URL: https://stvp.stanford.edu/blog/videos/attracting-promising-talent

After fundraising, John Melo, CEO of Amyris Biotechnologies, says that targeting human resources is his second largest priority. But being a smart candidate simply isn't enough, he reports; what's critical is being able to deliver in a group environment. Melo reports that reeling in the smartest and the best in the field is made easier by having an exciting in-house project on which to work.

Transcript

You must have a lot of focus on bringing the right types of people into the company with the capital that you've raised, the growth plans that you have.. How do you identify the right kind of talent? How hard is that right now in the life of the company? I think second to raising money, it's probably one of my core roles in the company.. It's interesting.. I focus on one objective in identifying the right people, and it's all about culture.. I focus on trying to understand who they are as individuals.. If somebody isn't adaptive, isn't a great collaborator, doesn't have a learning mindset, frankly, I just don't think they have a place in our company.. I make the assumption that most people that we interview are really smart.. Being really smart isn't an advantage.. The advantage is, "Can you take those smarts and do something really great with those smarts in a team environment?" If you can do that, again, great.. Your other question is, "How easy or hard is it to find people like this?" I've been scared and unpleasantly surprised along the way..

Every time we've seen the plan for headcount growth, we have a very simple model that says based on our history of developing the microbe, we know that it takes X number of people to do X number of experiments over X number of times to get X level of yield improvement which gets to your cost.. It's pretty simple, and obviously, we're always trying to make it more efficient.. How do we get more of what we have so that it doesn't take as many turns? So we've got a model then for headcount growth that tracks to that model that then gets to our cost target by the middle of 2009.. When I first looked at the headcount growth, I thought there's no way we're going to do it.. In the first quarter of this year or the first half of this year, we were going to grow the company by 70 people or 80 people.. I thought, you just can't do that.. We're not going to be able to find all those people.. This is, by the way, December going into January, and we hadn't found any of them.. So I'm thinking there's just no way.. It was funny..

I had a December board meeting, and I decided to tell the board that we're going to hire in a range, and I gave them a pretty big range to just ensure that we could deliver on the low end because I thought there's no way we're going to get there.. And sure enough? I think the VCs call this sandbagging.. Sandbagging.. I never sandbag.. How about broadening the target? Right, broadening the target.. No question.. We've done it because I think a key factor of our ability to attract people is actually having an exciting project to work on.. There's no question that the malaria project has paid back a million fold already just in the quality of people and the energy it creates inside of our company.. I'm just excited about getting to the point of saving lives because you add that with the kind of people we're attracting.. Anybody that asks me, "Why would you give it away?" The question I have is, "Why wouldn't you?" It's just the right thing to do...