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THE WORKPLACE

Writing a Good "SysAdmin Wanted" Ad
by Strata Rose Chalup .



USENIX & SAGE

The Advanced Computing Systems Association &
The System Administrators Guild

writing a good “sysadmin wanted” ad

by **Strata Rose
Chalup**

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Background

We covered a fair bit of detail on the interview process, and preparation leading up to it, in “Technical Interviews” in the December issue of *login*. You already know that you need a job description, and a requisition or similar backing from your organization. Since then, I’ve had a number of requests for specific tips on creating the description itself.

The Position

SYSTEMS MANAGER OR SYSTEMS MANAGEMENT?

Do not call the position “IT Manager” or “Systems Manager” unless it is a management position, i.e., involves having people who are direct reports. If it does involve managing one or more team members, that should definitely be spelled out; some folks won’t be interested unless it does, since that shows they can grow within the company hierarchy, and some won’t be interested unless it doesn’t, since they want to stay hands-on in their career path. Discovering a mismatch several weeks into the hiring process isn’t what you want.

If you want someone who provides direction to others, but is not their manager, call it “Team Leader” instead of “Manager.” If you want a team member or individual contributor, call the position “Administrator,” “Technician,” “Operator,” or something similar (e.g., “Junior Backups Operator,” “High-Speed Network Technician,” “Senior Systems Administrator”).

PRIMARY CUSTOMERS AND LEVEL OF SUPPORT

Make it clear whether the position is primarily concerned with supporting corporate infrastructure or supporting externally oriented production systems. Are the primary

customers organization employees or people accessing company systems via the Internet? If the answer is “both,” you’re not quite listening – who are the PRIMARY customers? Who gets priority? If the answer is still “both,” and you are not a company of under 50 people, you are probably trying to staff an entire department with one position. Rethink your position.

Indicate up front if the position requires cell phone or pager access outside normal hours. If there isn’t a formal on-call rotation, you might want to say that “while the position does not involve shift work, applicants should be aware that the company has a dynamic, fast-paced environment and will at times require support outside normal business hours.” Of course, this is often shorthand for “we haven’t codified our requirements into something firm enough to stand behind.” Danger, Will Robinson!

DUTIES AND REQUIRED EXPERTISE

Don’t describe the job duties with vague phrases like “manage infrastructure” or “ensure smooth operation of production environment.” If you include such phrases, they should be followed immediately by clarifying statements describing the specific technologies and duties. For instance, “manage infrastructure of EMC, NetApp, and HP storage arrays.” Even better, “monitor, design, and upgrade network of EMC, NetApp, and HP storage arrays to support critical financial modeling effort.”

Giving an explicit SAGE Level in the job description will help set expectations appropriately. Since not everyone is familiar with the SAGE Levels, don’t elide the job description to just that. Refer to the SAGE Level as part of a conventional description of required experience, stressing those parts which are most important to the position. Clearly distinguish what is required for the position from what would merely be nice to have. Your most qualified candidates are often those who are the most realistic about their skills; don’t scare away good candidates by appearing to require The Perfect Candidate.

The Constraints

CONTACT DETAILS

Do give a specific role or job-description email address to respond to and keep it “live” later, but don’t make it a person’s address. These things take on a life of their own; they are harvested on the Web, are saved by people to refer folks to later, are passed around between agencies as favors, etc. You’d like the address to be a good long-term one, so you can check periodically for folks contacting you, but you don’t want it to be anybody’s personal mailbox because you will get junk in it.

Do not rule out a candidate based on the format of their resume, but do suggest one or two preferred formats. If you make no specific requests, do not be surprised if you receive resumes in LaTeX, nroff, PostScript, or other formats which your HR department may be ill-equipped to deal with. Rather than deep-sixing a candidate whose resume HR does not understand, make certain that the resume is sent to someone technical for parsing or that HR requests a plain-text resume from the candidate.

MONEY MATTERS

Do not say “salary commensurate with experience” if you have a specific salary cap that is not informed by current salary survey data from your geographical area and industry. Give a range instead, and indicate that salary will be keyed into that range based on experience.

Giving an explicit SAGE Level in the job description will help set expectations appropriately. Since not everyone is familiar with the SAGE Levels, don’t elide the job description to just that.

Do include mention of any non-salary compensation accompanying the position, such as medical and vision benefits, day care, stock-option plans, and so on. If your organization provides domestic partner benefits, a special dental plan, and other benefits which are not customary, those can also be important enticements to mention to candidates.

THE FINE PRINT

Do say “principals only” if you don’t want agencies contacting you, i.e., would rather not pay 10% to 30% of salary as a finder’s fee. If you are happy to work with agencies, get explicit documentation of their fees before they send you a single candidate. If you have your own HR staff, find out in advance the interaction of financial responsibility for outside agencies presenting candidates.

Do say “This is a full-time, salaried position only. Contract, hourly, or part-time applications will not be considered” if that is the case – or vice versa. If your intent is to do a contract-to-permanent position, do not advertise it solely as a contract position. Conversely, if you are seeking a contractor but are open to a possible retainment, use a standard phrase such as “Contract position only, but employee possibilities for the right person.”

If you are publishing this directly, rather than handing it off to your HR department, remember to include whatever standard legal disclaimers are required or advisable. If you have specific requirements which are not specific to job duties, such as eligibility for a security clearance, or cannot accommodate certain situations, such as assistance with a visa or work permit, indicate those requirements clearly. I sincerely advise you to have your legal or HR department (or both) sign off on any requirements of this type before publishing them in any venue.

Summing Up

As you can see, the basic guidelines are simple. If you address each of the points above with a line or two of text, it will take a relatively small amount of editing to turn the results into an advertisement suitable for publication. Think of things that you would want to know about a position, and let that be your guide. Then run it past the lawyers just to make sure.