



7 Steps to Your Best Hire

The Ultimate Hiring
Guide for Employee
Benefit Advisors



When you have great talent, everything clicks.

You had a great week. Your team renewed four key accounts and a handful of others. One of the benefits producers sold a 1500-life group and morale is up. It feels good to have a team of service professionals that help you achieve your goals, right? But cultivating a team of the best service talent doesn't happen overnight. It's a long term process of finding, nurturing and recruiting top talent. Paying attention to your past, current and future personnel is a continuous process.

What if one of your key Account Executives left today?

Now, who will you assign this new 1500-life new case to? The Account Manager on this book isn't quite ready, and the AE's shoes will be hard to fill because of her longstanding rapport with several important clients. It doesn't take long for a competitor to catch one of those client at the right time - like in the midst of turnover - and potentially take the business.



How long would it take to find a replacement?

It's easy to get caught flat footed when an important member of your team decides to leave. How long would it take you today to replace a key Account Executive or Account Manager? At this stage of your business growth you've probably already tapped your own network of the best talent you know, and your employees have already referred the best contacts they can. You can ask your internal recruiters for help, but they are likely already overwhelmed with the number of open req's or jobs on their desk. You can always try placing a job ad on your website, Indeed, or LinkedIn, but when has that ever produced qualified candidates?

There is a better way. Use these 7 steps. There's no sugar coating it, turnover is a problem for benefit advisors and other benefits organizations. But you can combat its detrimental effects to company culture, morale and client experience by getting proactive about recruiting. Instead of scrambling, keep these 7 steps in mind.

7 Steps to Recruiting Account Executives

- 01 Understand the Opportunity
- 02 Go Beyond the Job Description
- 03 Research
- 04 Recruit
- 05 Build Relationships
- 06 Interview
- 07 Make and Offer and Close the Deal

01 Understand the Opportunity

TAKE A CLOSE LOOK AT THE problem you are trying to solve, so you can find the best available person in the market to solve it. Think about what is good and bad about your company and opportunity so you can represent your story accurately and positively in the market, and have the best chance at finding someone who will fit your culture as well as have the right skill set to accomplish the goals.

Having transparency about who you are as a company during the hiring process will ultimately lead to attracting the ideal candidate for the position. This step needs to be done first. If you don't understand exactly who you need to hire, you are setting yourself up for high turnover.



What Candidates Are Curious About

- **What types of clients will I manage?**

Share as much as you can about client size, industry, and mix of self-insured versus fully insured groups they'll handle.

- **What support will I have?**

Think about how your service team is supported in terms of people, software, and other resources like compliance or legal advice.

- **Where are the clients located, how much travel will be required?**

Have specifics in mind about physical work and location requirements.

- **What about bonuses?**

Talk to candidates about the metrics used to determine eligibility for bonuses. Give details about persistency percentages, upselling and cross-selling, as those apply in your organization.

- **Does your company participate in volunteering in the community?**

Have some examples to share, or even better, publish information about your community endeavors on your website.

- **What's the culture like?**

Do employees like each other? Is there a good relationship between the producers and the service staff?

02 Go Beyond the Job Description

A JOB DESCRIPTION IS NOT something that you have to post. We already know postings don't attract strong enough candidates. This is something to share via email with serious candidates.

Candidates are attracted to details, not generalities. If you did have a posting, and the candidate read it, that was just a start. Many compliance-approved job descriptions don't really give enough of the specifics candidates want to know, so it's left up to you to cover the details for more serious candidates.

Rather than take thirty minutes to share the details over the phone or in an interview with each interested and qualified candidate, why not lay out all the facts beforehand so you can get right down to what you both want to know.

This is like a job description but slightly different. Think of what you end up covering in real conversations. What questions typically come up? Write the answers down to the common questions, and save time



on the phone by sharing that with the candidate in advance of an interview. Understanding the answers to these questions yourself is important, because it helps you to understand the nuances of the opportunity, and therefore better connect with the right candidates.

Time-Saving Details to Send to Serious Candidates

- Who will the candidate report to? Share a LinkedIn link to their profile.
- What does the reporting structure look like? Name names. Perhaps they know, like, and respect people in the leadership hierarchy. This is a small industry.
- What is the target size for clients?
- How big of a book will they manage in terms of the number of clients and revenue?
- What will it look like when they are fully up & running?
- What is the range of the base salary?
- What is the range of the bonus and how is that calculated?
- What support is there? Share the team members' names.
- What do you expect the challenges to be in this role? The candidate should already know the challenges to the job that all the companies share, so be specific about those associated with their role and your company.
- What tools or strategies are provided to handle those challenges?
- How would you describe your culture?
- Has your company won any awards?
- Does the company do community service projects? Let candidates know that!
- Can you name some key clients to establish credibility, the way you might with prospects?
- If someone is ready to make a change, what else might attract them to your company over your competitors?
- Outline what to expect in the hiring process. How many steps, who they might meet, whether there is aptitude, personality and/or drug tests.

03 Research

AS OF TODAY, YOU MAY NOT have a large database, but use your CRM to start one.

Effective Ways To Build Your Database of Potential Account Executives

- Spend time on LinkedIn looking at profiles and send invitations whether you need to fill a position today or not. Use the search criteria at the top of LinkedIn's page under the people search.
- You can search in your area, e.g. "Dallas/Fort Worth Area," and put in the company names one by one either in "Current Company" or "Past Company," e.g. Gallagher, Mercer, Hub, Aon, etc. Then you can pan through the titles to find the people you think look like potential matches. It's probably worth paying for a higher level of LinkedIn, like Sales Navigator, since time is money. Then you can refine the search even more and use Boolean search terms in the "Keywords" section.
- For longer-term planning, consider attending conferences and association meetings solely to network.
- You may not have time to have coffee with candidate prospects the way you do with client prospects and current clients, but perhaps you can introduce yourself on the phone to initiate a relationship. It doesn't have to take longer than twenty minutes and there's no travel time.
- Try to talk to three new people per week. Then each time you have an opening you have a reason to call again and see if anything has changed for them.
- Keep track of where you are with candidates the way you do with prospects. Even unreturned emails and voicemails are a touchpoint. One day you'll catch them at just the right time, and your name will now be familiar to them.

04 Recruit

NOW THAT YOU HAVE THE VACANCY, activate that research you've been doing.

- Phone, email, text, InMail, and connect on LinkedIn to eighty to a hundred passive candidates who have the potential to be a fit for your role. Most people require multiple contacts. Over time, you'll have the general phone numbers of the companies where the talent works. The next step is getting direct numbers or extensions from the phone tree. If you're lucky, a real human might pick up the phone, and if you just ask you might get a direct number from them, or even a cell number.
- When you do actually manage to get your potential candidate on the phone, recognize they weren't expecting your call and it sometimes takes them a couple of seconds to understand who you are and why you're calling. The first eight seconds are a bit of a rodeo!



- Of course, the ultimate goal is to have a conversation to learn where they are in their career, tease out dissatisfactions or unmet aspirations at their current company, and to determine together whether your opportunity makes sense for them at this time. However, if the timing is bad now, or there's no interest, play the long game. Collect the home email and cell phone for future contact.
- You may not recruit them on this particular opening, or the next one, but one that comes up a few years from now. We all know how fast time goes. If the timing isn't right for four to six years, fine. That's here before you know it, and when the situation arises, then, how nice that this time you have a great candidate, primed and ready to go?



05 Build Relationships

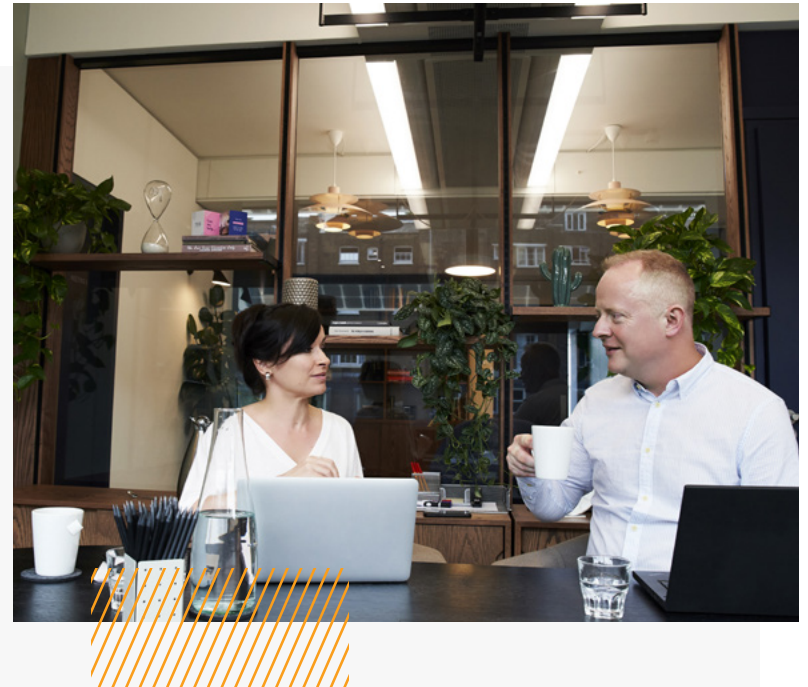
Use the 6 Prime Motivators.

1. Better quality of life for the candidate and their family.

This motivator includes both the quality of the candidate's work and their personal life. The best recruiters deeply understand the benefits a change could bring, and share that vision with their potential hires.

2. More responsibility in relation to their current position.

This could include not just additional responsibilities but also new challenges or size/scope of assignments. Specific to a client management role, that could mean whether they get to work on self-funded business and whether their current firm is even able to win the big groups or the kind of business they want to be working on that challenges



them. Do they have the compliance support, ben admin software, worksite and voluntary expertise, underwriters, or technical analysts and other tools and resources they need to be successful where they are? If they lack those resources where they are, are they something you can offer?

3. More opportunities for advancement in the future.

Is this position going to offer them a step forward in their career? Offering a growth opportunity doesn't mean their title has to change, but simply that they will be adding skills that will make them more marketable in the future.

4. Physically closer, or more time for family.

Perhaps moving to a new position means moving to a new area, city, or state. For the candidate, it might be a chance to get closer to home, which might be a shorter commute, or even moving back to a home town. The new position might be an opportunity to work remotely, and spend time with family and friends. Highlight the benefits of a move.

5. A boss and team they like.

It's well known that people often don't leave companies, they leave people, specifically bosses. Perhaps they have a boss who is micro-manager, or

completely distant or absent, or unfair, or unethical, or someone they feel they can't learn from or for whatever reason they just don't respect anymore. The same could be true with having to work with a toxic team member.

6. Money.

If someone is moving for money only, beware. They are a prime candidate for a counteroffer. It's easy for their current company to solve that problem by giving them more money. Of course, the money will ultimately have to be there, but it should be way further down on the list of motivators.

Good Communication

Developing these skills will optimize your interviews with candidates.

- Ask open-ended questions.
- Give long pauses to hear the answers.
- Use minimal encouragers to keep them talking (uh-huh, I see).
- Use mirroring techniques to encourage them to expand. (Repeat the last thing they said with a raised tone). “No budget for additional support so you’re overwhelmed?”
- Paraphrase what you heard them say, so you know you understand the issues and they know you’ve heard them.
- Emotionally label where appropriate. “You sound pretty frustrated.” (Annoyed, unappreciated, exhausted, overwhelmed, etc.).

Once they say, “That’s right,” they are open to hearing about what you have to offer!



In the course of this conversation, you will also be able to ascertain whether they have a track record of accomplishments, skills, and personality to fit your culture and opportunity. At this point, you can ask them to follow up with you by sending a resume. I also ask for a candidate profile. This is a simple list of questions that answers some of the basics you'd want to know, like, "How well-versed are you with self-funding? How big is the book you're handling currently in terms of the number of clients, revenue, average group size?"

There are a few benefits to having a candidate complete a profile.

The first is that you get answers to your questions and now notes have been pre-made for you, so

you have something to refer back to. This is helpful if you're fortunate enough to talk to a number of people and need to keep track of who said what. They are also useful to prepare other members of the team who will interview.

Second, you get a writing sample from your candidate. You'd be surprised sometimes.

Finally, they are putting some time and effort into it. They may seem excited on the phone, but if they don't take the time to complete the profile in a timely fashion, or at all, then that tells you something. The opposite is also true. They may not have been willing to admit a lot of dissatisfaction in an initial call, but if they complete the profile, especially if they do it right away, there's more there

than meets the eye. Actions speak louder than words.

Insisting on a completed profile is something to gauge carefully. Passive candidates might object to yet more work on top of a busy workload, but it's how you position it. You could decide to pass on the profile and meet for coffee and woo a little more first, but proceed with caution.

95% of candidates who end up taking the job will complete the profile.

The ones who don't are invariably the candidates who pull out at the 11th hour, or take a counteroffer once they give notice.

06 Interview

The first meeting

Have the first meeting “off-campus” and have them meet with the person who’d be their immediate supervisor so they can see if there’s chemistry. You are wooing these candidates who aren’t necessarily actively looking. They are not so much interviewing as gathering information in the first meeting. Meeting for coffee, lunch, or a drink, takes a bit of the pressure off and they don’t have to feel like they’re officially putting their name in the hat (despite completing a profile). This is not a time for an HR interview or applying online. They are not a serious candidate just yet. They have to be “hooked” before you can start giving them ‘official’ steps to take.

Stay with them throughout the process

In between official interviews, be a sounding board, a coach, and play devil’s advocate. Help them to manage their emotions and answer their questions over the phone.



07 Make an Offer and Close the Deal

Deciding to make an offer

If the second meeting goes well, it's appropriate toward the end to start asking what it will be like for them to give notice, even if there are a few more steps in your hiring process.

What could their employer do to keep them, if anything? With the best candidates, there's nothing. They don't like their boss, or the types/size clients they work on, or the commute, and so on.

If it's just money, that's tenuous at best

You can continue with the candidate (you miss 100% of the shots you don't take), but you want to keep your search going and work hard to have another strong candidate. You risk any time invested with someone who is a candidate for a counteroffer. However, given the dearth of talent sometimes you have to take your chances and move forward with someone who is a risk. If you've done your job, you just won't be caught off guard when it happens.



After planting early seeds regarding a counteroffer, when you know you're going to offer the job, you have to have the conversation again. Prepare them for what they might experience when they give notice.

Expecting and Dealing with a Counteroffer

If you have found the right candidate, the odds are they will get a counteroffer. Human nature being what it is, we often take things for granted. However, when a candidate goes in to give notice, this is when they will receive a showering of love and affection and compliments the likes of which they have probably never heard! “You are such a valued member of the team. You are one of the best AE’s we have. We love you, our clients love you! We see great things in the future for you here.” To an employee who probably has never heard this, it can be flattering and overwhelming and can cause them to second-guess their decision. It is often enough to get them to stay.

On a side note, think about this. Perhaps the need you are filling wouldn’t have come about if you were in the habit of telling employees THIS long before they ever get to the point of talking to another company! Sometimes it’s amazing how little a small show of appreciation can keep someone happy. This is often more important than money.

For now, you are on the other side of the equation. You want to hire this candidate, and their current employer is going to fight to hold onto them. Think of all the things that you would do in that employer’s position. They will try everything to remove whatever is ailing the employee.



Money will be the easiest thing to solve. However, if you are offering them a promotion but there simply isn't the room where they are, you've got something the current employer doesn't have. If you have the resources or the size groups that they want to work on that the current employer doesn't have, then you have a great chance of seeing this through.

Most importantly, you need to review this with the candidate. Talk to them about how they think this conversation will go, and prepare them to handle it.

Offering a candidate a job is not your goal. Your goal is to have them work for you. This is a crucial stage in the process. Don't skip it.

Remember, Recruiting Doesn't Stop When Your Offer is Accepted

Recruiting a great long term employee doesn't stop when your offer is officially accepted. In fact, it continues well past the first day of work. Have a plan for the first day, week, month, even 90 days for onboarding and retention.

The first days are the most important, but continue to



invest time in your new recruit by introducing them to peers, facilitating training and building a positive and rewarding experience. Stay in touch with your team's goals, aspirations, and needs long term, so you don't have to recruit again any time soon!

Implement the 7 Steps to Hiring Top Talent, and Grow the Way You Want.

RECRUITING TOP TALENT FOR YOUR BENEFITS

agency is an ongoing process that can yield incredible results in the form of a productive, happy, long term team. Implementing the 7 stages you've learned here provides an important base for recruiting success.

An ineffective recruiting strategy drains you of time and energy. A lack of great service talent can limit your growth, especially when an Account Executive leaves your team unexpectedly. Set yourself up for ongoing growth and success with attention to your hiring pipeline on an ongoing basis.

If it all seems like a lot, that's because it is.



Recruiting Services for Employee Benefits Advisors

We created the 7 steps. Let us help you use them
to your advantage.

SCHEDULE A CALL



About The Spencer James Group

The Spencer James Group is a boutique insurance recruitment agency in Denver, Colorado. Since 2003, our principals personally execute every phase of every search process to ensure genuine, lasting success for both candidates and clients.

Our nationwide database covers a wide spectrum of insurance broker/consultants, health insurance, ancillary, stop-loss and worksite carriers, ancillary, stop-loss and traditional general agents, enrollment companies, TPA's, cost containment companies, benefits administration and benefits software companies.

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Client Experiences



John Kirke

President | CCIG (formerly President, Benefits and Total Rewards at IMA Financial Group)

“Steve and the Spencer James Group are exceptional, value-creating business partners in the world of employee benefits consulting and brokerage talent acquisition. Steve helped our Employee Benefits division recruit and land incredible, top-tier client-facing talent that accelerated a critical market for our team. Steve invested in our business, deeply knew our culture, and was our first call for talent needs.”



Mitch Michener

Partner | Kennedy, Michener Benefits, LLC

“With their screening and review process The Spencer James Group was able to present to me just the right candidate! I did not need to sort through a bunch of resumes, web services, or missed appointments.”





Paul Champi

Former AVP | Human Resources at Reliance Standard.

"I've worked with The Spencer James Group on 50+ searches for both sales and service on a national basis since 2004. Over that time period, I got to know Steve very well both professionally and personally. Steve is a highly industry knowledgeable and sophisticated search professional with a comprehensive National database of employee benefits and financial services candidates. He is a "student of business" who always stays abreast of industry organizational, regulatory, compliance and M&A developments. I would highly recommend Steve for search assignments in the group insurance and financial services sectors ranging from sales to services positions through the executive level on a national basis."



David Schneeweis

RVP Sales | Symetra

"I highly recommend The Spencer James Group to any firm or candidate looking to enhance productivity and results."

