

Hiring

The Adaptive Path Approach to Executive Recruitment: Blogging

by Peter Merholz

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Like many small business owners, I didn't start a company in

order to run a business — I started it to do what I love. What I love is designing user experiences that delight people, and improve their lives. My company, Adaptive Path, is now seven years old, and we've grown from seven staff members to 40. As a tightly held LLC, we operated without a CEO, and as such, my attention has had to shift away from our practice, and towards the mechanics of operating a business. While fascinating in its own way, it's not what stokes my passion. With my fellow executives, we decided to recruit a CEO.

Our initial approach was typical — we talked to everyone we knew. That turned up a little, but nothing that panned out. We began conversations with a couple of executive recruiters, and found ourselves having difficulty swallowing their fees.

As part of our personal outreach, our COO, Bryan Mason, had a fateful conversation with Ross Mayfield. Ross hosts a popular personal blog, and had been CEO of Socialtext, a company he co-

founded that offers wiki services for enterprises. Ross told Bryan of his experience using his blog to look for a CEO, and how successful it was. Yes, most of the responses were worthless, but 20 were legitimate, and 5 were stellar.

We had considered such an approach, and Ross's comment pushed us over the edge. We figured we were only a couple of degrees separated from great CEO candidates in our social network, so we wrote our own blog post, and I wrote a more personal take on my site. Additionally, we ponied up the \$200 or so for posting the job to LinkedIn, which I then blasted at my connections there.

Which is when the deluge began. When we turned off the firehose (i.e., remove the posting from LinkedIn), we had received 170 inquiries about the role. Our numbers were similar to Ross's — 20 people warranted following up, and we had serious conversations with five or six. Two candidates separated themselves from the rest of the pack, and either would have been great. On July 9, exactly three months after our initial blog post, we announced the selection of Michael Meyer, a Harvard MBA whose direct experience at frog design and IDEO best suited our specific needs.

Before we publicly announced, one of our biggest concerns was that people might think the search suggested problems or instability at Adaptive Path. Happily, that never panned out, and it was important that our initial communication demonstrated concrete success that we're having, and articulated our honest reasons for the search.

Such an approach did require a lot of our own time. Instead of relying on an executive search firm to bring in just the few candidates who were worthy, Bryan spent numerous hours on the phone with folks. However, those conversations proved valuable in that through them we honed our criteria, and we also felt confident about the candidates who made it through, because we had cast such a wide net.

In order for this to succeed, you already need to an audience. Adaptive Path's blog had over 7,000 subscribers, and my personal blog had more than 2,000. Also, I've spent the last couple of years bolstering my LinkedIn network, such that I have 70,000 people who two degrees away. It's important that you cultivate your LinkedIn network intelligently. Though mine is large, I make a point of having a meaningful connection with everyone on it. This means I often decline requests from people I have only met once, briefly. Quality is as, if not more, important than quantity.

Obviously, this approach is not for everyone. But it's costs are so low, that there's no reason that anyone recruiting an executive should not give it a try.

Peter Merholz is President of Adaptive Path, which he also co-founded. For the last seven years, he's helped grow Adaptive Path from a web design consultancy into a company that helps organizations address experience design challenges of all kinds. He's perhaps most (in)famous for having coined the word "blog."

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Peter Merholz is a founding partner and president of Adaptive Path, and is an internationally recognized thought leader on user experience. He co-authored *Subject To Change*.