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Putting Your Best Foot Forward

A How-to For Navigating the Recruiting Process

FORUM ONE™

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- I've worked with Drupal since 2007, and WordPress in a much more limited capacity since 2014

- I have worked for digital agencies specializing in open-source development for the bulk of my career

- I currently lead a team of ~40 at Forum One

- I have held the role of "hiring manager" for more than 10 years

- I hired 8 new tech team members at Forum One since April 2019

- I'm looking to fill a Technical Architect, Senior Developer and Front-end Developer role now! Interested?

- I have been a hiring manager for 10 years, and have worked with Drupal longer than that.
- I have spent the entirety of my development career working for digital agencies. Prior to F1, I worked for agencies who operated in a "start up" culture where I was employee 1 or 2 on the development team, and my job was to build the team from the ground up.
- I now lead a team of ~40 backend, frontend, and JS app devs, as well as SREs.
- Though I am mostly a Drupal dev myself, over the years I've recruited:
  - FEDs (CSS)
  - JS devs (React)
  - Python devs
  - WP devs
  - Team leads, including a director of engineering
  - And my biggest challenge: a Site Reliability Engineer

Before we get started, a quick note about Forum One...

About Forum One

We've been at this for 23 years.

We've partnered with more than 1,000 organizations and government agencies.

We've helped them better reach their mission on over 2,000 projects.

We are experts in digital strategy, creative, technology, data, and user experience.

We create experiences that make an impact.

- Forum One is a…
- Full-service, Mission-driven digital agency
- Partnering with organizations and government agencies
- Helping achieve their goals by creating impactful digital experiences

Featured Clients

Here are some of our clients. Tech-wise, we primarily work with open-source. We do a lot of Drupal, WP and React development. We also manage hosting for a lot of clients, so we have a system administration team on staff. Our latest big tech challenges include CRM integration (Salesforce), Data visualization platforms (D3/React with a CMS backend), platform development in D8, content syndication, etc.

Why is technical recruiting so hard?

- Supply and demand, which is nothing new in Drupal. In fact, Dries wrote a blog post about it way back in 2007 where he advised hiring managers to focus on a strong CS background and train up on Drupal. But...Drupal has a well-known steep learning curve, and that didn't get any better with the release of D8.

- The field is becoming more specialized. "Web developer" has turned into "Backend developer" and "Front-end developer" and the latter has fragmented further with the addition of "JavaScript developer."

- With an increase in specialization, I am still seeing a lot of generalized "kitchen sink" style job postings, and that makes it hard to attract the right candidate because the candidate has a hard time understanding what the job's day to day will really be like. And they generally have other options...

- Whenever I get frustrated with how much effort a particular recruiting challenge is requiring, I remind myself of this quote. The right candidate is worth waiting for. Early this year, I waited FIVE months for the right JS dev hire, and I'm so glad I did.

> **"**
>
> "Competing for tech talent never gets easier, nor is it a perfect mathematical equation. Instead it is about understanding your market, knowing what your current and prospective employees are looking for, and doing your best to create the environment that attracts the right workers to your company."
>
> Stacey Carroll, Payscale

- Today's candidates can afford to be picky. Most have tons of messages from recruiters hanging out in their LinkedIn inbox at any given time. So how can you be competitive as a hiring manager?
- Remember that the highest financial offer doesn't always win. Job seekers I talk to want: flexibility, remote work, professional development opportunities, career advancement opportunities, dedicated time to contribute to open-source projects, and they care very deeply about what kind of projects/clients they will work on.
- To stand a chance in today's recruiting landscape, you have to market yourself and your company, and you have to sell the position. Yes, the candidates will sell themselves to you, but you must also do some selling, too.

The Recruiting Process at F1

- Post the position and begin outreach efforts
- Collect applications in our Applicant Tracking System (ATS)
- Phone screen with our recruiter
- Phone interview with hiring manager
- Skills assessment
- Technical interview
- Reference check
- Offer negotiation

These are the steps in the recruiting process at Forum One. We have this posted on our website, as we think it is important to let applicants know what to expect.

Outreach efforts include: asking for referrals from current employees (we offer a referral bonus and have gotten a lot of great employees this way), posting on social media, posting on job sites, engaging our networks (yes, LinkedIn!), sometimes working with external recruiters. We also make an effort to meet people at camps, conferences and cons.

We use an ATS to help keep us organized. This also serves as our database for future positions.

Recruiter phone screen: Salary requirements, go over the position in more detail, more information about the company

Phone interview: In-depth description of the position and the technical team. Focuses on soft skills (communication, team work, problem solving, etc) Candidate's opportunity to talk about what they are looking for in their next job. My goal: find a potential fit on both sides.

Skills assessment: depends on the position, but we generally ask for code. For architect positions, we also do some scenario-based work.

Technical interview: Our chance to make sure the candidate can meet the technical

requirements of the position. We like to see: evidence of good problem solving skills, humbleness, commitment to learning new things, knowledge of and adherence to best practices in the field.

Reference check: Handled by our recruiter. Completely confidential -- as the hiring manager, I do not get a ton of details.

Offer negotiation process: we deliver all offers via email in writing, on official letterhead. We generally time box the offer (we've been ghosted a fair number of times!) but we are comfortable negotiating either by email, phone or video call, depending on the candidate's location.

Tips for Hiring Managers

1. Write a job description

2. Design the interview process

3. Perform a skills assessment

4. Negotiate an offer

How many hiring managers do we have the group today by show of hands? The next set of slides is just for you!

We'll talk about:
- How to write a job description
- The interview process
- Skills assessments
- Negotiating offers

How to Write a Job Description

- Write a realistic description and assign a specific job title

- Define your "ideal" team member

- Avoid the "kitchen sink" posting

- Avoid unconscious bias

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These are the main points I will cover when writing up a job description.

Job titles & duties

- Don't be clever with the job title.
- Be specific.
- Be descriptive.
- Be honest.
- Tell people *why* they want to join your team.

Don't be "cute" : A few years ago, I used to see job postings for developers under the title of "Code Ninja," but I hope this has fallen out of fashion. It might look cool on a business card, but potential candidates don't understand what you're looking for and they may pass you by. Another reason is because people often use the job title to do salary research and set their expectations. If you are using a job title no one else is using, it is really hard for people to guess how much the position might pay.

Be specific: Rather than posting for a "Full- stack developer," name the level and the primary technology or technologies you need (i.e. Junior React Developer, Senior LAMP Developer, etc)

Be descriptive: I see a lot of job postings that are focused on what the company wants a candidate to bring to it, but many don't sell the position or company back to the potential employee. What will be the day-to-day responsibilities of this position? What kind of projects will the new hire work on? Be honest and give people a clear picture of what they can expect in the role. Also -- be as upfront as possible. Is this a remote position or on-site? Is there weekend or evening work expected? Is is contract to hire? I find it is best to get deal breakers out in the open as early as possible so no one's time gets wasted.

Tell people why: Aside from the standard benefits information, describe why someone might want to join your team. Is there opportunity for career growth? A great work life balance? A commitment to supporting open-source communities? This is your opportunity to sell the position! What makes it a unique opportunity? For F1, we find

our biggest selling point is the type of clients we work with.

Ideal team player
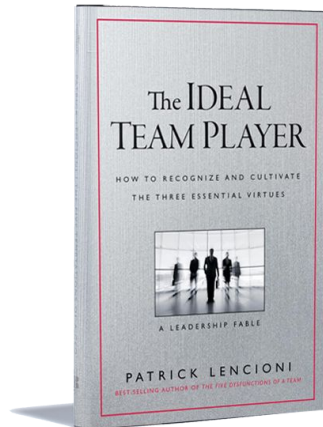
F1's executive team went through an exercise earlier this year to define our "core values." These are the values we want all of our employees to possess, and it was based on research and a lot of discussion as a team about what attributes our most successful and happiest employees bring to work. We have worked these core values into a lot of different areas, including recruiting.

These core values are "soft skills." Some of F1's Core values are: commitment to learning, being proactive, being a joyful collaborator.

I highly recommend that hiring managers go through a similar exercise. Yes, you need solid tech chops. But what other characteristics do you need on your team? Once you define them, you can evaluate for these characteristics as you review resumes, and during interviews. It is also helpful to get these attributed listed in your job descriptions.

Avoid the "kitchen sink"

Headless / decoupled Drupal development. JAVA development or support experience. Experience upgrading and migrating legacy web applications. Experience participating in Agile projects. Familiarity with ColdFusion, Site Executive CMS. Expert knowledge of Drupal 8 theming, module configuration, custom module development, security. Expert knowledge of PHP and MySQL, PHP frameworks (Symfony, Zend). Expert knowledge of HTML, CSS (w/ preprocessing), JavaScript, Typescript, Bootstrap. Expert knowledge of RESTful services, JS frameworks (Angular, React, Express). Demonstrable experience with UI and UX principles, concepts, and techniques. Demonstrable success on Drupal projects as a technical lead or senior individual contributor. Excellent oral and written communication skills. Excellent time management, organization, and attention to detail.

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I think we've all seen job descriptions like this. By the way, the job title for this position was Senior Drupal Developer.

The Unicorn

- Unrealistic expectations
- Encompasses several positions

Image credit Inez Pimentel via Unsplash

At Forum One, that single job posting would realistically be divided among 6-8 separate positions.

Avoid unconscious bias

- Identify your necessary requirements and list those only
  - Move non-essential characteristics under "nice-to-have" requirements
- Use gender neutral language
  - Using terms like "hacker," "code ninja," "rockstar," and "guru" will typically put people off and can come across as not serious
- Avoid corporate jargon
- Share your company's commitment to diversity

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- You may have heard the statistic: Men will apply for a job when the meet only 60% of qualifications, but women apply only if they meet 100% of them. (HBR: https://hbr.org/2014/08/why-women-dont-apply-for-jobs-unless-theyre-100-qualified).
  - Women are more likely to believe that "required qualifications" are required, and they said they didn't want to put themselves out there if they are likely to fail (22% compared to 13% of men)
  - Women are more likely to say they "followed the guidelines of who should apply" (15% vs 8% of men)
- It is better to write your descriptions with as few requirements as possible and non-essential skills moved to "nice to have"
- Before requiring a computer science degree, consider that women and other minority groups have not always felt welcome in CS departments.
- Use gender neutral language: https://empiric.com/blog/unconscious-bias-in-job-descriptions/
- Avoid Jargon: things like KPI and SLA may keep young people from applying (https://business.linkedin.com/talent-solutions/blog/job-descriptions/2017/cut-the-jargon-and-3-other-tips-for-entry-level-job-description).
- Share your commitment to diversity, beyond the EEOC declaration. Do you offer family leave benefits? Can a role have a non-traditional work schedule? Do you have mechanisms in place to make sure people are paid fairly for their work, etc.

Interview & Evaluating

- Let's shift over to the interviewing process….

Design an interview process

- Prepare a list of questions and skills assessments you'll use for all candidates

- But leave room for personalized conversations

- Decide who candidates should meet at your organization

- Be respectful of people's time

- Trust your gut

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Prepare questions: This list of questions should be designed to give you insight on whether the person is qualified for the job. Avoid riddles and puzzles meant to put people on the spot, even though this can be popular in tech. There are lots of ways to assess someone's problem solving skills without forcing them to solve an obscure math problem on the spot. But leave room for personalized conversations.

It is good for both you and the candidate if they have a chance to meet with several people from the organization. At Forum One, the typical candidate meets with between 4-6 people throughout the process.

I interview a lot of candidates that are already employed. Try not to require rounds and rounds and rounds of in-person interviews. Be willing to meet with people over lunch or at the very beginning/end of the workday so they don't have to take a whole day off. Be open to phone interviews or interviews conducted over video chat, if possible.

If an interview doesn't feel right, step back and try to figure out why. Many times in my career I've proceeded with a candidate who looked great on paper and I've always ended up regretting it. You will usually know when you meet the right candidate, and the right person is worth waiting for! Remember that a bad fit is very expensive and disruptive for both parties.

Skills assessments

- Define the goal

- Make sure it's related to the role

- Be respectful of people's time

- Don't use people for free work

At F1, we have used a variety of ways to assess people's technical skills set, including:

- Asking for a code sample: A lot of candidates do not have one they can provide for whatever reason. We've also received code samples from school projects or that were produced by a team, and it is difficult to evaluate our candidate's work as a result.
  - I have similar thoughts on requiring a d.o profile. There are a lot of reasons why people might not have a lot of commits -- can't share code, imposter syndrome, other interests/commitments, etc
- Having candidates complete a "quiz" during the interview: we found it hard to design questions that truly gave us insight to the candidate's ability to perform the job well. It gave us very limited information about the candidate's overall knowledge and didn't give insight on their problem solving skills.
- On-site coding challenge: we've given people a set of instructions that essentially asked them to write a class with methods in Codepen is JS. The drawback here is that people are nervous and being put on the spot is stressful. Under similar circumstances, could you write your best code? We compensated for this by making the instructions fairly easy, which again, limits the insight you'll get.
- "Homework": A few days before the interview, we give candidates instructions for a coding challenge. We ask them not to spend more than 2 hours on it, and

- we've made the assignment fairly open-ended so that there is more than one answer. We've been using this method for the last few months, and while our assignment still needs tweaking, we've found it more useful than some other methods.
- Scenario-based with prep: A few days before the interview, we give the candidates a couple of scenarios that we plan to ask them about in the interview. The purpose is to allow them to consider the scenarios in advance, but we do not expect them to deliver any actual work to us outside of the interview. These scenarios are pretty real world for the role we're interviewing for.

In my experience, the most important consideration for a skills assessment is that it really should include elements of the day-to-day role, if at all possible. If you need a Drupal module developer who can turn business requirements into a custom module, design a skills assessment that has them demonstrate their knowledge of the Drupal API.

When going the homework route, make sure that you are not asking people for a lot of time. Remember that many of your candidates have jobs and other commitments already.

Finally: job candidates are not sources of free labor. I've heard horror stories of companies assigning tasks to interviewees that were turned into client deliverables. This is completely unfair and you should never do that.

Negotiating offers

- Do your research on salary

- Expect to negotiate on more than just salary

- Avoid high-pressure tactics

- Close the loop

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Salary: Make sure you know the market demands for salaries and make a fair offer. At F1, we conduct market compensation studies regularly and form ranges accordingly. Again, this is another reason why you should not use cutesy job titles -- so that you can form apples to apples comparisons with salaries from similar organizations to yours.

Other negotiations: As I mentioned earlier, the candidates I negotiate with are often interested in more than just salary. They want to negotiate aspects of the role, schedule flexibility, remote work, support for professional development, etc. Be prepared to be as flexible as possible during these discussions, but remember that you must be fair to your current employees, too.

Do not pressure a candidate to take the job, even though it is tempting. At the end of the day, you want a candidate who is excited to join your team, not someone who feels coerced.

If at any stage of negotiation, things fall apart: be professional and leave the door open. You never know what the future will bring.

If you decide not to move forward with a candidate, tell them. If *you* are the candidate, and you've decided not to take an offer: please tell the recruiter or hiring manager. We will not take it personally (I promise) and this allows us to move on to other candidates.

Tips for Candidates

1. What kind of work are you seeking?

2. Define your non-negotiables

3. Resume tips

4. What to expect

Here are a few things to keep in mind as you go through the process as a candidate!

What kind of work are you seeking?

- Look for a position you will find challenging and interesting
- Consider what you want your day-to-day to look like and target your search
- What kind of environment allows you to do your best work?

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- When looking for a new position, try to stretch yourself. Don't just zero in on descriptions that would be a lateral move or where you already meet all of the requirements. Find something that offers you opportunities to do new things, learn new skills and grow. Maybe that is new tech skills. Maybe it is larger, more complex projects. Maybe it is product development vs website support work. You don't want to be bored on Day 1.
- What kind of tasks would you find engaging? What kinds of tasks do you hate? Target your job search that offer more of the former and less of the latter.
- Do you work best in on a stable team? Do you like to have several projects going at once? Do you prefer to work a traditional schedule? There are a lot of options out there.

Define your non-negotiables

- Type of work
- Work schedule and location
- Tech stack
- Culture and work environment
- Work-life balance

And don't be afraid to put them on the table! But also, keep an open mind. Just as hiring managers shouldn't expect unicorns, very few jobs are going to meet all of your criteria -- so boil down your list to the few things that are essential to you and apply accordingly.

- Type of work
- Work schedule and location
- Tech stack
- Culture and work environment
- Work-life balance

Resume tips

- List only the tech skills where you have significant experience
- Keep the layout simple
- Tell a story
  - Focus on accomplishments
  - Show how your career has progressed
- Cover letters and objectives

I prefer if candidates only list technologies that they are familiar with and have worked with previously. Don't just list things your previous company used if you didn't use it yourself.

Our ATS uses OCR to pull text out of PDFs. If the resume has a really complex layout, it makes it very hard to read once the text is pulled in to the ATS's application. Also, make sure your resume meets expectations for the role you're applying for. I would expect more design from a front-end/CSS developer candidate than I would a backend developer.

The best resumes show a natural progression of someone's career, in terms of job titles that increase in seniority and the complexity of the responsibilities the person held. If your resume doesn't tell a good story (maybe you have a gap, maybe you took a few lateral moves, maybe you switched careers, etc) the best place to offer an explanation is a cover letter.

List each position with the job title(s) held and some bullet points that talk about what you accomplished. Don't just rehash the position's original description.

Personally, I skim over "objectives" but I do read cover letters.

What to expect

- There is going to be waiting
- There are going to be skills assessments in some form or another
- You're probably going to answer the same questions from a bunch of people
- If you get an offer, there is probably going to be some negotiation

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What to expect?

- There will likely be a lot of waiting involved. Scheduling interviews takes time.
- You'll probably be asked to participate in a skills assessment of some sort.
- You might get asked the same questions over and over.
- If you get an offer, there will probably be some negotiation involved.

Retaining talent

I'll switch gears now from recruiting to briefly talk about retaining and motivating your new team member. You just went through a LOT of effort to get them. How do you keep them?

Performance problems

- UGH!
- Try to determine the reason
    - Rate how knowledgeable the person is from 1-10
    - Rate the person's desire to perform their job well from 1-10
    - Plot the results

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You've onboarded your new employee, given the time to settle in and...you're noticing some performance problems. Nw what?

As a manager, this is hands down the hardest situation I have to handle. A lot of performance issues can be turned around with understanding and effort. Keep an open mind and don't lose hope!

The first step when confronted with a performance issue is to see if you can find a reason why. If you know the reason, you might be able to fix it (or help the employee fix it). I find the following exercise helpful:
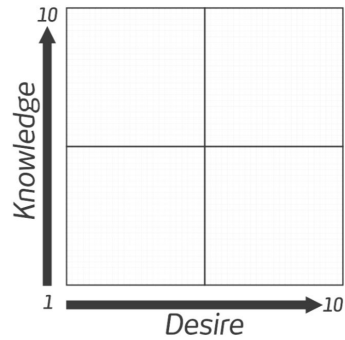
Rate the person's knowledge/skills to perform the position from 1-10
Rate the person's desire to perform their job well from 1-10

Graph the results and consider what quadrant the person falls in.

Managing Performance

Retaining Talent

Bottom left quadrant: You made a selection error in the hiring process. Re-visit your hiring/recruiting practices.

Bottom right quadrant: This person needs training. Get them some!

Top left & right quadrants: these are true motivation problem. Put on your detective hat and try to figure out why!

Frederick Herzberg's Hygiene Factors

De-motivators

- Lack of job security or role status
- Ineffective or obstructive policies or practices
- Ineffective supervision or guidance
- Poor working conditions (physical)
- Negative peer relations
- Personal life challenges

Maybe a reason is on this list. These are the "hygiene factors" that cause low engagement and job dissatisfaction, according to psychologist Frederick Herzberg. Your job as a manager is to identify which of these factors are present in your organization and try to address them.

- Lack of job security or role status
- Ineffective or obstructive policies or practices
- Ineffective supervision or guidance
- Poor working conditions (physical)
- Negative peer relations
- Personal life challenges -- refer to EAP

What if you're a middle manager? Listen and advocate for change wherever possible. It helps just to listen sometimes.

Drivers of motivation

McClelland's Human Motivation Theory

- Power & Influence
- Achievement
- Affiliation

Social psychologist David McClelland's work found that all humans (regardless of gender, culture, background, etc) have three drivers of motivation. Most people will have a primary one.

Power & influence: motivated by their proximity to powerful and influential people and the opportunity to persuade and influence others. They love to have influence of long-range, high-visibility outcomes. They like strategic planning. They love ambiguity in their assignments because they welcome the opportunity to shape and define. They like to collaborate -- but only if they are in charge. They like tasks that give them the opportunity to expand their networks and extend their influence over major organizational priorities.

Achievement: motivated by accomplishment and results. They like well-defined projects with a clear start and finish. They need to know the goal and what they have to do to cross the finish line. They like quantifiable (quantitative metrics) that are measures of success. They prefer to work by themselves, but if they have to work with others -- they want to work with other achievers. They need regular feedback with checkpoints & milestones. They like moderately challenging tasks (if it is too easy, there is no sense of accomplishment when it is complete.) They avoid high-risk projects at all costs.

Affiliation: motivated by the opportunity to interact socially and collaborate with others. They do not want to be put in competition with their colleagues because that interferes with the relationships that value. They like opportunities to meet and greet --

think client-facing projects where they are in charge of building relationships. They need clarity in their tasks; they do not like ambiguity.

Thank you!

Let's discuss!

Tell me about your recruiting experiences.