

“You’re Hired Now Go Home” – New Hiring Challenges in a Virtual Company

By Jeanne L. Allert

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Perhaps you remember going to career workshops in college where they taught you to research a prospective employer, plan carefully what you would wear, and rehearse witty responses to innocuous questions? I even recall one advice book recommending that you spend a typical morning and afternoon "hanging out" in the lobby of your prospective employer, making careful observations about when people would come and go, what they wore and how they interacted...to see if that was a place where you would fit in. What is the recommendation if the prospective employer is only a few months old, there is no dress code or commuting patterns to observe, and most of your interview conversations were via email? What if there is no "place" to fit in to?

The virtual company is one where work is performed outside of the definition of place. There's no factory floor, no retail store, no conference room, no cubicle farm. Virtual work is primarily the manufacture, retail, and distribution of Intellectual Property. Some of that intellectual property can lead to a product, as in the case of software or website development. Not only is there no physical place, but there's often no grounding in established policies and practices. Virtual companies have to rewrite a lot of the traditional rules and make many of them up as they go along.

In the sparse collection of advice for managers about hiring for virtual employees, you'll find that most of the recommendations are for the telecommuting employee. The telecommuter is one who spends some part of his/her work-time outside of the office. In the case of the telecommuting employee, you—as the manager—can still rely on the structure and amenities of the physical office to provide support. This article, however, is for the manager who works exclusively in a virtual context. It is based on my 6 years of experience as a manager of telecommuting employees and now, as company officer in a completely virtual enterprise.

Interviewing

The literature on virtual work suggests that you have to hire the "right kind of person" for this type of work. I agree, but what is "the right kind?" It's true that virtual work opens up a wider net of potential employees, in that you can consider the stay-at-home parent, the disabled person or retiree, or person in another state. But virtual work also narrows your options because of the needle-in-a-haystack characteristics you have to identify. Some of the traits you want to look for are:

Values or Mission-based. Candidates who see the larger picture of what you're trying to create and share your passion for the work will adjust better to virtual work. There will be days when any employee would question, "Why am I doing this?" Without colleagues readily available to boost their morale, the virtual worker could create a greater pool of doubt. Ask the candidate what motivates her to work. What internal rewards does she need? What activities does she do where time and effort don't seem to matter? Look for signs that she motivates from within.

Communication Skills. One advantage in remote interviewing is you get a fair indication of how well the candidate communicates on the phone, by email, and in writing. Those skills are essential to success with virtual work. The employee must be able to communicate instructions, understanding, disagreement, and his own unique personality using the tools of virtual work. You should seek to have the candidate communicate with you using all modes of communication during the interview process. Pay careful attention to tone and how well the candidate gets his ideas across.

Decision-making Confidence. Equally important to good communication skills is the employee's level of initiative, especially around problem solving. This person is going to be on his own. Should a complication or problem arise, you don't want him sitting around waiting for help. Look for people who try things—right or wrong—to fix their own problems. Ask questions during the interview about problems they have encountered in the past and how they solved those problems. Probe into how the candidate reacted when the problem arose and how he felt in resolving it.

Tech Savvy. Maybe this seems obvious, but I'm not referring to the candidate's ability to use email or word processing. It will be to your advantage to identify people who have some level of comfort solving their own

technology problems. Have they ever ordered ISP service for their home? Have they ever installed a new PC or put software on it? Have they ever called a help desk and been coached through solving a problem? You cannot afford to have a technician run out to their homes with each little computer mishap. You need people who understand their home systems enough to troubleshoot the problem or find the help they need.

Hiring

Truth be told: I've never hired a virtual worker I haven't met. Even though I've had some long-term work relationships with people exclusively online, I don't recommend it for employees. Ultimately, face-to-face interaction is important to building (or solidifying) the kind of relationship people have working together. Some of the bases to cover in the hiring process are:

Set Expectations. In extending your offer, make sure you have first communicated all that you expect the employee to provide for himself, and specifically what the company will provide. In a central office, there's always a copy room full of paper and supplies. Will the employee be expected to purchase his own? Is the company providing for hardware, software, connectivity, cell phone, second phone line, fax machine, answering machine, home office insurance, etc.? If possible, have all these detailed spelled out in your offer package.

Introductions. She's accepted and ready to start. How do you get her introduced to the rest of the company if you're not in the same place? My suggestion: make the hiring of a new person an occasion. Get a digital camera and take her picture. Have her write up a short bio and route it around on email for all the other employees. Create an employee website (secure access recommended) and let the employees update their own information with news and announcements. Have a luncheon, or dinner, or teleconference to celebrate her arrival and introduce her around. It's no worse than the obligatory "parading the new hire around the office" and it may put her at ease to see faces and learn names.

Orientation

I've known several large organizations where the employee orientation process was a pre-crafted routine. It could be as simple as the "scavenger hunt" approach, where the employee gets a checklist of who to meet and what to have, and she fumbles around on her own trying to get all her boxes checked off. On the other end of the

spectrum, I've managed within companies where the new hire was immediately ushered into an elaborate Hell Week of presentations, workshops, and speeches, complemented by the onerous 3-ring binder of "essential information" that might never get opened. Employers create orientation programs to acclimate new hires into the company and to get them into a productive mode in the least amount of time possible. In the virtual environment this is one of the hardest tasks. Here are some suggestions.

Start Busy. Create a bridge between their former worklife and the new one by more tightly scheduling appointments and company meetings, at least in the beginning. Map out commitments with them over the first few weeks, set goals and due dates, and be purposeful about finding occasions to meet in person. You might arrange to meet the new employee at a local coffee shop for an hour once a week during their first month on the job. This will be valuable time for you to gain feedback and assess their progress. This commitment can taper off as you both become comfortable.

Find a Buddy. Mentoring is a popular form of orientation and can work in a virtual context too. However, the "buddy" you identify for a new hire might have less to do with the job skill and more to do with similar personal circumstance. In our company, only two of us are parents. There's an unspoken fraternity among people who have to deal with carpools and sick kids and snow days. It's a different level of peer support. Similarly, I can't relate to the 22-year old whose distractions might be daytime TV or weekend planning. If you create a peer pairing, you should consider what actual support is needed. One good model is to let the employees create their own support network, and let them find each other. You need only to encourage it and make accommodations for it.

Support Structure

You've already made great strides in setting your virtual employee on a right course. But unlike some traditional offices where the new hire is wooed for a few weeks and then forgotten, the manager of a virtual enterprise must remain attentive. You need to put into place a variety of structures that will under gird the employee with support, and encourage his self-sufficiency.

Home Office Set-Up. Provide your employees with guidelines for home-office set-up including recommended equipment and space allocations. If

possible, make a site visit to offer suggestions and identify other ways the company can be supportive. This includes obvious support like equipment installation, but also guidelines for the not-so-obvious, like how to answer his home phone during business hours (if that's the only line) and why having his 6-year old record the answering machine message might not be a good idea.

Service Providers. When you're running a virtual enterprise, you often must outsource services that would normally be part of internal operations. Mail service couriers, office supply providers, copier services, and travel agents are some of the typical service providers. Be sure to educate your employees on how to take advantage of these services to save them time, and save you money.

Job Definition. A clearly defined job description is imperative (and nearly impossible) in a small, virtual enterprise. It's critical from the standpoint of giving the employee direction and structure. At the same time, in our pace of growth and change, it's very hard to say anything is carved in stone. It takes more management, but you would do well to revisit the job description at least every six months. And again, make sure that the employee clearly sees a connection between his job tasks and the company's greater mission.

Training. Make no assumptions about the employee's aptitude for your internal communications systems (email, voicemail, extranet) and provide for training on all of them. These systems are often the employee's only link to the world outside of his home and he must know when and how to use them properly. These tools are also a part of the culture of your organization and you need everyone to be a full participant in your company culture.

Time Management. If your workers are home-based, there are often hours in the day recouped from commuting, dressing, external lunches and office socializing. You might think this would make managing time easier, but two negative forces are at work. First, the home office opens up a host of distractions: the leaky toilet, the laundry, last night's dishes, or the television. These temptations are "out of sight, out of mind" to the office worker, but become looming reminders to the home-based employee. The middle of the workweek is also a great time to get your oil changed, do your grocery shopping, catch a short line at the bank. It's very hard to pull yourself from these other demands and get back to the computer.

The second—and actually bigger—threat to the virtual worker is not working too little; it's working too much. Because Work is only a couple steps away, it's easy to start at 6:30am and find yourself still at the keyboard at 11:00pm. I'm notorious for forgetting to eat; I just get caught up in what I'm doing. So I force myself to break up the day. I've also logged on to the network late at night and sent "stop working and get some sleep!" messages to the employees who were still logged on.

Give your employees clear definition for what constitutes a workday or work week. If your work allows for flexibility, employees might see it as a perk to be able to take care of personal errands during the day, and willingly work into the night. You, however, must set the lower and upper limits of how much work should get done in that time. And monitor this periodically. We all slip readily back into bad habits.

Family Matters. Be aware of the fact that not everyone considers virtual working to be "real work." Some of your more challenging obstacles may be somewhat removed from your control. Your home-based employee will face requests and impositions that will be hard for you to prevent: the neighbor who just "drops by," the spouse who's suspicious—or jealous—of the stay-at-home partner, the child who wants mommy's undivided attention. Once the neighborhood learns that Jack is always home, they'll start asking him to sign for their packages, watch their dog, run a quick errand. Prepare your staff for the issues that can come up, and provide for an open channel so that they can discuss any difficulties. You may need to relocate the employee out of their home—perhaps to do team-work at a colleague's location or work on-site with a client—to help him regain a sense of his work independence.

Social Connection. Work is inherently a social enterprise, and the work you are doing is—in some way—connected to providing a product or service to society. The virtual worker needs to have a daily sense of his connectedness to colleagues, the company, and the larger purpose. Because our work is Internet-based, the entire staff is online almost all day. We use Instant Messenger as a lifeline to one another. There's something affirming about logging on at 7:20am and seeing the names of all your colleagues appear on your buddy list. It's akin to "taking roll call." (It's also a lifesaver at 10:00 at night when you're tying up the last of the report and you see a fellow worker from the west coast still available for a question.) I make an effort to connect in some way to every employee at least twice a

week. A quick email or Instant Message can be enough to say, "How are you doing?" or "I'm glad you're with us."

We also make appearance at the weekly staff meeting mandatory and devote part of every meeting to social activity. There's always food, and conversation about people's lives flows freely. This is our time to reconnect with each other and feel part of the same enterprise. It's rejuvenating and sustains us for the week ahead. If your group can't meet in person with such frequency, encourage members to get together on their own, or plan more grandiose gatherings less often.

As the manager of a virtual enterprise, you set the tone and the culture of the organization. The new employees will take their cues from you, so you must set them on a productive course by your systems and your own actions. It's challenging and time consuming to manage this way. A virtual enterprise should never been seen as an "easier" way to work. It can, however, provide for a whole new set of rewards to benefit not only your employees, but also your business.