

Hiring Professional Testers



- Huib Schoots

Hiring the right people for a job is hard and often lot of work. When I look at the job offers for testers I see a lot of rubbish and that makes me nervous. I think those job ads show that there is still a lot of misunderstanding about testing and what testers do. That makes it harder to find the right people for the job. In this article I share my experience and will highlight what I think is important when companies try to hire testers.



Hiring geeks that fit

The process of hiring testers isn't very different from hiring any other people for IT jobs, only the skills, knowledge and experience you are looking for are tester specific. I recommend the excellent book "Hiring

Geeks That Fit" by Johanna Rothman [ref 1] to learn more about how recruitment of people in IT works.

I have been in the testing business for quite some time and I have a lot of experience with hiring testers from different perspectives. Whilst as a test manager for projects and as a line manager for a bank I conducted many job interviews to hire testers. We hired experienced testers as well as people directly from school. I have been in the secondment business for over 10 years and have done many job interviews to get hired for projects and consultancy assignments.

What are professional testers?

I often talk about testers and testing skills. I like to make a distinction between "professional testers" and "testers by profession". The last category are people who have the job mainly because it is a way to make a living and they do not act like a real professional should do. They know little about what they do and they do not study their craft. They never read professional literature and they only want to do courses if the boss is paying. They just do their job 9 to 5 and go home and want to forget about their work because they do not really enjoy it. Testers by profession just do something that seems to be working and can't explain effectively what value their testing is adding to the company.

Companies always want to hire the best tester possible. And I believe professional testers are a minority. Testing is a difficult, complex and demanding profession. That is why companies should be careful when hiring people to do testing. Professional testers have the right characteristics: knowledge, skills, experience, attitude, ethics and values. The trick in hiring professional testers is to recognize a professional and match the right mix of characteristics to the

characteristics of the job. Sounds simple right? I learned over the years that this is not as simple as it sounds. Later in this article I will present my heuristics to recognize a professional tester.

Problem solving

I like to approach recruitment as problem solving. Think of it like this: when you want to hire a tester, you have a problem. You are understaffed, you need different skills or maybe you need better people? It can be anything. The first step is to take some time to define what the problem is that you need to solve.

Recruitment takes a lot of time and could be expensive. You want to make sure you are solving the right problem by hiring the right tester. Do you really need new people? And if you think you do, who do you need to solve that problem? What are the characteristics you are looking for?

Vague job characteristics don't help

Many job ads are very vague and badly written. There are no clear characteristics mentioned of the person they are looking for and the attitude they expect from the person they are trying to hire. To me that is often a sign how the company advertising thinks about testing. If you have a weak job description, don't be surprised if weak applicants respond and try to get the job you are advertising. Be very specific in what you are looking for, don't be afraid that only a few people will react. Being very specific helps candidates determine if they fit and you will see that people who take the time to react, mostly are a better fit for your company.

Bad examples

"Bachelor's Degree in Computer Science or related field, or equivalent work experience" tells the candidate that almost anything is okay. I suggest to tell why this is important.

"Ensure that project deliverables are defect free"

tells the candidate that the company doesn't really understand what testing is about.

"Education: ISTQB / TMAP" tells me nothing. What do you want? Experience with it? Or only the foundation certificate? It might tell the candidate that certification is valued over testing skills or that the recruiter isn't able to describe which testing skills are important for the job.

"Developing, implementing and executing test plans" tells the candidate that it is actually a testing job as the job title was already saying.

Be clear in what you expect

Finding the right candidates takes a clear expectation of what you are looking for. All aspects of the person you are looking for should be in there: knowledge, skills, experience, attitude, ethics and values. Also add something in your job description on why the tester wants to work for you. It can be an awesome product, the company culture or great benefits.

Good examples

Brightpearl advertises this:

"Exploratory testing - and we mean serious, structured exploratory testing, not just a buzzword. You'll have heard of and read Cem Kaner's work and others."

This clearly states what knowledge they expect from you.

NewVoiceMedia has job descriptions where they describe clear values of the company: *"We value ownership and curiosity"*, what they expect from you: *"Share your passion for your work internally and externally"* and they tell you how those attitudes and values are translate in expected behaviour: *"Care about the company, the quality of the product and the user experience."* and *"Take on epic challenges that push you out of your comfort zone."* RES Software clearly state what they expect from a tester and what a tester can expect from their colleagues: *"You know how to convince a rock-star developer about a possible improvement in the software and have him buy you a drink afterwards."* and *"You test everything in your life, your new telephone, your new car, a piece of code and the quickest route to your new job."*

Selection: add an extra threshold

After you have defined the problem and the characteristics to solve the problem, the fun really starts. I would recommend adding an extra threshold for people who want to react. Let them write a cover letter in which they have to describe why they think they fit the description. This also gives them the chance to explain if they do not have the required experience or knowledge, but they still think why they could fit. Another way of doing that is to add a challenge to the process. Candidates who want to apply for the job need to test something and send their report to you or they have to answer some questions like "Describe testing and quality in your own words" or "How would you test website X if you have one day to test it" and have them send their answer together with their resume.

Putting up an extra threshold helps in two ways: it will discourage people who aren't really serious or lazy and it will give you some idea of the skill level of the candidates reacting.

The interview: "practice what you preach"

I have a lot of experience as interviewee in job interviews. The thing that strikes me the most, is that only very rarely I have been asked to actually test something. And I think that is a very risky way of hiring people. How can you be sure that they can test and not only are good in talking about it? Have the candidates shown that they actually can do what they claim in their resumes. Let a candidate test manager create, present and defend a test strategy and have a tester test a piece of software during the interview. Don't step in the trap of thinking that it will take too long to work with them. Take time to let them test! Let them explain how they work and how they think. It is the thought process that interests me. In my recent webinar [ref 2] I have presented some ideas to test the candidate during an interview.

Also ask questions that search for evidence of what they claim: ask questions like: "Can you give me an example of how you applied test technique X or method Y?". The most important question I always ask is how the candidate learns. A very important aspect of testing is learning about the product and learning is essential for professional testers. After the official interviews, I try to setup something for the team to meet the candidate and spend time together so they get to know each other and give the candidate a chance to get know the organisation better. Cultural fit in the organisation and the team is

one of the most important things you want to assure. If the person doesn't fit the culture, no matter how qualified you will have a serious problem in the end. Remember that recruitment comes from two sides: you have to make sure the candidate matches the profile and the candidate has to determine if they want to work for your company.

Rushing job interviews will get the wrong problem solved as the wrong person gets hired. Spending more time on defining the problem and selecting the right candidate will pay back in the long term by having a perfect fit for your organisation.

How to recognize professional testers?

In March this year I wrote a blog post called "Heuristics for recognizing professional testers" [ref 3] in which I presented 18 heuristics to recognize a professional tester. Use these heuristics in your recruitment process.

1. Have a paradigm of testing & can explain approach
2. Love what they do & are passionate about the testing craft
3. Consider context first and continuously
4. Consider testing a human activity to solve complex problems
5. Know that software development and testing is a team sport
6. Know that things can be different
7. Ask questions before doing anything
8. Use diversified approaches
9. Know that estimation is more like negotiation
10. Use test cases and test documentation wisely
11. Continuously study their craft
12. Have courage and refuse to do bad work
13. Are curious and like to learn new things
14. Have important interpersonal skills (like writing & communication skills, social and emotional skills, problem solving, decision making, coaching, teaching, being proactive and assertive)
15. Have excellent testing skills (like thinking, analytical skills, modelling, risk analysis, planning and estimation, applying many different test techniques, exploring, designing experiments and observation)
16. Have sufficient technical skills (like coding or scripting skills, being able use tooling, SQL skills, being able to configure and install software, knowledge and skills to work on different platforms)

17. Do not fear learning & are not afraid to make mistakes
18. Happy and willing to share their knowledge

This long list of heuristics might give the impression that we are looking for a super tester who has all these characteristics. That is why I call them heuristics, some may help you, and others may not apply in your situation. Not every job requires every heuristic mentioned. Since people work in teams, other team members will have some of the skills. Also, knowing the candidate lacks certain skills doesn't have to be a problem as such. If the candidate is willing to learn and your company is willing to invest in the candidate, the problem can be solved after hiring the candidate.

To be able to use these heuristics effectively demands that you know what you are looking for. It also demands that you are able to distinguish skilled testers from non-skilled testers.

Conclusion

Hiring the right tester is hard and often a lot of work. To attract the right people make sure the problem that needs to be solved is clearly defined and an explicit job description that matches the problem is written. Seriously testing the candidates will help you hire only the very best: the one that really wants to work for you and who is a perfect match for the job opening you have. Remember that professional tester will grow and get better once you have hired them while testers by profession will not grow too much.

Rob Lambert (@rob_lambert) is currently writing a series of blog post on the same topic. If you want to learn more about hiring professional testers, I recommend you read his blog. The series can be found here: <http://thesocialtester.co.uk/category/hiring-testers/>

References:

- [1] Hiring Geeks That Fit – Johanna Rothman – Leanpub - ISBN 978-0-9854820-0-8
- [2] Webinar EuroStar “Hiring Professional Testers” <http://www.eurostarconferences.com/community/member/webinar-archive/webinar-99-hiring-professional-testers>
- [3] Heuristics for recognizing professional testers <http://www.huibschoots.nl/wordpress/?p=1666>

More information:

- Discussion “Hiring Professional Testers’ on Testhuddle.com <http://testhuddle.com/forums/topic/hiring-professional-testers/>
- Recruiting Software Testers by Cem Kaner http://www.testingeducation.org/BBST/foundations/Kaner_JobsRev6.pdf
- TestBash 99 second talks: Don't be so bloody vague - Anna Baik (Starting at 25:55) <http://www.ministryoftesting.com/2014/04/testbash-3-video-99-second-talks/>
- Blog post Thomas Ponnet: writing job description for testers (part I and II) <http://observanttester.blogspot.nl/2011/02/writing-job-description-for-tester-part.html>
- Blog post Ralph van Roosmalen – Technical Recruiting at RES Software <http://blog.ressoftware.com/index.php/2014/04/25/technical-recruiting-res-software/>
- Rex Black & Michael Bolton: irrelevant interview questions? https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=10151920630645073&id=111442000072
- A tester's syllabus by James Bach <http://www.satisfice.com/images/testsyllabus.pdf>

About the Author

Huib Schoots is a tester, consultant and people lover. He shares his passion for testing through coaching, training, and giving presentations on a variety of test subjects. With more than eighteen years of experience in IT and software testing, Huib is experienced in different testing roles. Curious and passionate, he is an agile, exploratory and context-driven tester who attempts to read everything ever published on software testing. A member of TestNet, AST and ISST, black-belt in the Miagi-Do School of software testing and co-author of a book about the future of software testing. Huib maintains a blog on magnifiant.com and tweets as **@huibschoots**. He works for Improve Quality Services, a provider of consultancy and training in the field of testing.