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Bosses gripe about flood of bad hires

by ADINA GENN

While interviewing job candidates over the past five years, Larry Shulman, CEO of Farmingdale-based L.M.S. Technical Services, thought that hiring people with broad certifications would give him the best result.

Turned out he was wrong.

The techno-geeks he hired couldn't complete the work, his managers found.

"I was hiring in the old way," Shulman said. "Credentials turned out to be a negative indicator" of being a good network support engineer in the Long Island market. That's why in 2003, Shulman changed his hiring process. He still selects the candidates and conducts the first round of interviews, but he leaves the final decision-making to his company's vice president and service dispatch manager, who "know better what we need" in the trenches.

And while Shulman faced some hardship, it could have been worse.

For instance, one company hired a joker who put vodka in the water cooler. Another firm used the company cell phone account to run a drug and prostitution ring.

All this adds up to a fundamental concern among employers that new hires are likely to be bad hires.

According to a survey on the subject by Caliper, a Princeton, N.J.-based human resources consulting firm, twice as many employers say it's more difficult to hire new employees than to effectively manage existing staff.

In November, the firm surveyed executives from 400 companies nationwide on the subject of bad hires.

Ira Halperin, who heads the corporate practice unit at law firm Meltzer Lippe & Goldstein in Mineola, said hiring, especially on Long Island, is "extremely difficult."

"I've been actively looking to add attorneys for over a year," Halperin said. His efforts include working with headhunters and placing advertisements in various magazines. "The number of resumes is small. People aren't looking to move."

John Sullivan, vice president of Farmingdale-based Delta Computer Group, faces the same challenges in hiring salespeople.

One new hire for the company's Atlanta office seemed to have scores of contacts. But there was a problem. The rep's car was in the shop, so he had no transportation. That rep didn't last long and neither did the next one.

The third hire brought in steady revenue, but then "decided he didn't want to do it anymore." Sullivan, who recently hired another rep, said he now asks all candidates about the status of their automobiles.

Halperin relies on his gut instinct when interviewing.

"Talk to them and try to figure out if they're playing you or not," he said.

Of course, there's no guarantee that what you see is what you get. But Halperin said that technology combined with the outgrowth of networking makes the process easier.

"Today there's so much information. I can do a Google search, or put an e-mail out to the people I know," Halperin said. "You can get references that way. Years ago, you didn't have that ability."