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Expert Recruiting Advice for Jack Dorsey: Offer Vision, Not Perks

After its recent shakeup, Twitter needs to give job candidates a place to grow, says the recruiter who introduced Tim Cook to Steve Jobs. Think vision, not chateaubriand.

In Silicon Valley's talent war, nothing succeeds like excess. Free fitness classes, luxury shuttle services, on-site massage therapy--there's almost no perk some well-funded startup isn't offering to lure coveted engineers and product managers aboard.

Twitter has played this game as well as anyone. When veteran tech recruiter Rick Devine visited the company's offices, he was struck by the selection of free gourmet food available to employees.

"I was in their cafeteria and literally you could have gotten a chateaubriand," he recalls.

But if the social messaging service is ever going to get its mojo back, it's going to need to up the quality of its executive ranks, not its menu. And that means hiring the kind of people who prefer a meaty challenge to a juicy tenderloin.

"When the economics are flying, the fringe benefits are flying, sometimes there's a de-emphasis on the emotional resonance of the brand," says Devine, who has been recruiting tech talent for more than 30 years and recently founded soon-to-launch networking and recruitment platform TalentSky. Devine's claim to fame is introducing Tim Cook to Steve Jobs.

News broke over the weekend that four top executives -- heads of the media, product, engineering and HR departments -- were leaving their posts at Twitter. The departures are just the latest in a series of shakeups at Twitter since CEO Dick Costolo stepped down in June and was replaced by Twitter cofounder Jack Dorsey first on an interim basis, then, in October, as the permanent chief executive.

Dorsey's efforts to reshape Twitter have manifested in the laying off of 8 percent of the company's staff and a contribution of roughly one-third of his stock into the company to the employee equity pool for new hires and promotions.

Taken together, the layoffs, departures and other changes don't manage to scream "stable position with a growing company." If Twitter wants to draw top talent to its rejiggered ranks, the company shouldn't lead with stock grants, says Devine. It needs to lead with vision.

He offered the scenario of Jobs enticing Cook to join Apple in 1998 as a model. The Apple cofounder framed his vision of what the company would be -- that it would create products that change the lives of millions of people. As broad as that vision was, and even with Jobs not yet knowing what those exact products would be, "that's what got Tim excited."

"You have to get to the emotional essence of people's desires," he says. "We're all emotional and we connect with things on an emotional basis, and that connection needs to be strong."

Twitter has a clearly articulated mission, but it got burried under a year of turmoil. Dorsey re-articulated a mission of promoting freedom of expression shortly after he transitioned from interim to permanent CEO. "Twitter stands for freedom of expression. We stand for speaking truth to power. And we stand for empowering dialogue," he tweeted in October.

After reeling talent in with a clear mission, there's the challenge keeping top employees. You have to ensure employees have professional development opportunities that help them keep their skills from atrophying.

Salary, stock options and perks still matter; you just can't lead with them when your company is in transition. "If the stock is growing like crazy, that's going to be the emphasis for a company," says Devine. But "at some point the market is going to go down."

"People don't want free lunch, they don't want free sushi lunch. They want to build a successful career," he says. "If a company is not developing people, then people will go elsewhere to get developed."



▲
Jack Dorsey

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