

Savvy sales heads prove to be a rare species

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By Jonathan Moules

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Many business owners right now would probably happily suffer the problems of Brett Raynes.

His business, Backup Direct, which safeguards computer data for small and medium-sized companies, has grown its revenues by a third in the last 12 months, so Raynes wants to beef up his management.

With unemployment still on the increase, he thought that finding a sales director would be relatively straightforward. But nothing could be further from the truth.

"It is beyond difficult," he says, noting that after three months of searching, he has yet to appoint anyone.

Part of the concern is that the people he is considering might just be good at selling themselves. In a relatively young industry such as IT, where a lot of companies are growing strongly, it can also be hard to separate the skills of the sales person from the success of the companies.

"A lot of people happened to be in companies that were doing well and so they did well," Raynes notes.

He is not alone, according to Duncan Cheatle, founder of The Supper Club, a networking group for entrepreneurs in charge of high-growth businesses. The topic is so often a source of conversation at The Supper Club's private members' dinners that Cheatle is for the first time organising a special event in which those attending can talk about nothing else.

"It is easily in the top three things that people say they are worrying about every week," he says.

The hunt for good sales people has been made worse by the recession, not better, according to Cheatle, because it has made those with good sales people desperate to keep hold of their talented staff, even as they cut jobs. "Anyone who has a good sales person won't let them go, unless they are mad," Cheatle says.

His assertion is echoed by Marco Schiavo, who as managing director of Enigma Exec, an executive search and recruitment business, has a broad understanding of the job market.

"Sales execs are the hardest to hire, with no exception," he says. "The challenge has been made even more difficult by a surge of bottom 10 per cent CVs that have flooded the market on the back of mass corporate culls."

One common mistake is to assume that someone with a good track record in a large company is going to be a good sales head in a smaller growing business, according to Cheatle.

Not only is it a lot easier to perform well when your company has a strong brand, but people who have been in a large business often find it hard to settle into a company where everyone has to muck in.

"You get these people who just want to manage a team, when what you need is someone who can lead from the front," Cheatle says. Promoting from within is also not advisable, he adds. "Good sales people are often bad managers."

Getting a senior appointment right is crucial because of the high cost of hiring the wrong person.

Silver Fleet, a third generation family business running dinner cruises on the River Thames, was almost brought to its knees by a general manager who did not work out as expected, according to managing director Tom Woods. "We didn't do our proper due diligence," he says. "That led to four years of hell."

The experience marked Woods because at the time he was preparing to take the reins of the business from his father. It has returned to haunt him because his sales head of eight years recently decided to take a career break after the birth of her first child.

Woods was concerned that he would pick a candidate because he clicked with them on a social level, only to find that they were not right for the role. This was the mistake he made before.

To avoid repeating history, he has employed CBSL People, a specialist HR consultancy, to help him through the process. "They interviewed me to find out what I wanted in the role," Woods explains. "By talking it through, it exposed the holes in my preparation."

CBSL has helped Woods with writing the job advertisements, ensuring that the business owner neither undersold nor oversold the position. It also vetted the CVs and briefed Woods on the interview structure.

Woods has now whittled 100 potential candidates down to a shortlist of six. He admits that in the past he may have put too much emphasis on whether he got on with the sales director. "One of the most important things I have

realised is, while I am looking for chemistry with the applicant, it is secondary to whether they can do the job," he says.

Gareth Limpenny, owner of Frequency Telecom, a trade supplier of mobile phones, has hired two sales teams in the last three months for Frequency and its sister business Jelly Communications, which provides handsets and air time for small businesses.

Rather than employing professional recruiters, Limpenny cast his net wide with advertisements in local newspapers, job centres and online. He then held assessment days in hotels in London and Leeds, whittling down about 300 candidates to a shortlist, from which six people were given jobs.

Recruitment is only half the story, according to Limpenny, who believes that, as a former salesman, he understands the mindset of sales people. The trick is to train new hires so they follow procedures and ethics. "To be a good sales person, you need to understand the processes," he says.

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