



# **Recruiting Temporary IT Staff: Not Enough Time To Do It Right, But Do You Really Have Enough Time To Do It Over?**

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# **Finding quality temporary IT staff is now harder than ever.**

Job skills in IT have become more complex and recruiting practices have not always kept up with these changing needs. In addition, temporary turnover is appreciably higher than for permanent positions, often because the right IT person is not engaged the first time.



**This paper identifies ten ways to improve the recruiting process for temporary IT personnel, benefiting both employers and applicants.**

# Recruiting Temporary IT Staff:

## Taking the Time to Do It Right Saves the Time of Doing It Over

**The required characteristics of IT jobs have changed in three key ways, making recruiting for temporary IT positions more challenging:**

**1. The range of technology skills** required by even small and medium-sized IT organizations is expanding. Clearly the world has become more complex and the required set of skills is broader than ever before. Some of these skills include competency in middleware, multiple database protocols, understanding the security implications of system development and maintenance, and of course dealing with the Internet in all of its manifestations.

**2. Business-related competencies** (knowledge of applications systems and underlying business processes) have become much more important. Now that technology is being used as a strategic tool to advance a company's market position, IT executives are evolving their criteria when evaluating candidates. Therefore, it is no surprise that business-related skills will soon be as important as sophisticated technology skills.

**3.** In addition, cultural fit and **soft skills** play an increasingly visible role in the effectiveness of IT organizations. While cultural fit is often overlooked, it can be an important factor in achieving business results and in driving satisfaction among both the employee and employer. Examples of soft skills include expertise in project management, an aptitude for working with business management, and the ability to coach and train partners.



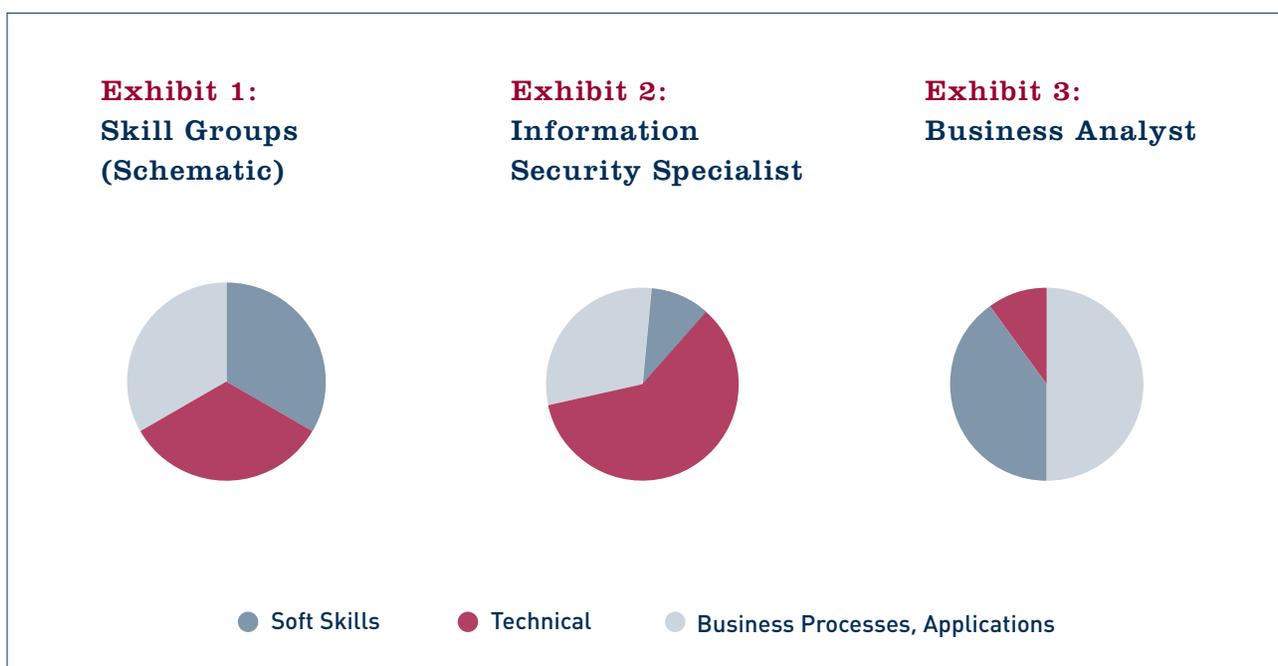
The three professional characteristics mentioned may be of equal importance, as shown in Exhibit 1. But for any single IT job, the importance of each skill set may vary. For example, an information security specialist will primarily need technical skills, as Exhibit 2 illustrates. For business analysts, on the other hand, business processes/applications are most important, followed closely by soft skills (Exhibit 3). Even in information security, an understanding of relations between business processes is often important. In principle, every job in an organization could have a different mix of characteristics; consider the contrasts between a project manager responsible for web marketing compared to one responsible for maintaining the operating system.

**Finding the right temporary IT talent may become yet more challenging if the pool of qualified applicants continues to shrink due to factors such as:**

- **The increasing rate of retirement among Boomers**
- **The declining numbers of graduates with Computer Science degrees**
- **Low unemployment levels in IT**

The current challenges in recruiting temporary IT staff places a premium on having a smoothly functioning and responsive engagement process. But when the current process is not working well, there are usually problems with the process itself as well as with ultimate outcomes.

### **Skill distribution for various/sample IT positions:**



# Problems in Recruiting Temporary IT Staff

The search for temporary IT staffing differs from permanent staffing in several respects. First, it involves a somewhat different mix of jobs. Permanent staff searches are more likely to focus on supervisory positions and on business functions that are at the heart of the enterprise. Temporary positions tend to have a higher technology component.

Another difference involves time horizons. The question most often asked about temporary openings is, “When can the person start?” In part, this rush-to-fill is a response to events, as shown in Exhibit 4. Many of these events ought to occur rarely, but all too often are a fact of organizational life.

There are other factors at work, too. One of these is an often unconscious mindset, which goes, “If a search for a permanent position takes three months, then one for a temporary position should take far less time.” In other words, a search for a permanent position is an attempt to find the best person for the job, but a temporary search all too often means looking for the best person available this week.



## **Exhibit 4:** **Rush-to-Hire Causes**

- Critical gaps in project resources
- Sudden awareness of skill deficiencies
- Unforeseen staff departures or long-term absences
- Changes in priorities and unscheduled projects
- Faulty project scheduling and project management
- Delayed approvals to hire
- Budget authorization expiring soon
- Hiring freeze or head count limits on permanent staff



**In the rush to fill a pressing need, the temporary IT recruiting process is too often a case of not having enough time to do it right, yet always finding enough time to do it over.**

The time constraints put on a temporary search often contribute to putting insufficient thought into the job profile. This can result in a profile that is off target in one or more ways. Rushed profiles can focus too much on the technology aspects of a job. Within the technology context, the profile may have either insufficient detail, too much detail, or too many irrelevant facts. It may contain a long list of “nice to haves” with no priorities attached, or simply too many buzzwords.

“Over-specifying” the job requirements in the profile can unnecessarily reduce the pool of applicants and/or have you overpay for the job. Jobs that are over-specified often end up having their requirements reduced in mid-search which adds to the search time, creates confusion, and inadvertently rejects qualified candidates.

A badly structured specifications process runs the risk of turning off potential applicants, while a well-functioning process impresses candidates with the organization’s competence and seriousness.

Accurate, consistent profiles for temporary staff are a necessity—especially because job requisitions and profiles often have to pass through several intermediaries: HR, Purchasing, the IT Hiring Manager, and one or more staffing agencies on the outside.

Defects in the process are typically rationalized as “It’s only for a temp job,” but this argument is not sustainable. All too often, valuable management time is wasted in the front-end process, as people screen and interview candidates who are wrong for the job at hand (even though they may be perfectly adequate for another position). In the course of interviewing, management may come to an understanding of what is really needed, such as fewer or different technical skills, or previously unspecified business process knowledge. This results in a hidden restart for the search.

Faulty search processes, not surprisingly, can produce suboptimal results. This unfortunately is a widespread problem, as evidenced by attrition rates for temporary staff being over three times those for permanent positions. And attrition is only the tip of the iceberg. With suboptimal recruiting, IT often tries to make do with on-the-fly training, assigning contract employees to easier work and/or pairing them with stronger workers; whatever “solution” is tried, productivity suffers.

There are multiple costs associated with these make-do strategies. The direct cost of a marginal resource is obvious. Other costs can be much larger, such as the resources consumed by project delays and lowered unit productivity. There are also less visible, insidious aftereffects on the quality of processes or software. This impact will be even larger in a smaller enterprise where a single employee mistake represents a larger proportion of the workforce.



It should be stressed that a “wrong person” for one job may be fine for another position or in another organization. Mismatched but otherwise competent staff may solve the wrong fit problem by voluntarily leaving, but rest assured, it will be at a time of their convenience.

In the rush to fill a pressing need, the temporary IT recruiting process is too often a case of not having enough time to do it right, yet always finding enough time to do it over.

# Solution:

## A Comprehensive Strategy for Engaging the Right Person the First Time

**The fact is, you can improve the temporary IT staffing process simply by taking more time. But results will be even better if taking the right amount of time is part of the overall strategy. The following ten initiatives describe a comprehensive approach for the search and engagement of the right temporary IT staff.**

**1. Improve the profiling process.** The key element for improving the search process is the creation and dissemination of an accurate job profile. Start with a master list of skills required in the IT department, and select the skills most relevant for the search. Try to limit a job profile to six to eight core skills to avoid unrealistic searches.

Specify the minimum level of achievement for each skill. Wherever possible, achievement should be defined by objective measures, such as certifications or courses. The familiar “years of experience” specification should be used cautiously, since some candidates with two years of experience are actually more qualified than others with five. (In parallel, applicants will identify and, as necessary, document their achievement levels.)

Profiles will be most effective when sufficient time is allocated to their development. An improved job profile process will improve all communications - within IT, with other departments in the enterprise *involved in* engaging temporary staff, with outside staffing agencies, and with applicants.

A structured profiling process can seem a bit arduous until it’s compared to the organizational burdens imposed by an unstructured alternative.

**2. Establish realistic milestones for the temporary IT staffing process.** Collectively determine how much time is actually needed to efficiently recruit the right talent. Identify and benchmark the elapsed time and person-hours for each activity in the process. Those taking part in assessing and setting the milestones will begin to understand why there are problems with both the process and the results. Even with agreed-upon timing milestones, there will be occasions when the search schedule will have to be compressed. But when rush orders are the exception, they are easier to deal with than when they’re the standard operating procedure for the organization.

**3. Make timely forecasts of temporary staff requirements an explicit part of personnel planning.** This will buy time for the search process itself. As part of the milestone process in step 2 above, record how much advance notice will actually be provided.

**4. Reduce unnecessary interviewing.** There should be fewer interviews, but with more of the right people. Interviews shouldn’t be held just to demonstrate “progress.” If the profiling process is working correctly, fewer—but better—candidates will be interviewed. Those interviewed, in turn, will be more likely to qualify for a position.

**5. Make timely decisions.** Desirable candidates are undoubtedly also interviewing with other potential employers. Candidates look for the best “total value proposition,” but at the end of the day they are first and foremost looking for a job. That’s why the first company to make an offer has the advantage. This is where a well-structured process helps balance the requirement for a thorough search with the need for a timely outcome. Don’t forget the obvious: Keep checking if the decision maker has decided. Make sure all the budgetary and administrative approvals are in hand and still valid.

**6. Improve the onboarding process.** Too often, the entry process for temporary staff consists of providing them with an ID card and an introduction to their supervisor. The onboarding process should be more structured, a “mini-version” of the one used for regular employees, emphasizing what is needed to meet job expectations. In addition, the onboarding process can be the final part of the process, confirming that both sides made the right decision.

**7. Collect ongoing feedback on performance.** Conduct periodic, structured reviews with the supervisor, one or more co-workers, and the temporary employee to determine if expectations are being met. This will not just weed out under-performers, but it also ensures that good performers will want to stay as long as you need them.

**8. Measure, measure, measure.** If you don’t measure something, you can’t improve it. Compare actual performance to the milestone benchmarks established in step 2. Quantify the importance of each skill for a position, e.g., on a 1-5 scale. Rate temporary staff performance and track over time. Compare temporary and permanent staff performance to the extent feasible. Understand the reasons for plus or minus deviations, and adjust the benchmarks as necessary.

**9. Throughout the process, cut losses quickly.** Sometimes a search is simply headed in the wrong direction. When that happens, don’t hesitate to restart, but do take the time to understand where the search went wrong. If none of the candidates seem quite right, but they are otherwise strong, reexamine the qualifications. Afterwards, use the feedback process (step 7) to make hard decisions on retention. If this decision is made early enough, alternative candidates from the original search may still be available. On the other hand, it might be possible to turn around a marginal performer, but the time and effort for this has to be weighed against the length of time temporary staff is needed.

**10. Change attitudes toward temporary staff.** While there are important legal distinctions between permanent and temporary staff, an organization should ideally place similar value on each type of worker. After all, permanent workers are often not that permanent, especially in a buoyant economy or an uncongenial work setting. Temporary staff can frequently be long-term and some eventually convert to permanent status. The best incentive for changing attitudes is bringing into the organization a higher quality of temporary employee.

**It may not prove feasible to immediately make all ten changes in your organization. They should, however, be factored into your long-term HR strategy for IT.**



## Win-Win Benefits

All participants benefit from a more efficient process for recruiting temporary staff. There will be less waste, fewer restarts, and ultimately, less turnover.

In addition:

- IT will increase the probability of filling a job with the right person
- HR and Purchasing will have more confidence in IT's more rigorous recruiting process
- Applicants will know what is required up front instead of wondering what is really expected and, in the worst case scenario, resigning in frustration

For some organizations, the net time to engage may decrease just from greater process efficiencies and engaging the right person the first time. While a time decrease is not guaranteed with a structured process, it would be a fitting reward for an approach that seeks to substitute “the right amount of time” for “as soon as possible.”

# Summary



IT jobs have become more complex, with an increased range of technology skills, a greater need for business-related competencies, and a growing importance for soft skills. These changes alone have made finding the right temporary staff more challenging, even before factoring in the potential shrinking of the applicant pool.

The old approach to temporary staffing—“we need someone yesterday”—is obsolete. This paper has identified ten strategies for improving the temporary recruiting process:

- Improve the profiling process
- Establish realistic milestones
- Forecast temporary staff needs
- Reduce unnecessary interviewing
- Make timely decisions
- Improve the onboarding process
- Collect feedback on performance
- Measure each part of the process
- Face reality and cut losses early in the process
- Change attitudes toward “temps”

**And keep this one thought top of mind: everyone benefits from finding the right person the first time.**

## Written By:

Tom O'Flaherty

## Contact Us:

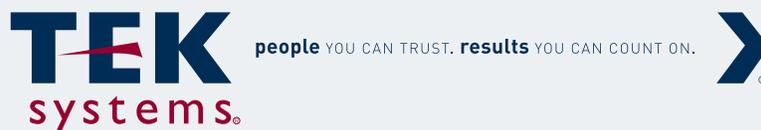
Feedback, comments, and/or questions on this paper should be directed to Marcy Stoudt, VP Marketing at [mstoudt@teksystems.com](mailto:mstoudt@teksystems.com).

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TEKsystems® 7437 Race Road, Hanover, MD 21076 888-835-7978 [www.teksystems.com](http://www.teksystems.com)

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