5 Keys to Engage Passives by Email and Phone

How do you craft messages that will get their attention, engage them, and – ideally – get them to reply to learn more?

Hint: Sending spammy, generic emails with attached job descriptions, or leaving general voicemails, like ***"Hi, my name is John, and I'm a tech recruiter with XYZ looking to network for a rock star Ruby on Rails developer in LA" does not work. Not for passive tech talent. So, what does work?***

> "The best messages are never about you or the job you're trying to fill. The best approaches start with the work that they are passionate about and how you can connect them to 1) new, really challenging problems in their space, and 2) help them grow in their career."
>
> *Andrew Carges, VP Global Tech Recruiting, Groupon*

What's the secret sauce?

First, there *is no secret sauce* – there is not one email phrase or set of key words that guarantees a response. Anyone that tells you there *is* a secret phrase is selling you something.

Second, you may have found something that worked really well a few times – awesome. But let's acknowledge that, while many tech professionals share similar motivators, not all will respond to the same message. So, we have to experiment and have multiple tools in our toolbox.

Third – and this is good news – many tech recruiters don't invest the time (or have the knowledge) to customize their messaging, so it's relatively easy to stand out in the mind of a passive tech candidate. You just have to do a few things differently than your colleagues, who probably rely on messaging that sounds like, "Let me tell you about *me,* what *I need*, *my company* and *my job.* Then you can read *my (crappy) job description* and let me know if you're

interested in applying." Me, me, me equals no response or no thank you.

How to improve your response rate
So, how do you get a passive tech candidate to reply to that email or call you back?

1. Pique their interest
Software engineers are generally smart, curious people, who like to build (and break) stuff. They are naturally driven to solve challenging problems. And the best engineers see the tools and technology they use to solve interesting problems as just that – tools. Not as something that should define them, or define a job.

So, if you're describing your opportunity by sharing the buzzwords from your job description – simply highlighting the technologies you need and specialized skills you want (like Java Programmer or iOS Guru) – you will *not* attract top tech talent. Why? The best engineers know that technologies and tools change all the time. Getting stuck using one language or working with one type of technology can be death to their long-term marketability, and can be quite boring over time. And frankly, Java programming just isn't that interesting. It's a means to an end.

So, what *do* you highlight when you're describing your opportunity? It's best to highlight specific examples of the work – the actual projects they'd work on – not responsibilities from the job posting. What would they build and what kind of impact would that make on the customer, marketplace or world? Then, pique their interest by referencing something (maybe even something you can't talk about now – future, cool stuff) that's bigger than a job. Paint a picture that shows them where they can take this – maybe it's the role they could play in building a new, disruptive, game-changing product for your industry. Maybe it's something that's never been done at this

scale before. Or, maybe it's just a really hard technical problem that hasn't been solved yet. Focus on the work.

2. Drop names and leverage specific connections

Please don't say, "Your name came up in a meeting we had this morning, and I'd like to talk to you about a unique opportunity." That's way too general, and it just sounds salesy. However, if you actually know someone they know, use that connection. "My name is John, and we both worked with Ketan back at [company]. Ketan's told me a lot about you, and suggested we connect live. I read that [post/article/blog/answer] you wrote on [site]. You've got an impressive background in [technology/problem space]. We're in the early phase of development, working on something in that space that's never been built before. Ketan thought you'd be really interested in learning more. Can you talk for 10 minutes?"

The key, of course, is if they say "Yes," you have to be able to do more than read the job description to keep them interested. You must really understand the challenging work and be able to go relatively deep when the candidate starts to ask questions. Do not – under any circumstance – refer them to your careers site to learn more. You will never hear from them again, and they will not apply. Do not send them a job description. It's too early in the process for that.

3. Don't ask for a resume yet

Passive candidates – by definition – are not actively looking for a job. They likely don't have a prepared resume, and won't be interested in applying to your open job. If you define success for your direct sourcing work as getting a resume 50% or more of the times you contact passive candidates, you will feel like a failure. Your goal can and should be to move them along the interest scale.

Get them from "No thank you" to "Tell me more" to "Sure, I'd be willing to talk to a tech leader." Your goal is to make a human

connection, start a two-way conversation and build the relationship. Not to close the deal after one email or call.

You can and should be able to very quickly get the tech hiring manager, a VP level leader, or even your resident tech expert on the phone to have a conversation. Now, most of you are saying, "But my tech leaders won't get on the phone with a passive candidate – they want only qualified and interested candidates, with their resume in-hand!"
Here's the deal, though. Moving them along the interest scale usually *requires* that you can get the hiring manager to have this exploratory chat.
To be honest, if your hiring manager will never talk to a (pre-resume) passive tech candidate, then you will likely not have a lot of success recruiting passive tech talent.

4. Get them talking about their interests
If you do get to have that conversation (or coach a tech leader on how to prep for that conversation), **plan on listening 80% of the time, and talking 20% of the time.**
Your goal is *not* to interview them. But, you do want to prepare questions that will help you understand if this is a good match.
For example, "Based on what I learned about you on your [blog/white paper/bio/Quora answer/Stack Overflow contribution], you clearly have expertise in XYZ. I'd like to learn a little more about what you enjoy about that kind of work, and the sort of problems you're passionate about solving.
And then I can answer some questions about the challenging work we're doing with XYZ, to give us both an idea as to whether or not this opportunity would be something you'd like to learn more about. Sound good? Great. Can you start off by telling me a little more about the ABC project you're working on now? I read about it online, but would like to learn more."

"I often try to get them to keep reading my email by connecting on a personal level. Sometimes it's a geeky Battlestar Galactica or Star Wars reference. Sometimes I'll write the subject line with a sarcastic tone – "Recruiting Email #38." People get bombarded by emails from recruiters and don't even open most of them up. So the key is to get them to engage, and sometimes, you do that by being real."

Derek Zeller, Sr. IT Recruiter, Advanced Resources Technologies.

5. Pimp your ride

It's become trivially easy for a passive tech candidate to check you out online before they decide to reply to your email, or call you back. So, be sure that your online profiles don't suck. One recruiter I've worked with shared that about 75% of the all passive candidates who replied to her emails looked her up online first.

Demonstrate your tech recruiting credibility online by:
- Showing how you're connected to people like them (people and communities/groups)
- Having recommendations from people like them (hiring managers and candidates)
- Focusing on recruiting people like them

Ideally, you want them to read your profile and think to themselves, "This looks like a good person for me to connect with – even if the opportunity she's calling me about isn't right for me now. She's clearly the kind of person who could help me in my career. I think I should call her back." Some of the best tech recruiters I know will list information right on their profile about their technology stack, the kind of problems their tech teams are working on, and the profiles of the kind of tech professionals they want to talk to.

The best emails and voicemails
There is not one ultimate email or voicemail that guarantees a response from a passive tech candidate. But, here are some sample messages that successful tech recruiters have used. You should find your own voice, experiment, and find the approach that works best for you.

- "You're doing some really interesting work in the XYZ space. Would you be open to a networking conversation with me this week? We're looking to bring a leader onto the team to [build/scale/design] ABC, and I'd like to learn more about you."

> "I take a very direct, short-but-sweet approach. Picture this technologist running to a meeting, with smartphone in hand. I'll say something like "5 minutes?" in the subject line of my email, and then say, "What would it take to get you to Yahoo!? Got 5 minutes to chat?" No scrolling, no job description, no wasted text. Just a direct approach."
>
> Janelle Delgado, Recruiter, Yahoo!

- *"My CTO, Brian, and I were reviewing some of the work you've talked about on [site]. You have an impressive background in XYZ. We're doing some early-stage work around XYZ that we think will change the way consumers do LMNOP. The team has less than 10 people on it now, but the work will ultimately touch hundreds of millions. Would you be interested in learning more about what we're doing?"*

- *"I'm a recruiter for [company]. Before you delete this message, let me tell you why I'm reaching out and how I found you. I can tell you're really smart based on the questions you asked on [site]. Our tech team is doing some very interesting work around XYZ, which appears to be your focus now. I've attached a picture of our technology stack, and would like to learn if problems related to A, B, and C are interesting to you. If so, I'd like to learn more about you."*

- *"I was speaking with [common connection], and he said "Hello," and suggested that I reach out to you. I've heard about the great work you're doing in XYZ, and I am hoping you might be open to a call about a role we're recruiting for. Even if it's not something you're interested in now, I'd still like to learn more about you and follow your career. As a recruiter, I get exposure to all kinds of opportunities, and I make it my job to know people like you. Would you be open to a 10-minute chat tonight or tomorrow after work?"* *There are entire books written on cold calling and getting people to open and reply to your emails. In this article, I wanted to give you some practical insights, and share some different approaches. As you see, some people take a very direct approach, like "I'm interested in you because of XYZ, and I'd like to talk to you about this opportunity" and have great success. Others take a more indirect approach, like "You appear to be a well connected expert – any chance you'd be open to a networking conversation?"* and also have great success.

Wrap Up: The keys to effective messaging

Whatever your specific approach, the most successful passive tech talent messaging seems to share a few things in common:

- The message is succinct and focused; it's never a mass email template or scripted voicemail
- The message is customized and personalized; it's clear you've done your research and know something specific about them, their interests and expertise
- The messages are about them, not you; in fact, job descriptions are not usually attached at this phase
- When available, a cold email/call is turned into a warm call; shared connections improve the call-back hit rate
- The request is not for a resume or a request to apply online; it's for a next-step exploratory chat