

Choosing Your Employees Wisely

By T. Murray Purcell, OLS, OLIP

This article was inspired by a tale. It is a tale of unbelievable misfortune followed by remarkable luck. We have all experienced the hiring process from one side of the table or the other. For most of us as employers, our hunt for hungry, ambitious, hard working, intelligent people to assist us in our endeavors is a time consuming activity of research that is taken far too lightly.

Last year, after initiating what I had felt was a fair recruitment and interview process, I was excited about my good fortune; my good fortune in locating "a gold mine employee", "a jack-of-all-trades", "a start to finish god", "a workaholic". This person knew my equipment, knew my software, and had years of experience in the areas of surveying that my company was built around. While this stroke of luck seemed almost too good to be true, I decided to research some of his previous employers for a bit of a background check. The result was that while his work was stellar, reliable attendance was sometimes an issue. Well, I thought, some employers are more difficult to work with than others are. Perhaps some employer/employee sour grapes? I mean really, how bad could it be? For a person like this, perhaps we could mold or break the bad habits. The candidate was eagerly hired and is herein referred to as Goldmine. The start date was to be in two weeks. When Goldmine didn't show up or call on his start date, I was not only disappointed, but also upset. I had already terminated the hiring process and notified candidates of lesser potential that the position was filled. Two days later, Goldmine called with a story that involved personal injury. He informed me that he would be available a week later. He was mildly scolded for not at least calling in but was

aware that we anxiously awaited his arrival.

For months that followed, Goldmine was a remarkable asset. Since Goldmine was within our probationary period, he was residing in hotels, motels and campgrounds and returning to his parent's home on weekends. Occasionally he would not show up on a Monday, and would not call, but had reasonable excuses for his absence. The excuses were either vehicle and/or family related. Each time, a scolding was issued and documented. Goldmine continued to generate incredible results, which boosted our confidence in his ability. The result was an increase in responsibility with more intricate projects.

Then one day in the fall, Goldmine did not show up. While this was never a good thing, it happened to be on a day when his services were desperately required on an on-going layout site. After scrambling to update another crew about the project, we awaited his tardy return. After a week we became concerned. Perhaps our anger over his absence was selfishly overshadowing the possibility of serious personal injury or death. We investigated his usual sleeping quarters, and called his

parent's home. No one knew where he was. Some time later we began receiving calls from his family asking to speak with him. Our response was always, "Goldmine is not here, but if you hear from him, tell him we would like to speak to him also". Eventually we mailed his termination papers to his parent's residence.

In January (some three months later), Goldmine called and wished to

see me. At our meeting I was told a tale of family "issues" resulting in an ex-communication from not only us but also his entire family. For some reason, I believed him and felt Goldmine deserved one last chance (plus I was still very busy!). This time it was on my terms. Since he was previously terminated, his three-month probation began at day one. I insisted he move close to work and the excuses for not showing or calling must stop. I would be his savior. I would help him get a new start and a new life away from his checkered personal past.

All went well for about one month. Goldmine was always eager for weekend overtime. One particular weekend he was set up with work, equipment; including a company truck, and an assistant. On Saturday Goldmine didn't show up to meet his assistant. On Sunday, Goldmine didn't show up to meet his assistant. On Monday, Goldmine didn't show up at the office. Goldmine was not at his residence, and his family did not know where he was. The police were called and the equipment, truck and file were reported stolen! The days that followed were ones of great pondering. Was I that bad a judge of character? What could I have done to prevent this from happening? How would my insurance treat this incident (now and in future rates)? What if he gets in an accident with my

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vehicle or is charged with impaired? Fortunately, these were questions I did not have to address as Goldmine showed up Thursday afternoon with everything in tact ... and ready to work first thing Friday morning. There was nothing more to be said. While a flurry of lies and/or excuses was once again provided, enough was enough. With my satisfaction of getting the last word, to his surprise, his employment

was terminated. To add insult to my injury, my company vehicle received a \$25 parking ticket from that nightmare Monday. The truck location was some three and one half-hours away from our office.

Since Goldmine's dismissal, I have had two inquiries as to his capabilities. It seems my name shows up on his resume as a previous employer! One inquiry was a small construction company looking for a good layout foreman. The call came before hiring. The other came from a fellow surveyor who had hired Goldmine and was put in a similar "holding the bag" absence incident. He was calling wondering if it had ever happened to me?

In an effort to uncover ways to prevent a situation like this from happening again, I have done considerable investigation into the process of recruiting, selection and hiring. As a result, you may wish to consider the following points.

Take the recruiting process very seriously.

➤ Know the Ontario Human Rights Code even before you post an advertisement for employment. There are very specific duties and accommodations an employer must abide by when posting.

➤ Determine the type of employee you wish to hire: Full time (hired for indefinite time period and working a full week), Part-time (hired for indefinite time but generally working less than 24 hours per week), Temporary (hired for a specific period of time in a full time or part time capacity), Casual (temporary employee who works intermittently as they choose), or Independent Contractor (employed by others or self employed and hired for some specific work). Of the various types of employees, the most misunderstood and potentially dangerous is the independent contractor. Extreme caution is advised when hiring contractors, as a person may be considered an "employee" under the Employment Standards Act resulting in retroactive holiday pay, Employment Insurance, Workers Compensation, Canada Pension, and Employer Health Tax.

➤ Running a job advertisement in a newspaper on Saturday and Sunday is as effective (and cheaper) than running the full week.

➤ In my experience, the best advertisement media is the AOLS website. Anyone who knows anything about our profession knows our site. This reduces the number of applicants, if any, to a manageable size (plus its free!)

➤ Don't advertise for high school or college students only. This can be interpreted as age discrimination.

Take the selection process very seriously.

➤ Keep a record of all applicant activity including an interview evaluation.

➤ Ensure that every applicant fills out an application form. Resumes provide good information but are intended to make the applicant look good. The application requests specific information and is an excellent method of reviewing a degree of care and legibility of writing. Also, an incomplete application can sometimes mean the applicant is hiding something.

➤ Ensure that the person is legally eligible to work in Canada (Canadian Immigration Act). The human rights code allows the question "Are you allowed to work in Canada?"

➤ Allow the applicant to sell themselves by posing questions such as "Why do you think you would be successful at this job?", "What are your key personal strengths you bring to the company?", "Why should I select you?", and "Why are you applying for this job?"

➤ Questions you should not ask during an interview include: "How old are you?", "Are you married?", "How many children do you have?", "What does your spouse do?", "Where were you born?", "How will you get to work?", and "Have you ever been arrested?"

➤ Always conduct reference checks. Do not check the applicant's present employer unless you have their written permission.

Take the hiring process very seriously.

➤ In presenting your potential employee with a job offer, the following information should be stated: job title, title of immediate supervisor, salary, starting date, deadline for accepting the job, and eligibility and conditions for company benefits.

➤ Where probationary periods are set out (and they are highly recommended!), the employer must advise the employee of such a period prior to accepting employment. Probationary periods longer than three months may entitle the employee to notice and/or pay in lieu, if terminated at the end of the probationary period.

➤ The employer should collect a photocopy of the employee's valid driver's license if operating a company vehicle. In addition, if the employee does not have his/her own vehicle, but is operating a company vehicle, they should supply a driver's abstract from police. For insurance purposes, this ensures appropriate coverage.

When I reflect on my previous recruitment, selection and hiring process, perhaps I've just been fortunate for never having experienced a freaky employee situation before now. I mean we've had our share of eccentric people (Why else would anyone choose this profession if not for some weird passion for inclement weather, mud, and bugs?). What could I have done differently to prevent my recent nightmare? Other than taking a hint on the first attendance issue, not much. What can I take away from this nightmare? A better knowledge and appreciation of the hiring process. To that, I suppose I owe a debt of gratitude to Goldmine.

Hopefully this tale can assist you in your interpretation of "Gold" and "Fools Gold".



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