SEO
HIRING
BLUEPRINT

7 STEPS TO HIRING AN INSANELY GREAT SEO

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INTRODUCTION

Stop hiring sub-par SEOs! If you aren't weeding out the beginners and fakes at the interview stage you are jeopardizing the success of your business. Make sure you get the best SEO before your competition hires them instead!

In this whitepaper I'll give you the benefits of my decades of experience and the hundreds of SEO interviews I've conducted to refine and perfect the SEO hiring process.

If you've ever made a bad hire, you'll know the cost in both money and time can be exorbitant.

The U.S. Department of Labor estimates the cost of a bad hire to be in excess of 30% of the person's annual salary. You have to factor in not only the total compensation, but also hiring costs, eventual severance pay, and other factors like legal fees.

And for such a critical role as an SEO, the stakes run even higher. A careless SEO mistake or misstep can result in a Google penalty, and that can take many months to recover from — assuming a full recovery is even possible. This can cost thousands or even millions of $ in lost revenue!

Have you ever been rattled by the fact that you're hiring an expensive expert and you have little way of testing their actual expertise? At what point does a great interview answer translate into a great investment in an employee?

It's a problem employers have even with positions they have mastered and understand. When you throw in SEO — a complex topic that the hiring manager probably has little experience with — it becomes terribly difficult.

Whether or not you've hired an SEO employee, contractor, or agency before, a more optimized process for recruiting, selecting, and onboarding SEO practitioners will benefit you greatly.

I just so happen to have such a process for you!

1. GET THE GARDEN TO WEED ITSELF

Former Van Halen front man David Lee Roth's "no brown M&M's clause" has become famous throughout music history as a subtle but genius test of an employee's attention to detail. Simply, he had a clause buried deep within his contract that obligated promoters to provide a bowl of M&M's backstage with all of the brown M&M's removed. Many thought this was nothing more than rockstar prima donna attitude.

However, Roth had a secret motive. He knew that if he went on into the dressing room and there were brown M&M's in the bowl, there was a serious chance that the promoter did not read the whole contract, and thus probably did not read all of the lighting clauses — at the time, Van Halen had one of the most complicated lighting setups of any live show in the country. This would prompt him to do an additional safety check. A lot of the time, he found serious setup problems.

The job posting is your opportunity for you to let the garden to weed itself. As Roth did, you can set up deliberate hurdles for your applicants to jump over; if they do not accomplish them, it is an immediate red flag, and you can separate good candidates from bad, without even reading their resume.

Just as it is for David Lee Roth's promoter, attention to detail is incredibly important in SEO. However, instead of a light falling, your company's Google traffic could be decimated.

Delegate to an assistant or direct report the job of reviewing the applications. He or she should scour over those applications not for content, but first for typos and grammatical errors. Lack of attention to detail in the application process portends even greater lack of attention to detail in the job itself.

An extra handy tip is to include a problem to solve or essay question to answer in the job posting. A riddle is one of my favorites because it demonstrates problem-solving skills and competence.

However, you should definitely make sure it is one that isn't easily found in Google; you want to measure logic, not skill in copying others' answers. Think SAT or ACT style questions.

And what if they don't include it in their application? Then scrap the applicant. Failing to comply with your request shows poor attention to detail and blatant disregard for following your explicit instructions. If an applicant isn't willing to put in a little extra effort on their application, are they really serious about wanting the job and passionate about working for your company? Sure, I receive fewer applications this way, but the signal-to-noise raise is way higher. You'll get a smaller pool of better candidates.

2. REVIEW THEIR SOCIAL MEDIA PROFILES

I've found this to be a great and quick indicator of credibility. However, you can't just casually browse at their social media profiles, you need to dig deep. Look back at least a year in their history. They may be putting up a good front now, but what about a year or two ago when they weren't actively job hunting?

Ask yourself some of these questions when reviewing their profiles:

Are they connected and active with other SEOs?

Do they ask and answer SEO questions?

What kind of content do they share?

Have they ever publicly criticized or bashed their employers or clients?

Is there evidence they participate in SEO conferences, Meetups, discussion groups?

How is their spelling and grammar in their social media posts?

Do they participate in athletic events or donate time to volunteering?

Are there "personality flags" such as anti-social behavior or mood swings?

Is there racist, sexist, or other prejudiced content in their profiles?

Is ther evidence of excessive drinking or illegal drug use?

Are there other red flags that the candidate is not a good cultural fit with your team?

You do have to be careful about basing hiring decisions on viewing social media profiles however. Check with your HR professional as to the legality and your own company practices regarding viewing social media profiles in the hiring process. In many areas you must disregard much of the information you see on social media that should not affect the hiring process such as the person's age, disability, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, or religious affiliation. Having said that, over half of hiring managers do check social media profiles during the recruiting process!

3. USE A/B TESTING FOR YOUR JOB POSTINGS
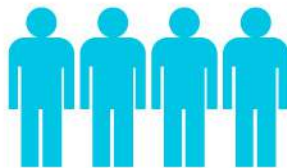
If you're a marketer, you likely know A/B split testing. You love it. You're a master of it. When you think about it, job postings are remarkably similar to PPC ads — optimize who you are attracting with various copy and image changes.

So why not run some tests on your job posting and watch the resulting kind of applicants you receive?

Try including the salary range then not including it. Test the job title/headline especially. I found in my testing, for example, that the term "geeky" in the title attracted much more qualified candidates than the term "wicked smart."

Test different ad outlets too. Does LinkedIn produce better candidates than Monster.com? Does Craigslist work for you compared to SEMPO?

4. USE TRICK QUESTIONS IN THE FIRST INTERVIEW

Trick questions aren't posed in an effort to trick the good candidate. They are instead designed to trick the person feigning up-to-date knowledge about good SEO. Here are a few great examples:

"What's your process for optimizing meta keywords?"

The only answer should be: Why do you ask? Meta keywords have no value to Google and never have been of value. Google went on record to say this on its Google Webmaster Central blog back in 2009.

"What's a good keyword density to aim for?"

Short answer is that keyword density is irrelevant. Keyword density is a worthless metric and a total red herring. The only time one might consider caring about keyword density is for edge cases — like when there are an insanely large number of occurrences (i.e., keyword stuffing) or when there are no occurrences at all. Bonus points if the candidate talks about how Google now understands much more what a page is actually about and ranks it based on that rather than the instances of exact keywords (the Google Hummingbird update).

"How much will meta descriptions help my rankings?"

Absolutely zero. If the candidate mentions their value in influencing what's displayed in the snippets of your Google listings, that is fine, but it doesn't answer the question. The only answer is zero. And thus, working on meta descriptions is a second order activity that is of lesser importance compared to optimizing title tags.

"What's the difference between Panda and Penguin?"

Google's Panda algorithm is about "thin" or low-quality content; Google Penguin is about low-quality links. If the candidate doesn't answer the question succinctly like this, simply probe some more. Ask a more specific question like, "And which one deals with links?"

5. ASK SPECIFIC QUESTIONS THAT CAN PROVE EXPERTISE

One of my go-to questions to ask is about their favorite SEO tools. If they don't know any of the primary metrics of their supposedly favorite tools (e.g., Page Authority, Domain Authority, mozRank and mozTrust for Moz's Open Site Explorer), they are not a real SEO. They may be able to spout off theoretical best practices, but SEO is also about "boots on the ground" — measuring, testing, reacting and dealing with changing practices over time.

One candidate mentioned he was a big user of Majestic SEO, so I asked him to name the tool's primary metric. He answered ACRank. Wrong answer. That metric was phased out literally years ago and replaced with two vastly superior metrics: Citation Flow and Trust Flow.

You can certainly ask the candidate to provide concrete examples of SEO successes as well. If they can't quote specifics of the amount of traffic gained for a project, the amount of additional revenue gained, the ROI of SEO on their last project, penalties removed, etc. then this should be a warning sign that they either haven't had these successes or that they weren't in the know enough, or didn't care enough, to know these metrics.

You can also ask about their philosophy and approach to link building. These days it's all about attracting links with great content or a fantastic business model and building relationships with the sites, writers, bloggers, journalists who might be interested in writing about or referencing your site or content. It's about building a robust audience on social media and getting them to share your content to get in in front of the people who might link to it. If they talk about old school link building like wide scale guest blogging, buying links, exchanging links, etc. run, don't walk, the other way.

I also like to ask about how much SEO training they have given other people. SEO success can depend on buy in from your whole organization from developers to PR people to your sales force. Buy in from the C-level is also crucial to getting the resources needed for SEO. Ask the candidate what they have done to spread SEO knowledge throughout organizations they have worked with and how they have "sold" managers on the value of SEO in the past.

6. THE SECOND INTERVIEW – BRING IN AN EXPERT

For the second interview, it is best to bring in someone who can really judge the candidate for ability. This could be an SEO consultant you've been working with, or perhaps a colleague in the industry. An expert can grill them more adeptly on best practices, algorithm updates, and recent advances.

On a second interview that one of my clients invited me to attend, I asked the candidate for the name of the recent Google local search update, and he didn't know (it's Pigeon), even though in the same interview he named Search Engine Land as one of his top go-to sources for SEO information that he reads religiously. Something didn't add up.

I sat in on another second interview for another client with an applicant who had passed the first interview with flying colors. However, in this interview, I asked him about his recent SEO successes.

He proceeded to regale us with a story of how he manipulated Google's autocomplete suggestions using sock puppets and proxies to make fake search queries. And he made no reference to the practice being blackhat. Or even greyhat. My clients cannot afford the risk of operating outside of Google's Guidelines and the potential repercussions.

It's more than worth the investment to pay an SEO consultant who is not only an SEO expert, but who has successfully hired other SEOs before, to sit in on a second interview. The fairly nominal cost is nothing compared to the potential loss of traffic, opportunity to grow, and revenue, not to mention your time and productivity, should you happen to choose a less than fantastic candidate and have to start all over again.

7. CONFIRM THE FIT DURING THE TRIAL PERIOD

Once you find that perfect candidate — someone who can bring fantastic value to your company and with whom you can build a great, long-term working relationship — bring them on board but make the first several months a trial period. Why give a trial run? It is the final test; it allows you to see how they perform in real life.

For the trial term, give the candidate a very clear, well-defined set of duties and projects to complete. Then, link up their job duties with their highest personal values. If you make their job align with what they value most, they'll have a far greater likelihood of being internally motivated and fully engaged. According to Gallup, 70% of U.S. workers are unengaged. That's a scary statistic.

I use the inimitable Dr. John Demartini's Value Determination test. It is a 15-minute questionnaire that prompts the candidate to specify their three most important values across 13 different areas. Then at the end, the candidate simply tallies up his/her most frequent responses and ranks them in order of frequency to find their highest values. You can sit down and spend two or three hours to brainstorm how the job duties align with the candidate's top three to five values.

For example, if one of their job duties will be to do YouTube audits, and the person's top priority is their kids, you could help them to see that sharpening their YouTube auditing skills could further their relationship with the kids in dozens of ways such as: setting up their kids' YouTube channels and building up views to their videos, potential for raises that could be used as an overseas vacation fund, potential for more vacation time, more job security, and so forth.

I promise the time you invest in linking up the job duties with the candidate's values will be well worth the improved performance and loyalty you'll see from them.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Follow these seven tips to avoid nasty, expensive surprises from hiring the wrong person for your SEO job. Hopefully, you'll find you've made a smart investment in new SEO talent that will pay off for years to come. Incidentally, a lot of this process can be used to screen SEO contractors and agencies, too.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephan Spencer is author of Google Power Search, co-author of The Art of SEO, and co-author of Social eCommerce, all published by O'Reilly.

Stephan founded Netconcepts in 1995 and grew it into a multi-national SEO agency before selling it in 2010 to Covario. He's the inventor of the pay-for-performance SEO technology platform GravityStream, now part of the Rio SEO toolset.

Stephan's recent SEO clients have included such retail giants as Zappos, Sony Store, Quiksilver, Best Buy Canada, Bed Bath & Beyond, and Chanel.

Stephan is a Senior Contributor to Practical Ecommerce and to MarketingProfs.com, and a columnist for Search Engine Land, Multichannel Merchant, and The Huffington Post. He's also been a contributor to DM News, Catalog Age, Catalog Success, Building Online Business, Unlimited, and NZ Marketing magazine, among others.

Stephan is a frequent conference speaker on SEO and other online marketing topics for the American Marketing Association (AMA), Direct Marketing Association (DMA), Shop.org, Internet Retailer, SMX, IncisiveMedia (Search Engine Strategies), O'Reilly/TechWeb, PubCon, ECMOD, IQPC and IIR. His thousands of speaking gigs have taken him around the globe – everywhere from Berlin, London, Toronto, Santiago, Sydney and Auckland, to New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and places in between.

Stephan is an avid blogger. He blogs at Stephan Spencer's Scatterings, NaturalSearchBlog.com, BusinessBlogConsulting.com, ChangesForGood.org, and Google, I Suggest…

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Stephen Spencer Bio:

Recognized as a prominent SEO expert, Stephan Spencer is the co-author of the Art of SEO, co-author of Social E-Commerce, and author of Google Power Search, all published by O'Reilly. His books of consistently been one of the top three sellers and Amazon in the respective categories. He founded the SEO agency Netconcepts in the 1990s and in 2010 it was required by Covario. Stephan invented the automated pay-for-performance SEO technology called Gravity Stream.

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Stephan worked on SEO and eCommerce Strategy for House of Travel. Stephan has a real enthusiasm for the power of the internet to change businesses and his passion rubbed off on House of Travel. While working on House of Travel their online revenue increased dramatically.

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For the better part of a decade, I have been talking about social media with Stephan and he is one of the few people who really understands the blend between SEO and social media, and how it's related to commerce, specifically ecommerce.