

## Hiring & Firing: The Art of Wooing

The secret to attracting A players.

by Geoff Smart

*Web exclusive*

One of the toughest jobs for any executive today is wooing star talent. I hear this all the time from my clients. Many come from large companies with very deep pockets, so the major obstacle is not lack of resources. They just haven't mastered the art of wooing.

Consider the senior managers of a large public firm that recently asked me for advice on how to recruit better people. When I asked what the company did to attract A players, the executives appeared confused. "Well, HR sends them their offer letter, and we wait to hear back," one of them finally told me. Wait to hear back! That's not good enough.

Whether they work at large or small companies, the managers who attract the best people have mastered two basic skills: listening closely to potential hires and pushing their hot buttons. And passively sending out an offer letter won't allow you to accomplish those goals.

To outdistance the competition in the hiring process, it's important to structure your job interviews so you can find out why someone is considering joining your company. Ask them what they have liked about ex-bosses and former employers. And find out what their long-term career aspirations are.

Make someone an offer the moment you know she is an A player. If she doesn't accept the offer initially, call or e-mail her every 48 hours until she says yes. Even if she declines, keep calling and contacting her. At some point, she may accept your offer. I remember a case when a client heard no five times before getting a yes. If a candidate asks for more information, invite her to lunch or dinner or give her a tour of your company.

It's only natural to think about how a potential hire's services will benefit you. But when you are trying to attract a star applicant to your team, you should pay attention to his hot buttons. Talk about the five or six things that rev him up about the idea of working for you — whether it's the promise of more autonomy or the opportunity to take on high-visibility assignments. If he uses certain buzzwords to describe those things, you should, too.

When I joined the board of [Xolia.com](http://Xolia.com), a software startup, our first priority was to persuade Jim Fischer, then the No. 2 person at [Accenture](http://Accenture) (which was known until recently as Andersen Consulting), to become the firm's CEO. During our interviews with Fischer, we identified the 30 things that were most important to him. When he

expressed initial reservations about coming on board, we had Xolia's founders phone him every 48 hours. The main reasons the dot-com job was appealing to Fischer were: a chance to be his own boss, the intellectual stimulation of Xolia's new business model, less travel, the chance to make a massive contribution to the company, and the opportunity to have fun doing something that had not been done before. During every phone call or e-mail we had with this superstar, the young founders and I mentioned as many of these 30 hot buttons as possible. I attribute his decision to join the company to this approach.

Sometimes, if you want to attract A-list talent, you have to be even more aggressive. One A player's family was not sure they wanted to live in Austin, Texas. So, the CEO's assistant took unbelievable initiative and went out and shot a video of the neighborhood and interviewed people about what it is like to live there. She overnighted it to the candidate along with a huge care package of Tex-Mex food and spirits. In another case, an A player's wife was an actress who did not want to move from New York. The hiring manager pulled some strings to connect her with local film production companies. I sent my leading candidate for executive assistant about 40 "congratulations" balloons from [1-800 Flowers®](#) with her offer letter attached. Her two-year old loved the balloons and asked her mommy why she was so special.

The point is that A players are very special. So invest the extra four hours and couple of hundred bucks and do a world-class job wooing the top talent your firm deserves.

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