



Don't Pass on Game Changer Candidates Who Are Still Rookies

DR. JOHN SULLIVAN

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Professional sports lead the way in recruiting “game changer” candidates that are still untried rookies, while in the corporate world; most of the inexperienced are simply passed over.

If you’re not familiar with the term “game changer”, they are high-impact hires that soon after joining a team, end up completely transforming it. They quickly move beyond being just top performers because they can be further described using words like stunning, remarkable, exceptional or extraordinary.

There are two types of game changers, experienced ones, and rookies. Experienced game changers are relatively easy to identify because they have work experience and have a proven track record. But there are also “rookie game changers”, the subject of this article. Rookie game changers are individuals that are just entering a new field who are so extraordinary that you are literally “stunned” when you meet them or read about their amazing accomplishments. LeBron James, for example, was identified as a “rookie game changer” while in high school, even though he never played a single game in college or the NBA. In the business world, the youthful Steve Jobs, Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg were all “rookie game changers”. But the sad fact is that most corporate recruiters and hiring managers completely miss out on these “rookie game changers”. College hiring programs usually miss them because they don’t always have excellent academic credentials and experienced hire programs miss them because they lack experience and they haven’t officially held a paid corporate position with a formal title in their field. If you want to capture these rookie game changers, you must put “a lack of experience” at the end of the hiring decision process, rather than at the beginning.

IT’S UNFORTUNATE BUT MOST HIRING MANAGERS PASS ON ROOKIE GAME CHANGERS

Unfortunately, I frequently see recruiters and hiring managers pass over these extraordinary rookies, even though they are destined to change their industry. For example, as a college professor, each year I select one of these extraordinary students to be my research assistant and TA. And after a year of intense development in recruiting, I am routinely surprised when these “breathtaking individuals” still encounter job rejection simply because they’ve never held the formal title of recruiter. Two years ago it was Trena (who after a few rejections eventually ended up at Google), last year it happened to Kim (who is finally a recruiter in the finance industry). Because I’ve had so many wildly successful TA’s, I literally shake my head when firms that actually admit how exceptional these individuals are, still pass on them simply because they have never had a formal corporate recruiting title. Unfortunately, when smaller and lesser-known firms pass on these rookies at the very beginning of their career, they may be passing up their only real chance of ever landing them.

IT'S NOT DIFFICULT TO IDENTIFY ROOKIE GAME CHANGERS

Obviously, you can't hire them if you can't find them. So be aware that you can't always identify rookie game changers only through their resumes or LinkedIn profile because both are often weak. This is because they are generally busy producing solutions, so they don't have time to update their job search materials. In my experience, the 4 best ways to identify rookie (or experienced) game changers include:

1. **Ask references to identify them** – let's face it, most reference checks are designed primarily to identify the major faults that the regular candidate might have. But you can't find a game changer by looking for negatives. Instead, when you think you have a game changer, specifically ask each of their references, "Would you, without hesitation, classify this individual as a game changer, who is an extraordinary individual that stands out because of their stunning capabilities?" Next, ask the job reference to go further, "Would you help us? Do you know anyone else in this field that you would classify as an extraordinary game-changing individual?" And finally, ask them "If you run across a game changer in the future, will you please refer them to us?"
2. **Ask your employee referral sources** – game changers tend to know other game changers, so start by asking your last year's college hires to refer any of this year's graduating game changers that they know. And when you are seeking one to fill a particular job, ask your own game changer employees in the field to seek out and to refer other extraordinary individuals and game changers that they know. Also when an employee makes a referral that turned out to be a game changer, complement them and then ask them personally to continually refer any additional game changers that they come across. Also, ask your new hires that have become game changers to actively be on the lookout for other "rookie game changers".
3. **Ask grad assistants and professors** - in my own research I have found that on college campuses, grad assistants and TA's either know or they are themselves game changers. They can identify top talent better than any Dean or career center. Officers of professional fraternities and clubs are also likely to know them. Professors may know, but they may also be reluctant to reveal the names.
4. **Find their work on the Internet** – if your employees are continually learning, during that process they are likely to spot "the work" of rookie game changers online and on social media. You can find the game changers in other ways because they also often write blogs and articles that are passed around and commented on. Game changers also frequently answer technical questions on "answer sites" like Quora or on professional discussion forums. Rookie game changers also frequently win online contests and competitions.

Their limited experience may be an asset – the new hire's lack of direct experience may actually serve as an asset. Because with less history to cloud their vision, they may "see problems in a new way" and from a fresh perspective. This fresh perspective may result in them generating many new ideas and innovations.

WHAT MAKES THESE ROOKIE GAME CHANGERS EXTRAORDINARY?

These rookie game changers may be college students, college dropouts or they may simply be individuals that are trying to enter a new career field. But if you expect to accurately identify them, it's important to note the factors they have in common that give them their extraordinary potential. In my 35+ years of mentoring, helping interns, rookies and aiding corporations assess talent; I have found that rookie game changers share these characteristics:

- **They are accomplishers** - their most important characteristic is that they have a proven track record of accomplishing everything they set out to do. They will have already accomplished difficult things that most experienced professionals have not. Their accomplishments are likely to be in school, as volunteers or outside of formal work channels. They also always “find a way” to meet their promises and goals and they love to “own” problems and to manage projects.
- **Learning** – they are literally “learning machines”. They focus on learning about emerging problems and the best practice solutions to those problems that are utilized by top firms. When you ask them, they always know about the latest trends and practices.
- **Passionate** – they have a passion and a laser focus on excellence in their field. They don't see their field as a stepping stone but as a career destination.
- **Innovation** – they're not satisfied with the status quo, they push not only for incremental improvement but also for game-changing innovations.
- **Adaptable** – they embrace change and don't get flustered in a volatile work environment.
- **Extraordinary habits** – they have extraordinary work habits, which gives them discipline and consistency.
- **The glass is half-full and leaking** - they see everything as needing continuous improvement and they assume that even successful programs will eventually become obsolete.
- **They have manageable egos** – even though the work that they have accomplished is stunning, these rookies have manageable egos. They don't seek credit; they merely strive to be part of a significant change.

FINAL THOUGHTS

In my experience, among all recruiting mistakes, missing out on rookie game changers is near the top. This is because 1) of their immediate business impacts, 2) the career trajectory of these individuals will one day make them a VP's and 3) once they get even a little experience under their belt, you will likely no longer be able to land or afford them. Most college recruiters look for grades, awards or for perfect CVs. But I have found that that narrow approach will lead you in the wrong direction because real rookie game changers focus on projects rather than grades. Also, I have found that it is rare that a Dean or Department Chair would know the name a rookie game changer. Instead, identify everyone that has a track record of successfully identifying extraordinary rookie talent.

Because these “talent scouts” have probably already sought them out and they might have even gone the next step and mentored them.

ABOUT DR. SULLIVAN

Dr. John Sullivan is an internationally known HR thought-leader from the Silicon Valley. He specializes in strategic talent management solutions. He is a prolific author with over 900 articles and 10 books covering all areas of Talent Management. Along with his many articles and books, Dr. Sullivan has written over a dozen white papers, conducted over 50 webinars, dozens of workshops and has been featured in over 35 videos. He is an engaging corporate speaker who has excited audiences at over 300 corporations/organizations in 30 countries on all 7 continents. His ideas have appeared in every major business source including the Wall Street Journal, Fortune, BusinessWeek, Fast Company, HBR, the Financial Times and more. Dr. Sullivan has been interviewed on CNN and the CBS and ABC nightly news, NPR, as well many local TV and radio outlets.

Fast Company called him the “Michael Jordan of Hiring”, Staffing.org called him “the father of HR metrics” and SHRM called him “One of the industries most respected strategists”. He was selected among HR’s “Top 10 Leading Thinkers” and was ranked #8 among the top 25 online influencers in Talent Management. Adding to these acclamations, Dr. Sullivan has also served as the Chief Talent Officer of Agilent Technologies, the HP spinoff with 43,000 employees as well as becoming the CEO of the Business Development Center, a minority business consulting firm in Bakersfield, California. Dr. Sullivan is currently a Professor of Management at San Francisco State (1982 – present). Most importantly, he wants to hear and respond to your most pressing questions about advanced talent strategies.

His articles can be found all over the Internet and on his popular website www.drjohnsullivan.com and on www.ERE.Net. He lives in Pacifica, California.

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