Don't rely solely or heavily on title - based searches. Not all companies use the same titles for the same roles and responsibilities – so making this mistake contributes to you populating Hidden Talent Pools with every candidate that matches your hiring profile or job order but has a title that you didn't think of and include in your search. See best practice #1 above.

Don't rely solely on using skill / tech terms (e.g., Java, Oracle, Accounts Payable, SOX, etc.) when creating your Boolean search strings. Technical terms such as programming languages, operating systems, and databases will only give you results of people who mention those terms in their resumes. Mentioning buzz words does not imply any degree of responsibility or capability.

The most effective searches reach beyond skill / technology term matching and into the realm of semantic search by include responsibility terms (administer, configure, create, manage, reconcile, coordinate, design, etc.) and environmental terms (enterprise, host*, etc.) where applicable. This is the first step in moving beyond simple buzz-word bingo.

#4. See Each Resume as More than a Potential Match for the Position You're Working on

Any source of candidates you have access to can be leveraged in much the same way as LinkedIn can – every person is actually a conduit to a larger network of people. So even if a particular resume or social media profile you're reviewing doesn't appear to be an ideal match – they actually might be (see #3 above), and they may know someone who is.

If you find yourself scanning a search result that appears to be under - or over-qualified – remember to not make assumptions about candidates based on their resume / profile, and also be aware that people who are in fact too junior or too senior for your current needs might fit future needs. Additionally, people who are either too junior or too senior for a particular position might work with or know someone who is an exact match.

#5. Run Multiple Searches Across Multiple Sources

No matter how strong your sourcing skills are or how many times you've recruited for the same position, you should always run multiple searches. It's impossible for one Boolean search to find all qualified candidates.

It is also critical to leverage every resource you have available to you. You may be in love with LinkedIn, but the best candidates for that special position you're working on may be tucked away in your database / ATS, or on Twitter!

If you think you've exhausted a particular source of candidates – believing that you've found all of the available matches and cannot find any more – you're wrong. Invariably you've left behind Hidden Talent Pools of people who do match your positions, but you could not find them because your Boolean search strings and perhaps even your entire search strategy made it impossible to do so.

Being aware of this is a major step on the path towards sourcing enlightenment. See best practices #1 and #3.

#6. Search ALL Resumes

I'm aware that there are MANY users of resume databases (online or internal) who focus specifically on resumes posted / entered in the last 30 days, assuming these are the candidates to target because they are "on the market."

You do NOT know **anything** about a candidate until you establish contact with them. Just because their resume was posted yesterday, it does not mean they are "actively" seeking a new position. I've spoken to many people who happened to recently post their resume into my own database on a job board, and once I made contact, they explained they were just "checking to see what's out there." Doesn't sound too "active" to me!

Also, just because a resume is 3 - 6+ months old – you have NO idea what their job search status is. You cannot safely assume they are not looking & are "off the market."

They could be #1. Still passively looking, having not found the right match yet, #2. Available because they are finishing up a contract position they took 3-6 months ago, #3. In a new position, but extremely unhappy because it's nothing like they were led to believe it would be, #4. In a new position, but their a) boss is leaving, b) position is in jeopardy due to layoffs, c) division is being acquired, etc. – you get the drift.

Ultimately, you should want to find the **BEST** candidates possible, regardless of silly job search status labels (active, passive, blech!). Everyone is a candidate!

Never limit yourself to only searching resumes posted in the last 30 days – some of the best passive and active candidates have resumes 31 to 365 + days "old."

And most people don't call them.

#7 Don't be a Sourcing Snob

Despite popular opinion to the contrary, job board resume databases are not filled with desperate, low quality candidates. In fact, it's statistically impossible. There are plenty of "A" candidates available in each and every job board resume database – major or niche.

If your experience suggests otherwise, perhaps it's your searches or your search strategy. If you go fishing in the ocean and don't catch the particular species of fish you were hoping to, would you be able to assume that there were no fish of that type in the ocean that day? Of course not. Just because YOU didn't catch the fish you were looking for, it doesn't mean they weren't there to be caught.

And if you're the type who believes that the job board resume databases are filled with "active" candidates, you might be surprised to know that approximately 75% of all resumes in the major job boards resume databases are dated over 30 days old. Some are 2 - 4+ years old. Are they still "active" candidates? Do you think anyone's calling them?

Don't be a sourcing snob. As I pointed out in best practice #6 – your goal should be to find the **BEST** possible candidates, regardless of what "side of the tracks" they live on.

#8. Don't Submit the First 2 -3 Candidates You Find/Speak With

Sound crazy? I can hear someone asking, "Why shouldn't I submit the first candidates I find that fit the requirements?"

Well, ask yourself this – what's the statistical probability that the first 2 people you find and speak to magically happen to be the **BEST** candidates you can possibly find? Or the most closeable and controllable?

Recruiting candidates should not be conducted on a FIFO basis, but on a BIFO (Best In, First Out) basis. Find and speak to 10 - 15 candidates and then submit your **BEST**.

Talent selection based on FIFO methods is like a single person walking into a bar and leaving with the first person that speaks to them. There is no "selection."

You saw it here first. Think about it.

#9. Seek to Continually Improve Your Candidate Sourcing Skills

As a sourcing / recruiting professional, one of your goals should be to get better at what you do on a daily basis. Not just meeting your objectives and KPI's – but actually improving your sourcing and recruiting skills and ability.

Geoff Colvin cuts to the root of the matter, pointing out that "Most fundamentally, what we generally do at work is directly opposed to the first principle (of deliberate practice): It isn't designed by anyone to make us better at anything. Usually it isn't designed at all: We are just given an objective that's necessary to meeting the employer's goals and then expected to get on with it." Ouch – that hurts Geoff…but you're right on the money!

As a sourcer / recruiter, you can perform deliberate practice, which is specifically designed to improve performance by getting you out of your comfort zone and continually stretching you just beyond your current ability. Ever hear the cliche of "if you're not getting better, you're getting worse?"

Unfortunately, when most people "practice" on the job, they are just doing what they've always done, going through the same old motions – which does nothing to **improve** performance. Unlike many professional athletes, most business professionals (including sourcers and recruiters) do not go to work every day specifically trying to get better at what they do. It's something many people may talk about, but very few people actually do.

Be one of those few.

#10. Spend 80% of Your Sourcing Time Using High-Yield Sources

Why spend a lot of time trying to squeeze blood from a stone? I feel there are many sourcers and recruiters spending too much time focusing on intrinsically low-yield candidate sources.

For example – some people spend countless hours searching the Internet for candidate leads at the expense of not heavily / effectively leveraging their internal resume database / ATS. While you can certainly find great people on the Internet, the Internet is not indexed specifically to enable sourcing and requires many tricks and tweaks to yield relevant results.

If you have access to an ATS or internal resume database – it's specifically designed to store and retrieve resumes, and probably has more local and more qualified candidates than the Internet, and might actually have a better search interface enabling more precise searching to find more of the right people more quickly.

To top it off, your ATS / CRM is filled with people that have already expressed interest in your company (at some point in time) and with candidates that you or other sourcers / recruiters found elsewhere and entered in! And when it comes to finding candidates on the Internet vs. the job board resume databases, see these 2 articles for an eye-opening apples-to-apples comparison of Monster vs. Google search results, see [Monster vs. Google Round 1](#) and [Round 2](#). Facts are facts, folks.

High yield sources of candidates are [#1 Highly Searchable, and #2 Deep on candidate data](#). Of the social networking sites out there, LinkedIn is the most searchable and has the deepest candidate data, and [you don't need more than a free account to leverage it like a rock star](#). Also – if you have access to any of the major job boards – they have highly effective search capability, actually have a larger percentage of "passive" job seekers than "active" and they have some fantastic candidates – see best practices #6 and #7.

Final Thoughts

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but I feel it represents some of the highest impact candidate sourcing best practices. If you have a candidate sourcing best practice to add to the list - please let me know.

Thanks and happy hunting!