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## SVN Editorial

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### Careers@TechnoSkill

## Need for speed redefines characteristics of successful early stage high tech CEOs

Everyone seems to have a startup in his or her basement these days, and because I recruit so many early stage executives, I am often asked about the success characteristics of an early stage technology CEO, as in, "What's the secret blend of bravado and experience?" A common question with a complex answer.

First, it's all about the team. The modern organization is undergoing rapid transformation. Vertical structures of the past are tilting into horizontal organizations. Hierarchies are being replaced by teams. Business process re-engineering is cutting across functions to remold the organization to compete with upstarts who now must be both "thin" and "deep."

Today, if you don't get the right people mix, you're doomed from the get-go. This has serious implications for leaders. While CEOs still need to make tough calls in an environment of uncertainty, now they must also reveal their vulnerabilities to garner trust and harvest the technical expertise of all employees throughout the company.

Up front, there is no quantifiable "secret blend" of charisma, energy and brains. Yet a very real baseline of common characteristics defines the successful executives in early stage companies -- a template of sorts. The list is short but powerful in its implications of what you should look for when hiring for your startup.

### ***Baseline of common success characteristics***

Specific product and industry experience will greatly influence performance, but a lot of times we're blazing through virgin territory with new technologies and innovative applications of legacy products, so experience in what? Here are the most important traits and characteristics that determine success:

- Judgment -- specifically the ability to deal with novel, complex situations where there is no corporate history or industry road map. Most Internet startups are winging it.
- Focus -- the innate ability to capture and define a business' strategy beyond the original product concept and then garner the support of internal and external stakeholders.
- Defensible values -- by dint of personal style and experience establish a core philosophy of operation (a value set) and organizational culture that promotes the desired results.
- Customer focused -- understanding how markets work, as in the ability to get appropriate products to customers and to get customers to buy those products.
- Charisma -- an ability to recruit a quality subordinate team, generate high levels of performance from team members and get them to work together.
- High integrity -- an ability to hire and fire quickly, manage effectively and blend together the intricate personalities and quirks of talented people.
- Battle scars -- substantial management experience and an understanding of the factors that make a business work.
- Cash savvy -- knows the critical importance of cash to emerging companies.
- Smart --- a strong intellect, coupled with pragmatism and pure common sense.
- Stamina -- a built-in, unrelenting drive to succeed, and a willingness to make a substantial personal time commitment to the business.

### ***Common failures to avoid***

I'm sure you have heard the phrases "empty blue suit" or "loser's limp." When you are recruiting a CEO or senior executive, don't get caught up by superficial evaluation factors:

- Charm -- outward personality is not an accurate predictor of success in the CEO role. Probe for substance and ignore the width of the candidate's smile.
- Experience -- despite what I said before, sophisticated knowledge of a product may not truly be important. Instead, make your decision on the basis of a broad range of factors, not only on industry experience. Product knowledge can be bought, whereas the baseline success characteristics cannot. You either have them or you don't.
- Pedigree -- prestigious school credentials are nice to have and may even come with a built-in network, but they don't guarantee success in a CEO role. Keep them in proper context. If you need "A-school" contacts, consider adding them at the board level instead.
- Golden-Boy references -- by this I mean references from people who have worked or "consulted" for him but not directly with him. If a reference cannot say, "I remember when he did x...", discount any flattery heavily.

Interviews are artificial situations where people try to turn out their best colors. The real secret is for you to know in advance exactly what you want delivered at the end of the day and to stick to your guns until you find exactly those executives with the characteristics you value.

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