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# How to...

## HOW TO FIND LOCAL TALENT FROM BANGOR TO BOISE

Luring good recruits is hard for mid-market CIOs, harder still if you're located outside technology's hot spots. Check out these winning strategies.

BY C.G. LYNCH

**Nine years ago, Denise Stephens worked** for aviation behemoth Boeing, at one of its divisions in St. Louis, a city that consistently tops the list for having one of the highest crime rates in the country. She often wondered if there was a better spot to raise her family. Then the Washington Savannah River Co., a \$300 million firm that manages a nuclear materials site for the U.S. Department of Energy, convinced her that Aiken, S.C., beat St. Louis by a country mile. "I got recruited to come down here, and they toured me around," says Stephens, now the company's CIO. "I love horses, so they showed me all the farms and hooked me up with a real estate agent who specializes in equestrian properties. There wasn't any traffic, and it was a better place to raise my kids. That's how they got me here, and now, when I'm trying to recruit others, I do so in turn."

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- :: Ways to retain talent once you find it

## Draw upon the talent you've already hired to find reliable candidates: "We've got three new college hires this past year and they were all friends up at Clemson University."

—DENISE STEPHENS, CIO, WASHINGTON SAVANNAH RIVER CO.

But for Stephens and her mid-market peers who are located outside traditional IT talent hotbeds, luring recruits takes creative work and planning—especially for lower-level jobs where companies can't roll out the red carpet like they do for potential C-level candidates.

Just ask Jeff Roggensack, VP of IS and technology for Alere Medical, a \$65 million company that implements remote patient monitoring systems, based in Reno, Nev.—a town known more for its gambling and legalized prostitution than for cultivating hotshot programmers. When he served as CIO for United HealthCare of Illinois (based in Chicago) and later RehabCare Group in St. Louis, he never had to search high and low for talent. "There were people to be had," he says. But once he joined Alere in late 2004, he had to prioritize recruiting work with local area colleges and reach out to people who had tired of the nearby San Francisco area.

Despite the hurdles, Stephens and Roggensack have built strong IT departments. Better still, they've implemented measures to ensure that once they have the people they want, they can prevent them from being seduced by the sexiness of cities like Boston and San Francisco and the big-money firms found there. Here's a look at what's working now for CIOs in Idaho, North Dakota and similar places.

### Make Smart College Connections

**Though it's tempting** to try to pluck talent away from the big guys, mid-market IT departments find it more effective to keep a steady dialogue with local universities, and encourage new grads to stay in the area. This takes more than just the proverbial job posting or phone call to the college counseling office.

United Heritage Life Insurance has made its home in Meridian (just outside Boise, Idaho) since 1934 and likes the talent it finds there. The \$76 million company happens to be surrounded by colleges that contribute to the pool of some 60,000 IT professionals who live in the area, says Mick Ware, VP and CTO of United Heritage Financial Group and Life Insurance. As you might expect, Ware works with his HR department to get jobs posted at colleges like nearby Boise State and Albertson College. But he suggests going a step further and visiting the schools personally, as he does, giving presentations to business and IT classes.

While a campus visit from a senior-level exec like Ware can have a positive impact on recruiting, many CIOs believe it's even more effective to send employees who have recently graduated to visit their alma maters and encourage their former classmates to apply for work.

At Washington Savannah River, for instance, Stephens says she's

been able to draw upon the talent she's already hired to find reliable candidates. "We've got three new college hires this past year and they were all friends up at Clemson [University]," she says.

At Amcat, a call center software maker based in Oklahoma City, CTO Jim Texter puts a premium on local talent for a simple reason. "We have not had a lot of success at trying to draw people from outside of the area to Oklahoma," he says. "Unfortunately, we're not known as a high-tech area. A lot of people fear by moving here they'd hinder their career more than help it." He recruits heavily from Oklahoma State University.

Still, he says, don't put all your eggs in the local college basket, because college counseling offices and academic departments have a fair amount of churn. "We've seen enough turnover in the departments [at the colleges] that it's hard to keep a relationship going with them," he says. "As we find good candidates, we ask them for their friends and acquaintances. We usually find a sharp software engineer usually hangs out with other sharp software engineers. So if we get one, we can play into their network and get some others."

### Tout Growth Opportunities

**Nobody wants to** work at an organization where they feel as though they can't move up the ranks—an impression some candidates might have after visiting a mid-market company. Before a company can even sell its relaxed culture and all the other niche benefits that go along with it, candidates (especially those coming out of the college ranks) want to feel as though they aren't hitting a dead end if they take a job with you.

Amcat's Texter hears this concern from some recruits as well as from some staffers hitting about the two-year mark with the firm. "They say, OK, I'm hired on here, but I might want to grow into management, but I can't because the team isn't big enough."

United Heritage's Ware says that he tries to argue the opposite to potential hires—at larger organizations, you'll have more difficulty moving up because you'll be lost in the crowd. "Some people are looking for a large organization where they think they can move up quickly," he says. "But it's probably the reverse; they find it's difficult to move up because there is a lot of competition. I think at a smaller organization you can move up quickly when you have the talent."

Also, in addition to offering the usual promotions, bonuses and incentives, it's important to make candidates feel they can have a specialty at the organization, rather than having to wear too many hats to compensate for a smaller IT staff, says Alere's Roggensack. "In some cases, when you get to the real small company, you become a jack of all trades," he says. "At the mid-market, we have more specialists."

Even so, many mid-market employees will have to juggle mul-

## **“Tell recruits: Small development companies can take on new technologies, evaluate them and determine their feasibility before larger companies even decide to evaluate them.”** -JIM TEXTER, CTO OF AMCAT

multiple functions—and you can tell recruits that’s not necessarily a bad thing, since IT workers who get trained in multiple areas tend to have better job security, says Washington Savannah River’s Stephens. “There is more opportunity to get involved with different types of things than there is with a larger company,” she says. “There, they know they can get more pigeonholed into a certain function within IT.”

### Sell the Simple Pleasures

If your mid-market company’s CEO doesn’t keep a petty-cash box under his desk, odds are you’re going to be outbid on salary. Suzanne Fairlie, president of IT search firm Prosearch, says mid-market companies in more remote locations should not fear this disadvantage but rather, research the stunning differences in cost of living. When you crunch the numbers, she argues, you might be able to show that whatever the giant company is offering isn’t so great after all. Plus, remind candidates that big-city jobs mean big-city hours. “When you’re in New York or Boston, it’s not at all unusual to be working 60-to-70-hour weeks,” she says. “So, you can equate it to people. Yes, you’re making more money in New York, but you’re really working two jobs.”

In North Dakota, Mark Molesworth, enterprise project manager for the state of North Dakota IT department, says IT workers in his hometown of Bismarck (the state capital) want a better quality of life—including a lower crime rate, stronger schools for their children and more access to outdoor activities—things you just can’t find in many cities. “I live on the northwest edge of town, but I have three stoplights between me and work and it takes six minutes to get here,” he says. “And if I go in the other direction for less than five minutes, I’m on the shore of the Missouri River.” After work, he’s already fishing while the guys in Chicago sit on the expressway.

*Money* magazine rated Boise, Idaho, as the eighth best place to live in 2006, a factor that Ware knows plays in his favor. Access to outdoor activities—including downhill and cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, water skiing, fishing, bird and big game hunting, kayaking, white-water rafting, hiking, camping and mountain biking—is nearby. “These activities can all be done within a 30-minute drive from downtown Boise,” he says. “And there are so many other things that make this a community that people want to stay in,

such as the low crime rate, excellent education system, four distinct seasons and progressive cultural events.”

Even in Reno, which might be known more for its vices than anything else, a close proximity to Lake Tahoe has enabled Roggensack to attract a few candidates from the San Francisco area. “When we advertise, there are people from the Bay Area that are tired of traffic and the cost of living,” he says. “Reno is close to Tahoe, and there’s no state income tax. That kind of expands the talent pool. We don’t pay as much as the Bay Area, but it doesn’t cost as much.”

You might also want to convince new recruits that your team likes to play together as well as work together. In the more remote areas especially, Stephens says, it’s important to set up times for your younger employees to network. “There isn’t exactly a huge night life here in Aiken,” she says, chuckling.

### Demonstrate Use of New Technologies

People coming out of college or switching from a big company to the mid-market want to feel as though they aren’t missing out on up-and-coming technologies. While your budget might not allow you to roll out the newest piece of software or equip everyone with the newest handheld gadget, it’s critical that a candidate feels as though you’re not too far behind. “We try to stay on the leading edge of technology and give them some excitement and motivation for staying with the company,” says Ware. “I think that’s better for those types of individuals that are new to the workforce.”

You need to stay reasonably current, says Amcat’s Texter. “I believe smaller development shops can move faster than large companies in adopting new technologies. In fact this is one advantage I believe smaller companies have over larger ones. Small development companies can take on new technologies, evaluate them and determine their feasibility before larger companies even decide to evaluate them,” Texter says. “We try to stay on the leading edge of technology without falling over to the bleeding edge,” he says. “We evaluate technologies constantly. We look at what we think will stick.”

As an example, Texter recently let his engineers start using Ajax programming techniques to help in their software development. In addition, he says, he always welcomes an employee’s input when someone comes forward with a new technology that could help the business.

You can tout this as an advantage to potential hires, he notes. Being more nimble, he says, his company can respond better to technology suggestions from the ranks. “I can move a lot quicker than

#### Recruiting Kings

For more advice on how top CIOs are winning the staffing wars, read HOW TO HOOK THE TALENT YOU NEED at [www.cio.com/article/24439](http://www.cio.com/article/24439).

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the big organizations," he says. "We don't have quite the red tape and hierarchy structure."

## Once You've Got 'Em, Keep 'Em

**In some cases,** if a candidate is happy with the location and the work environment is low-pressure yet prosperous, retention will take care of itself. But people get restless and mid-market companies are acutely aware of that fact. With a little more meat on their bones than small boutiques or startups, mid-market IT departments can ensure promotions and raises from time to time. But you can do much more than that to retain your staff.

When business conditions cripple your ability to promote staffers, move people around occasionally, even if a true promotion isn't immediately available, Prosearch's Fairlie suggests. "It's a great way to keep people, because they don't get bored," she says. Alere's Roggensack has employed this strategy by encouraging some employees to move to other areas of the business.

When this occurs, however, ensure a healthy give-and-take of talent, Roggensack advises. "As we have lost good people to other areas of the company, our positions have been filled by people from other areas," he says. "For example, a key user in one of the [business side] operational areas was promoted to IT as a junior business analyst since they knew both the operation and the system."

At Amcat, regardless of whether times are good or bad, Texter also employs this strategy because he wants to be cautious that his employees don't burn out. "If you leave them on the same thing, day in and day out, year after year, they are going to get tired and they are going to get bored," he says.

Also, work with your HR team to regularly evaluate employee benefits. Strong healthcare and 401(k) benefits, for example, can compensate for sluggish growth in salaries, especially for older workers, says Washington Savannah River's Stephens.

Don't forget the value of your travel budget. While people may bask in the small-town life, most value the chance to have new experiences, says Texter. Have your team members travel on the company dollar occasionally, and you can not only quell the restlessness of living in a more remote area but also improve their professional growth, he says. Amcat frequently sends its software engineers on business trips to interact with end users of the company's software products in both the United States and Europe. The engineers get to see new cities and meet new people while

## How To IMPRESS Out-of-Town Candidates

So, you can't wow talented IT recruits with a fancy corporate campus, never mind a fancy salary? Neither can the other mid-market CIOs—but you must make the most of what you've got. Since you can't count exclusively on local talent, prepare to treat folks from across the country well, says Suzanne Fairlie, president of Prosearch, an IT staffing firm based in Philadelphia, who has helped place candidates at mid-market companies. Here are a few ground rules from recruiters and mid-market CIOs who've won at this game.

**1. Do at least one, maybe two, in-depth phone interviews** before you fly a candidate to your location. This way, you won't waste your time or theirs. "Don't just do one short interview; you need to give them time to get to know you," Fairlie says.

**2. Roll out as warm a welcome as possible.** "You don't need to have a limo waiting for them at the airport," Fairlie says. "But you need to make sure you arrange transportation and lodging. Make sure a person meets them at the airport. I've heard of [recruits] getting stuck and wheeling their suitcases down the street."

**3. During the visit, have your staff sell the job too.** If a candidate is middle-aged, talking to him about good healthcare benefits, the school system and a low crime rate will likely resonate, since taking care of the family may be a top concern. But CIOs say that fresh-out-of-college kids might relate better to their peers who recently took jobs at your organization. "We've had new hires recruit their friends," says Denise Stephens, CIO of the Washington Savannah River Co., who gathers recruits from schools like Clemson and the University of South Carolina.

**4. Tout the ability to work from home, if available.** Allowing an employee to put in some occasional time at home might just be an added perk, says Fairlie, and serve as a stark contrast to a big firm where only the big shots can utilize such an advantage. At Oklahoma-based Amcat, a call center software maker, CTO Jim Texter will tell recruits that he has even gone so far as to let some employees work remotely permanently when, say, that employee's spouse wants to relocate. "If that person is the right candidate, we try to allow them to go work in other areas and still work for us," he says.

**5. Keep it real.** While it's tempting to tell recruits that you're working with the same technologies as the big guys, don't embellish your company's résumé. "You can't say what you're not," Fairlie says. If you don't have the cutting-edge technologies, put your best foot forward but be honest, she advises.

—C.G.L.

learning new ways they might better serve customers.

"As you develop a system, you're putting your heart and soul into it and there's nothing more satisfying than to go out and have the users praise what's going on or find out what's not working quite as right," says Stephens.

For others on your team, your out-of-the-way locale's calm environment and sense of community may be just the factor that keeps them around. As Molesworth says, "In New York, when you walk down the street, nobody makes eye contact," he says. "In North Dakota, you walk down the street and people smile and wonder how you're doing. I think that carries over in the business environment." ☐

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