

# ULTIMATE ACHIEVERS

M A G A Z I N E

**Talent Acquisition &  
Optimization:  
What We Get Wrong  
And How To Make It  
Better**

**The Secrets to Vetting  
Better Candidates**

**How I Identify The  
Perfect Client Companies  
To Work With**

**Steve Higginbotham**  
**Smart Technology - Human Touch**

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## TALENT ACQUISITION & OPTIMIZATION: WHAT WE GET WRONG AND HOW TO MAKE IT BETTER

By Brian K. Wright

I had the honor of interviewing Steve Higginbotham recently, and we discussed a lot of great topics including talent acquisition and optimization, how to improve vetting candidates for open positions, his consulting work with large and small companies, and much more!

**Brian:** Welcome, Steve. Did you envision early on that you'd be where you are today?

**Steve:** Absolutely not. From a child that was born and raised in one county and not seeing much of the world, to being in the U.S. Navy and traveling the world, to 27 years within recruiting and talent acquisition, I didn't think that this is what my career would be.

**Brian:** Tell us about your career. How has it unfolded for you?

**Steve:** When I first started 27 years ago, I had the opportunity to meet and work with an impressive corporate CEO of a privately held staffing firm, and he shook my hand one day at a national sales meeting and said, "Work hard and treat people fair."

When I look at my career path and how it's unfolded, that has been my guiding principle. I'm going to do what's right by the companies that I support, as well as the clients, the candidates I find positions for, and myself.



It has helped me through the years where I started out in recruitment for a variety of industries and found myself moving from recruitment into operations, and then Talent Acquisition project management. And now, it has culminated into everything I do within my consulting practice for recruitment and Talent Acquisition.

In my first ten years I was with one company. I had a couple of different jobs, but that didn't serve me later on in my more mature adult life where I wanted to challenge myself, to progress and thrive, creating and building Talent Acquisition businesses for my clients.

I also served in the military, and one of the reasons why I joined was to do one of the hardest jobs they had, which was to work within the U.S. Navy SEALs, their special operations group.

**Brian:** Wow.

**Steve:** Very tough job. I've trained with many of them, and coached a lot of them in career transition more recently. But when I came out of the military, got married, had a family, and had jobs

within corporate America, I've always kept those principles that I want to strive to be the best. I want to do the toughest jobs, and I want to take on the biggest and greatest challenges. Not only have I embraced this, I've acted upon it every step of the way in my career journey.

When I left that first company after 10 years, that's exactly what I did. That was my mindset. I wanted something that was going to challenge me and help shape my career and evolve me into the person that I am today.

**Brian:** You spent 27 years in the recruiting industry, and you talk about talent acquisition and optimization. What exactly does that mean to you?

**Steve:** I started in this industry back when we had the Yellow Pages and carried a beeper.

I felt like things got revolutionized when I got my first cell phone and when I stopped receiving faxed resumes. Monster came up and I had free resumes at my fingertips.

That was just the beginning of it. You look now and there's LinkedIn and AI software that can parse through resumes and navigate those choppy waters. And now, we're on smartphones and can apply to jobs on our phone versus a computer.

In the 27 years, I've seen a few major shifts and changes. Same thing with the way in which we recruit. Nowadays, I feel like it's not as humanized as it could be. People hire people that they trust, like, and respect. They don't hire resumes.

It's great to automate, but they're still a person at the other side of that resume. So, it has to have a humanized approach.

And I feel that's where people and companies get it wrong. They are moving so fast, they forget about the human touch.

**Brian:** Absolutely.

**Steve:** When I look at the recruitment industry, there's some things that are done really well, and other things that are done really poorly. Having a good talent acquisition team can make a difference.

And it's not just going through quick resumes or having the interview, but it's everything, making sure that **interviewers** and **candidates** are truly engaged. Candidate engagement refers to the ongoing process of building meaningful communication with job seekers (applicants) throughout the recruitment journey. It's not just about sending resumes or updates—it's about creating a connection that keeps candidates interested, informed, and aligned with your company's values and culture. And that's the difference between candidates and applicants. The human connection.

And now, that's also moved into the candidate experience, not just once they get hired, but how they move through their journey within a company. That's how I look at my role and what I've done over the years.

**Brian:** You mentioned that there are things that people do very poorly in terms of vetting candidates. What are



some of those things?

**Steve:** First and foremost, job descriptions that a lot of the companies write are either archaic or not specific enough. They're a little too generic and too open.

I'll give you one example, and part of this is based on compliance. People know that they might want someone with five years of experience, so they'll put three plus years of experience. So, it opens up the candidate pool a little too wide. You'll get people with two or three years, and then you'll get people with 20 years.

And it doesn't mean that you wouldn't hire someone with 20 years of experience, but let's narrow down a little bit. No longer are the days where they put five to seven years. And again, they shouldn't because someone with eight years might be very well qualified for that job. You don't know until you interview them.

The second thing they do is they give tasks to the wrong person, meaning that they have a coordinator who is overworked, probably underpaid, and doesn't have the time to sift through the quality resumes.

And again, how can you tell a person from their resume? Some resumes are one page, some are two. The hard thing is when people look at resumes, they tend to look for what candidates don't have. What are they missing? This is standard human bias. AI and assessments could help companies predict better qualified candidates if they could focus more on the hiring practice versus their time to fill metrics.

We don't have time to screen 20 candidates. We only want to shortlist the top five or seven. And then we give that to our managers and they narrow down even further.

So, that's where AI comes in now—can it help sift through the rubbish or the rumble and get the better qualified candidates? Well, if we don't have the best job description and we don't know what that means, how do we know where we're going?

I think the greater part of it is when a recruiter and a hiring manager do not have that connection.

I'll give you an example. Some companies hire the same person month after month. Maybe it's a maintenance mechanic or manufacturing technician. There's heavy turnover, there's high volume, and we think we have the perfect job description. We're going to send it out, and we just get the same people, and we're praying a little bit.



Basically, it's a posting and coasting method that we're using to get a candidate.

But we really don't know. Every time we put someone in that group, the culture shifts just a little bit, good or bad. And we're not necessarily in tune or engaged with that because we're worried about the production and keeping the line moving.

If we can get that intake call a little bit tighter and more narrowed down when we're screening and interviewing candidates, we can choose someone that may be more retainable, perhaps at higher pay—however, they're going to fit better within the organization and stay longer.

So, there are fewer postings and it gives us time. If we had a quality recruiter on the front end, a quality job posting, and quality conversations, I know that would make the whole process much better. And if companies are open to it, providing a user-friendly assessment can also help predict better quality candidates, not just applicants.

Doing a better job in those areas would make a huge difference.

**Brian:** Absolutely. And if you get the job description wrong, your ideal candidate may not even apply.

**Steve:** Right. One of the things that I look at, and I've seen recruiters do this correctly, is we'll have a job posted internally and externally for 30 days. But it's frustrating when you know that this job is going to be filled by someone internally. Why are you posting it externally? There is no need for that.

**Brian:** Maybe they're required to by law?

**Steve:** Ideally, it's the best practice. But realistically, it keeps too much traffic on the internet. If a third of the jobs are filled internally, we can cut that down a little bit because if I'm a candidate and I'm applying, and 33% of my jobs are all going to be filled internally, you're wasting my time. You're clogging up the internet and making it challenging.

Not to mention, most employers, and

especially staffing agencies, ghost applicants. According to a 2025 Candidate Experience Report by Criteria Corp, 48% of job seekers reported being ghosted by an employer, which is a 10% increase from previous year. Companies often ghost applicants due to overwhelming application volumes, AI-driven mass applications, and uncertainty in hiring decisions.

That's where I try to optimize and work with clients on the viability of posting externally. Often times, it isn't necessary.

**Brian:** How do you vet ideal candidates? What has to be in place?

**Steve:** The job description needs to be exact. But the hard thing is we rely so much on the resume, and we, as the general population in recruitment, are sometimes overworked.

Let's say that you have 30 jobs on your desk and you have 40 hours of work week. That means each job gets less than 90 minutes of time to review resumes, source new candidates, and conduct thorough introductory interviews.

That's not enough time to post it, then sift through resumes, and eventually to interview applicants for that job. You've got to move through it very quickly. Most of the time, too quickly.

And let's face it, when you send an email to a candidate, they're not sitting at their phone ready to respond immediately, and you're not having an interview right now. That means you have to be organized. Prioritize for the near future.

However, you've got to look at not just the job description, but you need to read between the lines. Do these candidates have a profile on LinkedIn? Are they on social media, whether it's Instagram, Facebook, or whatever? That takes time.

But it starts with their resume. If you have AI integrated into your process, it can sift through the resumes and find a better match quicker. You don't necessarily have to interview or review all the resumes because you can tell the system what you're looking for, which could parse them in or out.

But for me, I like to do a lot of courtesy calls, meaning it's not full-blown interviews upfront. Depending on the roles that I'm working on, probably 25-30% of those people don't even respond back. Even if they replied to the job and it was a day ago, you get ghosted by them.

That means they're already weaning themselves out. But I would rather have more introductory calls upfront then schedule more thorough interviews once we know the candidates are actually interested and capable.

I send over the best candidates to the hiring managers. The other thing I do is have a weekly cadence, meaning that the first round of candidates that apply aren't always the best. Speed to apply is not one of my main priorities and it's a misconception for most applicants.

I'll give you an example. If I'm posting a job and someone replies, they're quick on the trigger, and they're one of the first five or ten applicants. That almost gives me a sign of desperation. They need a

job or they really want to change, they're looking at every title and applying very quickly. It doesn't mean that they are not qualified, it just gives me a pause or concern.

I like it when they apply the second week or the third week to the job because maybe they thought about it, done their homework, and gone to the website. They're thinking about it strategically, "I don't necessarily need to change my job, but this one might look a little bit better, maybe it pays a little more. Maybe it's a bigger challenge".

So, I don't always go with the first batch of shortlisted candidates. And I talk to hiring managers about that. Give me a couple of weeks, and I'll find you the best candidate(s).

I also do my own sourcing. Traditional recruiters go through the job boards and send some stuff on Facebook and on LinkedIn. I'll check my own network. Depending on what industry it is and where it's located, I've got certain networks that I will reach out to. So, I don't just rely on the posting of a job or the job boards. Recently I have been utilizing AI & infusing this into my Talent Acquisition recruiting process. I call this Precision Hiring – Simplified. Smart Technology - Human Touch ®

**Brian:** Fantastic. And now, instead of working for one company, you consult and you make yourself available to multiple companies at one time. How has that journey been for you? Why do you like this better?

**Steve:** I loved working for my first company for ten years. It was a foundation and I would never take



anything away from that. As a recruiter, I wanted a challenge, something more out of my job and my career. And I've definitely gotten that.

Sometimes it's tough consulting because I've got to jump into the hot seat very quickly. The best clients that I work with are those going through some sort of transformation. They don't have all the answers, they are growing and they need a hand. I can come in strategically, but I've always been an individual contributor. I can pull from many aspects of my experience.

I started consulting about 10 years ago, and I did a project for Johnson & Johnson. I started up one of their centers of excellence out here on the west coast for their CSS group, which is their MedTech group within medical devices. And that was one of my favorite projects ever.

But the reason it was so great was I came in thinking that we were going to do a merger and acquisition, and then all of a sudden, we did a demerger,



meaning a divestiture. We bought two other companies that we had no intention of buying the first year, but we bought them the second year.

And we're merging all these different companies and their different cultures into one and growing one big unit. We started with 400 people that worked at ASP at the time, and now, we were at 2200 in less than two years. So, that's a huge growth.

Projects like that are why I love this work. I wanted to start consulting, and that was my first opportunity. But I also knew being a west coast recruiter, there aren't a lot of big pharma companies or big medical device companies out here. Genentech is the most notable exception, (West Coast - South San Francisco), and it was my favorite biotechnology company I've ever worked with.

They were phenomenal, but they weren't doing transformational work. They were growth-based on their products and services.

But with that, there's a lot of heavy lifting, which involves stress and

pressure. And there's a weekly cadence and timelines you've got to meet. You're working with different partners internally, some externally, and you've got to get things done. There's not a clear roadmap. They'll give you the tools, but somehow, you've got to put them all together.

And it's about *controlling the chaos*, which I really gravitate towards.

I'll take a quick step back—when I started with the first company I worked for, right out of the military, within three months they moved me into a different division with a different manager.

Then three months after that, they moved me into a brand-new division that didn't have any management. And then five months after that, I moved into another group that I had to grow. So, within my first year and a half, I was already on my fourth division. And every time I encountered a problem, my philosophy was, "Let's solve this and fix it."

By design, I think my career just kept going along that trajectory—find a problem, figure it out, and fix it. I thrive in that environment.

**Brian:** What does your perfect client company look like that you enjoy working with?

**Steve:** Great question. I think the biggest thing that I look at is are they growing or transitioning? And with that, do they need an expert that understands not only HR, but also truly Talent Acquisition?

Maybe it's rebranding, perhaps they're merging with a company. Maybe they just got bought out by a company, they're not sure how that's going to shape up and they want to get some processes and procedures put in place. Anything around a transformation or growth is my typical company.

I've consulted with Fortune 100s, and I've also done startups. So, I want the challenge and I want the heavy lifting.

**Brian:** Fantastic. You had a chance to contribute a chapter to a book recently. Tell us about that.

**Steve:** Absolutely. I had an opportunity to meet Jim Britt, and he asked me to write one of the chapters. I'm thankful that it's endorsed by Tony Robbins and the forward was written by Brian Tracy.

And ironically, I went to my very first seminar when I was a salesperson, very junior in my career, called Results 2000. Tony and Brian were both on the stage. And now, 25 years later, I get to collaborate with them. Very exciting!

ENDORSED BY TONY ROBBINS

STEVE HIGGY

*Jim Britt's*  
**CRACKING THE RICH CODE**  
21 Top Thought Leaders Share Strategies for Living a Rich, Fulfilling Life

*"Be You To Full"*

QR CODE

#1 AMAZON INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

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Jim is a phenomenal mentor, and we had full creative opportunity to write what we thought being rich was about. When people think of "rich", many automatically think of money and wealth. I think of it differently, and so does Jim and some of the other co-authors that we collaborated with.

It's about having a rich life. Money is a component of that. So, a lot of people back in the day used to say work-life balance, I'd rather look at it as work-life harmony.

When I look at that, I think of my career and where I've come from, recruiting to project management, to being a fractional talent acquisition expert. I bring to the workplace all the knowledge that I have, but also the passion and what I've been driving from even before my experiences with the Navy.

My chapter was BeYouToFull but not beautiful like aesthetics. It was about being yourself fully. Having a rich life is whatever I take out of my work, and when I come home, I infuse that into my household. How does that affect my wife and my kids? How does that affect me after work? In order to have a full life, there are three main components that I believe one must have: Passion. Purpose. Intent. That is having a rich life.

**Brian:** Fantastic. And as we begin to wrap up, who inspires and motivates you?

**Steve:** There are many people who inspire and motivate me. I don't want this to sound cheesy or cliché, but I look at your work. For instance, I look at your career and what you've done, and I've



seen how successful you have been, and yet you're still so nice and humble. You don't have an arrogance or an ego about you, but I know that there's confidence in you.

I look at Jim Britt. He's always there and I consider him as my mentor.

And I am very thankful that I have a spiritual inclination. I look to the guys at my small men's group at church, they inspire me as well. I would also say my wife and my kids. I draw inspiration from a lot of people.

**Brian:** That's fantastic. Where can we find you?

**Steve:** I'm always on LinkedIn being a recruiter and in the talent acquisition space. So, I'm at Steve Higgy. I also have a website: [stevehiggy.com](http://stevehiggy.com).

**Brian:** Fantastic. Steve, thank you for being here. It was awesome having you here.

**Steve:** Thank you so much.

**Steve Higginbotham**—known as Steve Higgy—The Coffee Coach—is the leading authority on Talent Acquisition and Career Progression. Steve brings a bold perspective, deep expertise, and transformative methodologies to help business leaders navigate and solve complex, systemic challenges with clarity and confidence.

He is a Talent Acquisition Expert, Motivational Speaker, and Mentor to executives and organizations—from Fortune 100 giants to emerging startups—with strategic guidance that fuels career acceleration and organizational growth. Renowned for delivering exceptional outcomes, he adds value through his transparent, collaborative approach.

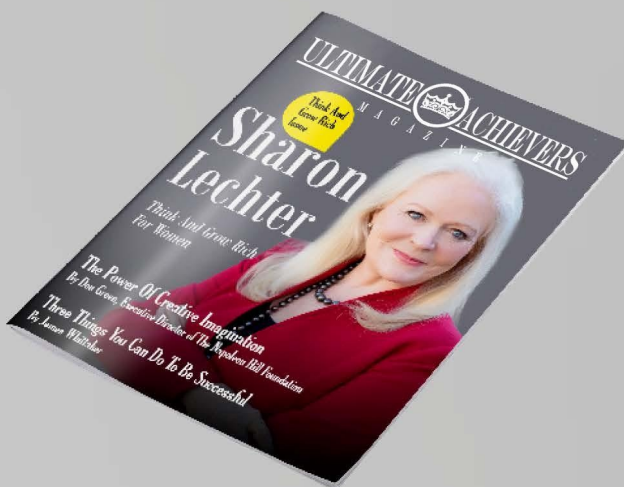
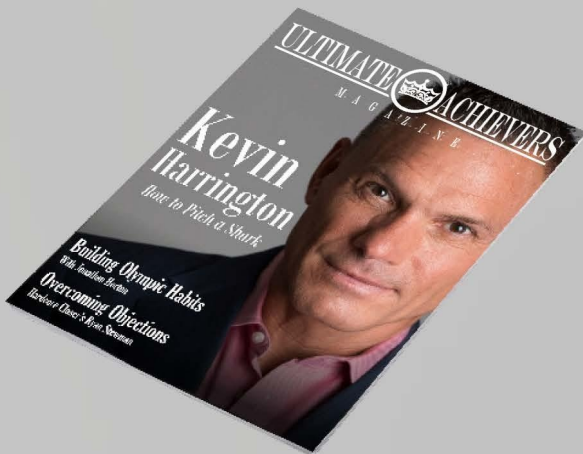
Steve's talent for cultivating impactful partnerships consistently generates transformative results. He has dedicated his career to coaching leaders in enhancing communication and fostering cohesive teams, resulting in outstanding employee engagements, uplifted workplace cultures, and improved leadership.

Steve takes immense pride in cultivating leaders, challenging them to raise their expectations and dismantle limiting beliefs. He equips them with the tools to succeed, fostering a mindset that drives unstoppable progress, ensuring his message isn't just heard—it's felt, embraced, and acted upon.

**Brian K Wright** is the Publisher of **Ultimate Achievers Magazine**, host of the personal development show Success Profiles Radio and book writing coach/ghostwriter.

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