

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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How to Hire Mary Poppins

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It's a fantasy we all secretly share: Somewhere out there is a person who has just what you need—some special mix of talent, character and experience. If only you could find them, recognize them and convince them to come work for you—they could solve all your problems.

I call her (or him) Mary Poppins. She's "practically perfect in every way." Doesn't that sound nice? Aren't you tired of hiring people who just don't cut it? Most of your employees—the ones who stick around more than a week, that is—are just barely competent. And that's if you're lucky. Many are good. Really, they are. They're worth what you pay them. Fewer are great—they understand the business, they connect with the customers, they anticipate your needs, they're two steps ahead.

But when's the last time you found someone capable of turning everything around with just a spoonful of sugar? When's the last time somebody came knocking on your door who had the ability to transform your business, your culture, your fortunes? Mary Poppins can. She brings out the best in everyone. She is magical. She is better than great, she is—there's no other word for it—supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.

Depending on the day—or even the hour of the day—I go back and forth from telling myself, "Don't give up hope. There really are Mary Poppinses out there" to "Don't be silly! Nobody's going to swoop in and do your job for you."

I think both are right. You need hope to persevere, but in the end, you must persevere no matter what. You need a paradoxical mixture of equal parts contentment and dissatisfaction.

How do you find her? Well, you don't. She finds you. Finding her is like finding a needle in a haystack. The best strategy is to use a magnet. You have to attract her to you.

The problem is that Mr. Banks (you remember the father from the movie, right?) will never attract Mary Poppins. This was his job ad: "Required: Nanny. Firm, respectable, no-nonsense."

But the children came up with their own advertisement:

"Wanted: A nanny for two adorable children

If you want this choice position

Have a cheery disposition

Rosy cheeks, no warts!

Play games, all sort

You must be kind, you must be witty

Very sweet and fairly pretty

Take us on outings, give us treats
Sing songs, bring sweets
Never be cross or cruel
Never give us castor oil or gruel
Love us as a son and daughter
And never smell of barley water
If you won't scold and dominate us
We will never give you cause to hate us
We won't hide your spectacles
So you can't see
Put toads in your bed
Or pepper in your tea

The father, naturally, tears up this ridiculous nonsense. But we all know which ad brought Mary Poppins into town and it wasn't the respectable, sensible one. I hate to break it to you, but in this story you're Mr. Banks.

It amazes me that small businesses like ours write such stiff and lifeless job ads. Why try to sound like you're a soul-sucking corporation? Maybe you should let your kids write your next help wanted ad. Could they do any worse?

Perhaps you worry that you'll attract weirdos, misfits and losers. Your worries are well founded; you will. But you have to remember that Mary Poppins doesn't need you nearly so much as you need her. You have to give her some clue that you require something special, that her talents are welcome, that there's room in your business for her to weave her magic, that something extraordinary is needed.

You can read more about how to attract, manage and (eventually) say goodbye to extraordinary employees in my new ebook, "How to Hire Mary Poppins." **GT**

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