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September 2010

## FINDING A FIT

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HIRES THE RIGHT EMPLOYEES  
AT CORESTAFF SERVICES**





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HOW **JAMES E. BOONE** HIRES  
THE RIGHT EMPLOYEES AT  
**CORESTAFF SERVICES**

BY BROOKE BATES

In James E. Boone's vocabulary, there's no such thing as work force. Yet, as president and CEO of CORESTAFF Services Inc., he manages his own employees and tens of thousands of others.

But to him, "work force" is an oversimplification — like "automobile."

"There's virtually all types of automobiles, from small compacts to luxury vehicles," Boone says. "There's a mistake in that some organizations look at people as a unified entity — and, of course, they're not."

In addition to managing his own 292 full-time employees, Boone issued 21,789 W-2s to temporary employees last year. Because he places that many employees in occupations as varied as accounting and engineering, in offices from Boulder to Boston and beyond, Boone can't approach hiring as a simple function of plug-and-play.

When it comes to filling internal positions at CORESTAFF, he takes each candidate as an individual to determine who is right for the job. Some words of wisdom from Cecil Dye, his former district manager at Digital Equipment Corp., revealed what a challenge that can be.

"He said, 'When you're interviewing people for positions, the obvious A's — the ones that

clearly have all the boxes checked — that's about 10 percent, and those are easy decisions,'" Boone says. "Likewise, the people that are obviously not right for the position, that 10 percent is also extremely easy. It's the other 80 percent that will determine whether you're going to be successful or not.'

"What I gleaned from that is judgment is going to be a major factor as a manager. You have to really trust your innate skills and abilities when you're speaking with people because ultimately you will answer for those decisions."

Boone has honed his judgment abilities when it comes to hiring and developed a disciplined interview process to usher the right people into position.

## Prepare to fill positions

Some preparation is necessary before the search even begins. Boone meets with his senior vice president of human resources to write a job description that reflects both professional skills and personal characteristics that would make someone successful in that position.

While the description is important, it shouldn't be too prescriptive.

"I like a position description to only be 85 percent accurate because the individual coming in the door provides the other 15 percent," Boone says. "People will have different skills, experiences and knowledge from various positions of responsibility they have had. If you have a position description that's so detailed down to a cookbook approach and all you've got to do is follow the recipe to be successful, you're missing the whole wonderful experience of human behavior."

The 85 percent comes mostly from the technical side of the position. Leave more leeway when it comes to personal interests. You probably won't reject candidates who aren't involved in their children's activities, for example — although discovering that later in the process may better illustrate someone's makeup.

Next, Boone targets certain groups when recruiting. Thanks to technology, this is easier than ever.

"There's just so many different ways that you can reach out to a constituent group, either through LinkedIn or Facebook and obviously job boards," he says. "Market segmentation is becoming increasingly more sophisticated today."

## The Boone file

“If we’re looking at a position in accounting, for instance, then we will certainly target organizations that are geared toward the accounting profession — starting with associations, networking with accounting firms, job postings in publications that those types of individuals would read. We’re diligently reaching out to a constituent group we think could introduce us to the right type of person versus just a blanket ad.”

### Narrow the field

Once the job is posted, the key tool for narrowing the field of candidates is the resume. Boone considers resumes to be career blueprints, devoting much more time to them than cover letters.

“Obviously, no one’s going to write a resume that’s detrimental to them,” he says. “So you’re looking at what, in this person’s view, is their best face. So that right there tells you something. If you see a resume that’s inconsistent or it’s incomplete, then you’re going, ‘Wow, if this is their best presentation skills, I wonder what their worst is.’ Likewise, if you see a resume that is concise, logical, demonstrates the person’s responsibilities and achievements and it really strikes home the essence of what this person brings to the table, then this is someone I want to meet.”

Look for resumes that are complete and thorough and don’t skip over early positions.

“If they’ve had several years of experience, they start deleting their early years,” Boone says. “I want to see what those formative years were like because that period when people get out of college really is the foundation for the rest of their careers. That’s where they’re going to experience, hopefully, some of their larger errors.”

For example, people’s first several years in the job field can cement their work ethic and their preferences for corporate culture. Seeing their early responsibilities and achievements can reveal those hits and misses.

For a resume to be thorough, it also must be factual. Technology has also made this process easier by providing access to backgrounds for double-checking claims.

“It’s amazing to me how many people will fudge on resumes and somehow don’t think they’ll be caught,” Boone says. “But in this day and age with technology ... there’s very little excuse not to catch someone if they’ve lied about a degree or if they have fabricated a position. It’s just all there in the public domain.”

Boone also requests releases from candidates so he can confirm through references as well as civil and criminal background checks.

Showing that level of particularity can also set the stage for honesty through the rest of the process.

“That gives people a good comfort that you’re very serious about their role in the company,” Boone says. “It sends a clear message about the expectations you’re setting for them when they’re interviewing.”

**Born:** Louisville

**Education:** Graduated magna cum laude from the University of Louisville and completed post-graduate studies at Harvard Business School’s Executive Management Program

### Whom do you admire most and why?

Rather than admiring a specific person, I’ve honed in on human interest stories of people who suffered tragedy or setbacks and how they overcame those. For instance, I saw a report on the news about a Marine who lost his arms and legs in Iraq. He’s recovering and he just got engaged. He’s excited about getting new arms and legs. That’s inspirational. That puts in context my tribulations compared to people with insurmountable difficulties.



### Your workday is off to a bad start. How do you turn it around?

I wouldn’t look to turn a bad start around; I would live through it and know you’ve got to have trying periods to appreciate life cycles. When I first got into the executive search business, I went to my boss and said, ‘I don’t think I’m going to make it. One day, I’m high because I found a great candidate and the client was thrilled. The next day, the client is upset because the candidate didn’t live up to their expectations.’ The boss smiled and said, ‘Clip your highs. Clip your lows. Don’t get overly excited or depressed.’

### What’s the best business advice you’ve ever received?

From Cecil Dye, district manager at Digital Equipment Corp.: ‘When you’re at a critical decision, sit down at your desk and write down all the positive things that can be derived from a yes answer to the decision that’s before you. After you’ve written down virtually all the wonderful things that can happen by a yes decision, take that piece of paper, wad it up and throw it in the trash. Now, write down all the worst things that can happen [from] a yes decision. If you can live with the worst negative, do it. If you can’t, then you shouldn’t do it.’

### What’s your definition of success?

Success is when you’re passionate and you’re focused and you’re committed to what you’re doing, that you are totally engaged and you really believe that you’re making a difference. It’s that sense of mission mentality — that you are where you need to be and you are doing what you’re supposed to be doing to experience fulfillment.

### What’s your favorite part of your job?

My favorite part of my job is really sitting down with my leadership team — or, for that matter, any of the people in the company — and listening to them work through an issue or a challenge that they have and being the sounding board to them. You kind of see that aha moment where they light up because they figured out what they’re going to do on their own. It’s watching those managers grow and develop in their skills and abilities as they’re making these critical decisions that certainly will affect the outcome of many people’s lives.

## Look for a fit

After resumes suggest who makes it to the interview phase, look for more signals that indicate a good match.

Before you start scheduling appointments, spend more time preparing by revisiting the job description.

"When individuals are interviewing an individual, they have that position description in front of them," Boone says. "I ask them to make sure they reread it before they start the interview so they're asking questions against the specs.

"What happens with many organizations is they don't nail down exactly what they're looking for to begin with. Then they start interviewing people and — the old saying, 'When you don't know where you're going, any road will do' — they're not exactly sure what they're looking for. Then something really catches your eye and you tend to ignore some of the other things that would demonstrate that this person isn't the best fit for that role."

Similarly, make sure candidates have done their homework with the job description. To gauge their preparedness, Boone asks why they'd be a good fit for the role.

"I've had people actually hand me typed papers where they've taken the job descriptions and, under each bullet, they've typed — maybe in a different color — why they think they're an excellent fit for that role," he says. "Other people just articulate it. But the key is being very specific on what you're looking for and then having that person interview to the specifics. Then the results increase dramatically for success."

Boone spends the first 10 or 15 minutes discussing the position, filling in details that may not have been covered by the description.

"There is no opportunity at any company that's all hunky-dory and high fives," he says. "There are going to be negatives in any position. Most people would like to know the good, bad and ugly. You have to establish a bond of honesty and integrity on both sides of the desk."

So, for example, Boone shares CORESTAFF's aspirations and potential roadblocks. He also drills into specifics about the position's potential for helping the company overcome obstacles, illustrating that the candidate would play an important role in achieving success.

By starting with that mutually familiar topic of the position, Boone hopes to relax candidates.

"You have to ask open-ended questions, certainly things that don't generate a 'yes' or a 'no,' to get them talking," he says. "You want to create an environment where they feel comfortable speaking. If someone is in that mode, sometimes they may say some-

thing they inadvertently didn't mean to say if they had been more guarded."

Then the questioning begins. Boone asks about candidates' proudest professional achievements and how they handled challenges, adversity and failure. Whether they overcame it or it overtook them, you can reap valuable insights about their demeanor and how they learn from experiences.

"Ask and then be quiet," he says. "Too many senior executives, if it's an hour interview, they will spend 40 to 45 minutes talking. That is a huge mistake. The candidate should be

entirely up to you; it must be a fit for the candidate, as well.

"I also encourage the individual that it's a two-way street, that they're interviewing us, as well," Boone says, and he reiterates that with other interviewers. "They're not an applicant; they are a professional in their own right and they're sizing us up. ... You should wear both a buying hat and a selling hat when you're speaking to someone. Too many executives always wear that buying hat and they try to create an environment of such exclusivity and, at some point, will give you the

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doing the vast majority of the speaking."

Obviously, listen to their responses but also stay keen to clues beyond the audible answers.

"First, it's just body language," Boone says. "When someone comes through the door, ... the first thing to look at is just their demeanor, their approach to you, their style. Do they have energy in their voice? Are they pretty excited about being there? Are they somewhat defeated?"

Then, piece things together. Don't be afraid to put candidates to the consistency test, using them to check their own claims.

"If you say, 'I increased sales 150 percent when I was vice president of sales at XYZ company,' then I say, 'Tell me how you did that. What specifically did you do versus the other individuals?'" Boone says. "Just keep boring down into more and more specific information and see if this person can ride with you.

"People that have done what they say can match you toe-to-toe as you go through that interviewing process. People that may have been on the periphery of something and not really in the decision-making part will run out of steam at some point."

If candidates get fuzzy when you push for details, red flags should shoot up. Boone also looks for consistency when he compares the written reports of everyone who interviews a candidate — which usually includes him, his senior vice president of human resources and peers to the position.

## Sell the position

True, you're looking for the ideal peg to fit in your company. But the decision isn't

secret handshake and let you in the door."

Consider how you treat candidates. You're not just filling a position; you're representing the company to potential employees who are looking for jobs.

"You're sending direct messages to the candidate as to how you treat them throughout the interview process," Boone says. "Remember, their antenna is up. They certainly want to join an organization that also embodies their values. How you treat them, how you respond to them, your timeliness — they're going to measure that against what you're saying in the interview."

Some executives selectively turn on the sell switch when they realize a candidate could add value. Boone tries to sell the position to all candidates, whether or not they're right for the role.

"I want them to feel good about the time they spent with CORESTAFF because they are a professional," he says. "While they may not be right [for the] role at this particular time, one never knows. They may be a future customer some day. It's just professional courtesy to treat everyone in a manner in which you'd like to be treated."

So far, Boone has been pretty successful bringing in the right employees, who took CORESTAFF to 2009 revenue of \$258 million.

"In the end, you still have to rely on your innate judgment ability," Boone says. "But it's not just willy-nilly, off-the-cuff; it's a regimented process of interviewing someone." <<

**HOW TO REACH:** CORESTAFF Services, (713) 438-1400 or [www.corestaff.com](http://www.corestaff.com)

