




Where to find tech talent,
beyond the obvious

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 4 Find technical talent
- 5 Beyond the networks: Using advanced search techniques
- 7 Leverage your current technical team
- 8 Writing the right job description
- 10 Go where they are
- 11 Network with people who are tapped into the talent pool
- 12 Create your own pull strategy
- 14 Create your own networking environments
- 15 Go forth and hire
- 16 About the author



Where to find tech talent, beyond the obvious

Finding technical talent can be a daunting and challenging task. It used to be that you could find it in obvious places, but the growing demand for these candidates at almost any skill level has made it feel like there is a shortage. And if you do manage to find qualified people, they're often already engaged and happy where they are.

I've used various resources to gather the ideas, strategies and tactics presented here, including learnings from some of the top recruiting experts in the field, but the caveat is this: No method is foolproof.

The culture or size of your company can have an impact on your results, as can the area you are recruiting in and types of projects you are recruiting for. Sheltered in-house IT projects might not have the same attraction as highly visible products, newfangled apps or change-the-world systems.

Also, how your company is perceived among prospective employees, as well as the reputation of your managers and owners, could mean that you have to be a lot more tactful or aggressive as you work on wooing talent. Let's explore what this might mean for you.

Finding technical talent

Where do you find technical talent? This is like asking, “Where’s the best fishing hole?” While most people wouldn’t compare a great programmer to a great trout, the idea of going where the talent hangs out is relevant. Even the correlation between using the right bait, fishing at the right time and landing the big one have meaning in this analogy, but let’s stay focused on the people.

If you want to find talent, you either need to understand where these people naturally congregate, or you need to figure out how to get them to gather where you want them. An easy assumption might be social networks, but don’t stop there. Tap into the knowledge and experience of recruiters to learn where they find their talent.

Steve Levy, a recruiter and HR consultant based out of New York City, wrote a parody to the popular “Twas the Night Before Christmas” titled, “A Recruiter’s Night Before Christmas,” where he shares a number of places, tips and techniques to find technical talent. He starts out saying that the recruiter was “puzzling over which webpage to mine,” and quips that, as a recruiter, “he was better than any of the CIA’s spies.” As his parody unfolds, it’s clear that he thinks finding the right person to fill your open position is not necessarily as simple as letting people know about it. You need to search and research, discover and uncover. This takes work and creativity.

The default place to search for talent is probably LinkedIn. However, the experienced recruiter knows there are dozens of other places to find it as well. While LinkedIn is a good starting point, and might be the only place you need to go, it’s so popular that competition to find and attract talent within the network is fierce. Think about who is hanging out where. For example, artists are on DeviantArt.com, crafters are on Pinterest and Etsy, European professionals are on Xing.com, musicians are on MySpace, and you can probably find a network for every niche out there. So where are database administrators and hardcore programmers? There’s no single answer to that question. And even if there were, today’s answer might change in a few months.

In Levy’s parody he talks about a number of places, including Github, Snipst, Gerrit, Ohloh and SourceForge. Have you heard of any of these resources? Let’s look at these sites to get a better idea of why he included them as potential pools of talent. As you look at each brief description, or tagline, ask yourself:

what can you do to help propel your students stand out in a competitive field? It all comes from helping them put their best foot forward through excellent demo reels and portfolio work - plus coaching them through the hiring process.

WHAT DO THEY HAVE IN COMMON?	
SITE	DESCRIPTION
Github.com	Build software better, together.
Snip1t.net	The publishing platform for coders.
Gerrit	Web based code review and project management for Git based projects.
Ohloh.net	Free, public directory of free and open source software.
Sourceforge.net	An Open Source community resource dedicated to helping open source projects be as successful as possible that thrive(s) on community collaboration
Did you catch them?	Here are the key words: together, review, projects, directory, community and collaboration.

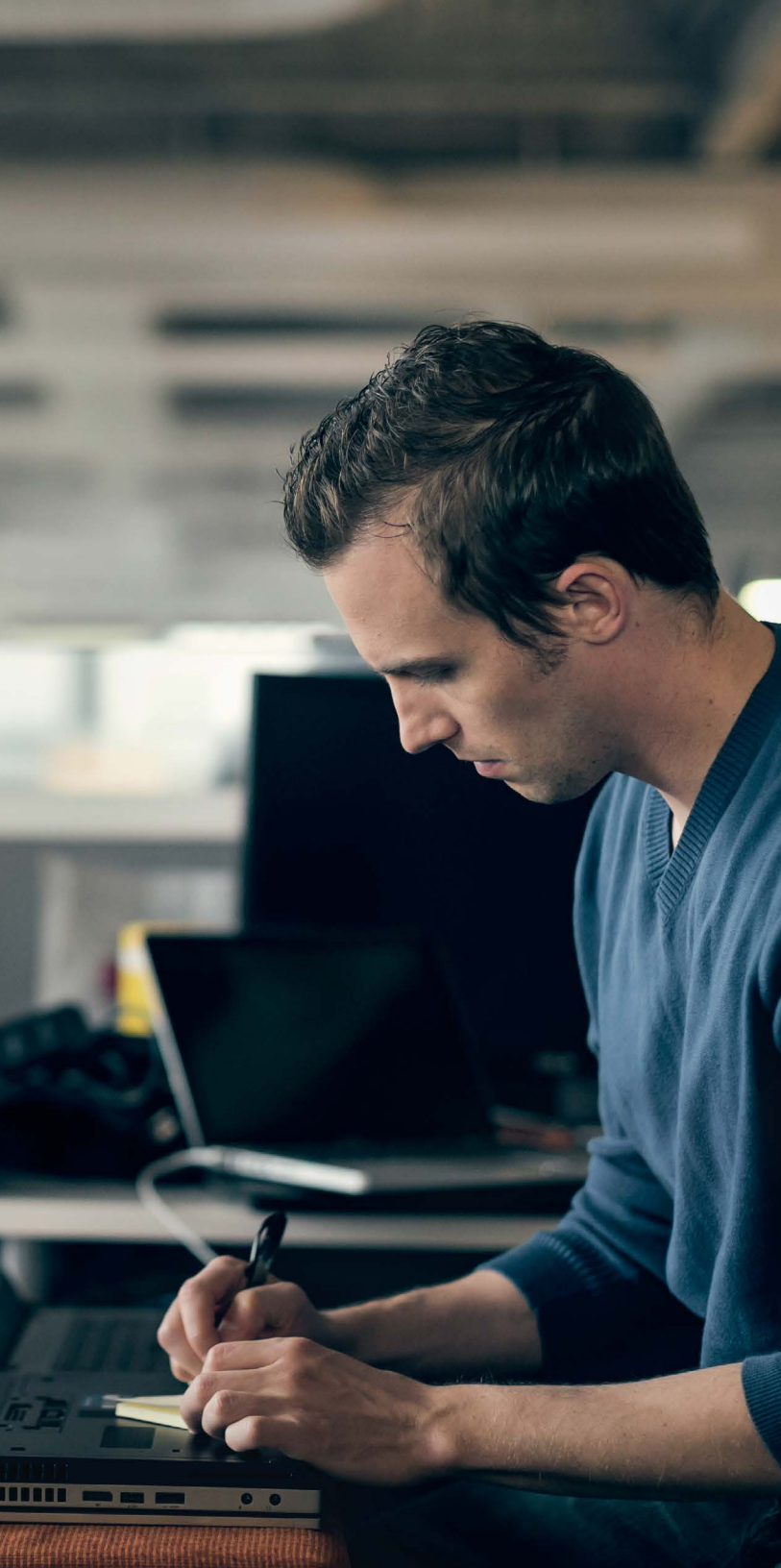
Beyond the networks: Using advanced search techniques

In addition to social networks and online communities, Levy's poem alludes to finding organizational directories from a Google search. For example, including the phrase ext:xls returns results that have "xls" as an extension. This means the search results will contain Excel spreadsheets instead of a typical list of websites. The amount of data that you can find in a spreadsheet (or other document) posted online that might not normally come up in search results is fascinating.

I'm reminded of a time when I searched high and low for contact information for a prospect I wanted to reach out to. I found the person's LinkedIn profile, Twitter and

Facebook pages, company bio page and more. But nowhere could I find a direct phone number or email address. Finally, through using this method of searching for documents, I found a link to a Powerpoint file the person had used in a presentation at a conference. In the last slide was her direct phone number and email address.

To find people by using your favorite search engine, learn the art of advanced search techniques. Glen Cathey, a recruiter and sourcing expert, authors the popular blog Boolean Black Belt. Cathey's posts show you how to use a search engine to do what is referred to as "LinkedIn x-ray searching," which means you use a tool like Google to get better, more or different results and information than you might get using LinkedIn's search.



Cathey uses tricks that are new to many, such as `site: linkedin.com`, which will restrict the search to only pages on LinkedIn.com. This is a great trick to use on your favorite blog to locate an old post that the blog's search engine can't find. He also teaches about punctuation and words that can help you get better search results. For example, these two searches are NOT the same

- `Java web programmer seattle`
- `"Java programmer" +seattle -web`

The first example is like saying `java OR web OR programmer OR seattle`, but not `java AND web AND programmer AND seattle`. The second example groups "java" with "programmer" and forces results to include Seattle (like: `AND seattle`) and exclude web (like: `NOT web`).

Instead of doing basic searches, learn how to manipulate the search engines to really narrow down the results to get closer to what you want. For more on this, visit Cathey's blog, or search for "google search tips" or "search operators."



Leverage your current technical team

The tactics above are what I would consider basic, easy and common recruiting ideas. It's what everyone does, and what anyone can do. The return on the time invested can be immediate. However, it isn't necessarily the best way to recruit. Robert Merrill, a senior technical recruiter who blogs at ConnectedWell.com, shared what can be considered the best long-term answer to "Where do I find technical talent?"



In an interview, Merrill didn't bring up searching on any of the sites listed above (although he did say that Stack Overflow is a great resource to find people). Merrill has recruited technical talent for many years, in different capacities. He has worked for a technical staffing and recruiting firm and lately has worked for two large and popular high tech companies. He says:



"It's going to sound boring, but the answer over and over again is that if your current technical people are happy, and you give them an incentive to bring in their friends, that is where you are always going to find the best talent."

I'm not sure if that sounds boring as much as it sounds hard. Keeping your team happy and providing such an incentive system will mean your company culture will have to be aligned with your staffing goals. Instead of spending an hour online doing some searches, we're talking about getting executives and managers involved, and creating the right environment where culture and incentives are aligned.

Merrill says that if you like your job, and you like your buddy, it's natural to want to bring him or her in. If your friend works with or by you, you can hang out more, commute together, work on fun stuff together, and maybe your workload will be lightened. Of course, this will only work if your friend has the skills needed.

Executives and managers have to help the team refer their contacts to your company. Merrill says, "You have to talk to your people. If your people aren't giving you referrals it's because they are arrogant, or they don't understand the requirements of their job and can't communicate it to their friend. They have to understand the job before they refer people."

Writing the right job description

You can find a lot of opinions regarding job descriptions. The experts and pundits are pleading with those who write job descriptions to make them better. If you can't write one that makes sense, or that accurately describes the role, how can you expect your team to communicate it to their friends?

Levy has another blog post that touches on this subject titled "Pick Me...Pick Me!" He says:

*"Boring, generic titles that are backed up with equally boring, generic job descriptions do little to pique the curiosity of game changers: 'Oh, a job responsibility of a software developer is to code? I didn't know that...'
With these approaches you're trying to sell the job based upon salary to anyone with a pulse rather than matching the needs of the role, the group and the company with the career needs of a person."*

Putting an accurate description together must be harder than you think, considering how many of them are so poorly written. But go through the exercise to really define the job well so it's appropriately understood by people who find it. When you have the

right message, you empower your team to represent you better and more frequently.

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That assumes that you really have created a great place to work. Merrill says "The biggest reason people don't refer their friends is that they don't like their job." This is a bigger issue than finding talent, although it does play into keeping talent. Create the right environment and culture, make it easy for your team to refer people, and you might have a neverending source of top talent ready to tap into.

Merrill says it's important to make the staffing needs a constant part of the conversation in your technical teams:

"The best managers I've seen dedicate time in their staff meetings to talk about staffing. They talk about the needs of the team, and what skills they are looking for. Make this a regular part of your team meetings. Talk about how many interviews are going on and what you are looking for."

TIPS FOR WRITING GOOD JOB DESCRIPTIONS:

- Don't hide relevant information. Job seekers are weary of job postings that don't have a company name or any salary information.
- Make sure the specs are real. It's discouraging for an expert to read a requirement for 10 years experience in a programming language that has only been around for three years.
- Write it so it doesn't look like every other job description.
- Include some company culture, even a problem to solve, in the description.
- Let candidates know you are really interested in great talent.

He adds that including your technical talent in the interview process is as important. "Often times," he says, "people won't bring in a friend until they are in the interview process (as an interviewer), and they think 'wow, I know 10 people that are better than this person!'" Then they become comfortable bringing their friends in.

Hopefully you've created an environment your team enjoys, and one they'd want to invite their friends to join. You might need to coach your managers on how, when, and how often to let their team know about staffing needs. Merrill says this "also requires you and your managers to get realistic about whether your team likes their job or not."

But it's worth it. During the course of the interview, Merrill made it clear that "the number one best return is getting referrals."

Go where they are

If referrals aren't working as well as you had hoped, Merrill suggests you ask "where does the talent you want to attract hang out?" He suggests asking your team where they spend time, either online or offline. Ask them, "when you have a problem, who do you call?" or, "what email list do you go to?" Your team will know what resources are current and helpful.

The suggestion of learning where these people hang out is different than having a list of networks that you can search through, as suggested earlier. This next level is to be where they are, and be one with them. Perhaps you sponsor their list, network, or event. Or maybe you're a regular contributor, or people on your team are regular participants in the discussions.

As I've counseled networkers, including job seekers and entrepreneurs, I tell them that they need to find

networks, groups and environments that are relevant to them and be one with the crowd there. They are not there as a vendor or lurker; they're there to develop real relationships. As they participate—whether they start a new thread, comment on someone else's thread, or volunteer to speak to the group they become a peer and colleague with the others. This is exactly what you want. As you provide value to the group, you become trusted, and with trust you can have conversations that outsiders and vendors cannot.



“There is, however, a novel way to get potential candidates to call you. It’s called the ‘in-direct approach,’ where media is used to create such an external buzz about a company that candidates eagerly line up to be interviewed!”

Network with people who are tapped into the talent pool

“Never Eat Alone,” best-selling author Keith Ferrazzi talks about networking with “power connectors.” Power connectors are people who know a lot of people, and can (and do) make introductions among those in their network. They might not know everyone in their network because they have met them in person, but by virtue of who they are, or what they do, they can facilitate introductions. Ferrazzi says certain jobs can make someone a power connector, for example, a realtor, accountant or lawyer. These are professions where you spend a lot of time meeting new people regularly.

Merrill suggests another power connector to network with: professors in a programming (or systems) program. He says, “Develop a good relationship with college professors who teach in the area you are looking for talent, and then ask them who their best students are or were.” He admits this is a long-term approach, and can give you great results, but it might just be easier to find someone right now through other means already mentioned.

Merrill says this tactic “is more like growing corn rather than killing a deer. The benefit to a hiring manager is that they are in it for the long-term, and have a vested interest in developing long-term.” You have to weigh the benefit of going for a quick solution, like looking on LinkedIn, versus this long-term approach, but if you are looking for long-term benefit and results, start developing these relationships right now.

He says, “This is more challenging if you are looking for senior people, but if you develop relationships with masters or PhD professors, you might find some great senior talent.” He suggests asking who their favorite students were, which should get you names of competent people who have left school and have some practical experience.

Instead of purchasing advertising, Perry and Gander developed campaigns which got media coverage, and resulted in “right stuff” candidates calling him.



Develop a lasting relationship with professors by coming in as a guest speaker to their classes. Whether you get interest from the students or not, the key relationship you want to develop is with the professor, who can be one of your power connectors for many years.

Create your own pull strategy

Dave Perry is a recruiter in Canada and author of the popular book “Guerrilla Marketing for Job Hunters.” He is also an advocate for job seekers who, many times, find themselves perplexed by the unwritten rules of the job search. They might be as perplexed as the manager who has to navigate his or her first hire! In a paper Perry wrote titled, “When the Best Candidates Call YOU,” he writes:

“There is, however, a novel way to get potential candidates to call you. It’s called the ‘in-direct approach,’ where media is used to create such an external buzz about a company that candidates eagerly line up to be interviewed!”

I have never been in a capacity where I thought that using traditional media would be feasible, but the way Perry describes it, it’s definitely within reach. His whole premise for this approach is figuring out “how can you make the right stuff knock on your door, and ask to be interviewed for a job?” Perry says:

“The battlefield strategist Liddell Hart summed it up years ago, when he coined the term ‘the indirect approach.’ It means you don’t keep banging head-first into the problem – that just makes it worse.

Attacking the trenches head-on in the First World War is a tragic example. Instead, you do something surprising – something that maneuvers around the blockage. In the Second World War, the Germans attacking through the supposedly impassible Ardennes forest, sweeping around behind the French army, is an indirect approach.”

Perry claims he has “had great success in generating attention-getting recruiting campaigns through the media.” His secret weapon, he says, is Barry Gander, an Ottawa-based media consultant who specializes in media launches. Have you ever thought of using a media consultant to help you get air time? Instead of purchasing advertising, Perry and Gander developed campaigns which got media coverage, and resulted in “right stuff” candidates calling him.

His examples include DY4 Systems, whose staffing problem was their image: “an unexciting place to work, especially in the environment of pre-IPO enterprises.” Not all tech jobs or companies sound thrilling, but are they any less fulfilling? Maybe there are great opportunities at unexciting places. Perry writes:

“The solution [was to] find a media-worthy event that tied the company’s name to the ‘entrepreneur’ concept, so candidates would associate DY4 with ‘energy.’ Barry’s answer was to invent the ‘Technov8 Awards Program,’ where DY4 sponsored a contest for the creation of the best innovative technology. It got sweeping media coverage, and the DY4 phones began to ring, as the right stuff linked DY4 with a place where innovation is rewarded!

What a great example of shifting perception, or a company’s brand, by doing something newsworthy! Perry’s next example sounds a bit more extravagant

(and expensive), but it also got significant media coverage. He writes:

“Espial had the opposite problem: It is a small, relatively unknown entrepreneurial company, with no track record of media coverage. The answer was to take an inventive con-test for software developers to new heights – literally! The reward for the best software application was a ride to the edge of space in a Russian Foxbat fighter plane! The idea caught the media’s imagination in Barry’s press drive, and gained North American-wide coverage in prestigious new-economy publications like Wired magazine.”

To pull off this kind of coverage, Perry says you must understand your market, know what would appeal to your “right stuff” prospects and be sincere. He cautions, “An indirect approach that is badly focused will backfire.”



Create your own networking environments

We've talked about finding environments, including online networking sites and offline networking groups where your potential hire might be. What about creating your own environment? It could be company or product specific, but it might be something completely different. For example, if you have a team of programmers who are passionate about a certain language or methodology, can you allow them to create a forum where they can explore their passion, and allow people outside of your company to join in? This might enhance the appeal you are trying to nurture in your company culture.

It's easy to create forums, bulletin boards, email discussion forums, or even social networks to facilitate a community. For instance, you can even create a new LinkedIn group and start the conversation there. The benefit of using LinkedIn is that the group

technology already exists, and there are hundreds of millions of potential participants. It's also quick and easy to set up. Alternatively, if you have your own platform, hosted on your own server, you will have more control over the technology and direction of development to grow your community.

Indeed, you may find the hardest part of creating your own environment is getting others to join. Many a group admin has been faced with the perplexing challenges of getting more members and fostering activity and discussion. If you can find solutions to these two challenges, your own group or community could become a great source of technical talent for years to come. Remember the question Merrill asks: "When you have problems, what email list do you go to for help?" What if you owned the email list?

“There is, however, a novel way to get potential candidates to call you. It’s called the ‘in-direct approach,’ where media is used to create such an external buzz about a company that candidates eagerly line up to be interviewed!”

Go forth and hire

Hiring technical talent can be expensive, there are real costs associated with losing employees as well as finding replacements. The cost of finding a new hire can be 1.5 to 3 times their salary. This could be a real deterrent for many budget-conscience companies to staff their organizations appropriately, but consider this excerpt from a Houston Chronicle article:

“It may cost as much as \$150,000 to replace an information technology employee who earns a salary of \$60,000 a year, according to James Del Monte of JDA Professional Services, Inc., one of Houston’s leading IT staffing firms. Much of the expense is in indirect costs such as loss of training, loss of institutional knowledge, productivity losses, consulting fees and overtime expense.”

It doesn’t have to cost \$150,000 or a big multiple of anyone’s salary to find talent. Aside from where you are looking, you might reconsider what you are looking for. Just as job seekers make the perpetual mistake of always looking for a job opening, instead of referrals who can help them network into a target company, you might consider looking for talented technicians who could introduce you to the person you would eventually hire.

To this end, Levy shares an analogy comparing the hiring he does as a recruiter to an imaginary discussion between two fiancés the day before their wedding. The groom-to-be doesn’t do an assessment of his fiancé and say, “You know, you are an eight out of 10, and I know I’m better than that. I’ve decided I’m going to hold off and look for a 10 out of 10. The wedding is off.” Levy said the employment relationship has similarities to a marriage, and too often employers are so afraid of missing the “10” candidate that they pass over the eights and nines, who are really quite capable and would do the job just fine.

Maybe it makes sense for you to wait for months or years for the 10 to come along (if the 10 even exists), and leave the position unfilled, but if an eight or nine will do, and if they can grow into a nine or a 10, consider reevaluating your standards. I don’t think Levy is suggesting you lower your standards and hire people who will be high-maintenance or require too much training. But his story is important for those who are afraid to make a hiring mistake.

As you go forth and find your next team members, please help them feel like it’s a war for talent and not a war on talent. Create a company culture where it’s safe and encouraged to help with staffing needs, and be one with your target audience so that when you need to tap into the pool, you get a positive reception.



Jason Alba

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Jason Alba is the CEO and creator of JibberJobber.com, a web-based system to organize and manage a job search (and the networking you do between job searches). Jason is a certified Personal Branding Strategist and popular blogger and speaker about career management and social tools for professionals. Jason wrote *I'm on LinkedIn - Now What???*, one of the first books on using LinkedIn. He also wrote *I'm on Facebook - Now What???* and is finishing two more books (*Eight Lunches*, for entrepreneurs and a book on social media etiquette). Jason maintains several blogs including JibberJobber.com/blog, and contributes to the AOL Jobs blog. In his spare time he created the *LinkedIn for Job Seekers DVD*. Jason has an IT and business background and earned a Computer Information Systems degree and an MBA.



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