THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO

ENGAGING TOP TECH CANDIDATES

By **Dice** and **John Vlastelica,** Recruiting Toolbox

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Top tech talent doesn't respond to generic "seeking rock star programmer" spammy emails. Personalized messaging is key to hitting your response-rate goal and generating a slate of top candidates. But with so much information available on candidates, it can be difficult to decide what to use in your communications and when to use it.

Have no fear. We've partnered with John Vlastelica of Recruiting Toolbox to provide you with the best practices and checklists that make personalization possible, even when you are staring down a dozen or so requisitions.

In this guide, we'll walk you through the keys to messaging top tech candidates through email, phone and social media channels. With these tools in hand, you should feel prepared to engage candidates across the spectrum of active to passive candidates.

"I've worked with and interviewed many of the best tech recruiters and sourcers on the planet. Their secret sauce? Do the work. Preparation, personalization, and persistence are the three keys."

— **John Vlastelica**, *Recruiting Toolbox*

PREPARATION

Invest more time upfront, and you'll improve your reply rate. Preparation should focus on both your job and the target candidate.

Go Beyond the Job Description

Before you begin a search, you must know what you have to offer. Why? It helps you focus your search on targets that are both qualified and interested, as well as credibly communicate why happy, high-performing tech pros should consider a new opportunity.

What do you need to know? Beyond the basics of the company and its products, compensation, geography, and more, there are three things that are going to be important to most tech professionals. And these things are NOT found in horribly written, responsibility and requirements-oriented job descriptions.

1 The Work and Technology

What will they get to build? What are the specific projects they'd work on? What specific problems will they get to solve? What's the scale? What difference does their work make? How will it impact the company, industry or world? What pieces of the work can you point them to now (examples on the web, published research, etc.)? What is the company's technology stack today, and its tech roadmap going forward?

2 The Team and Culture

What is the background of the people they'd work for, work with and learn from? Where has the team previously worked (big-brand tech companies, financial services, startups?) and gone to school (are they all pedigreed top-school grads, or are they mostly scrappy and self-taught?)? What have they accomplished and built? Is the culture open and collaborative, where engineers work in open, shared spaces? Is it an Agile environment? What percentage of time do engineers and developers spend building software, versus attending meetings? Is the

"You have to know your audience and your own opportunities inside-and-out. Simply describing the job and flattering the engineer isn't enough. With generic flattery, you'll simply end up with nicer "not interested" rejects from passive tech talent." – **Chetta Crowley**, *Head of Tech Recruiting, Groupon*

focus on iteration and shipping often, or much bigger releases with more formality and lower risk tolerance?

3 The Learning Curve and Career Path

What would the tech pro learn on the job? What are examples of new technologies and methodologies the team has learned in the past year? Are other team members encouraged to be heads-down, headphones-on cube coders or collaborative, generalist problem solvers? Are team members rewarded for technical depth and peer influence with principal-level roles, or are they forced into people-manager roles?

If you learn even a third of the information in the previous points, you'll be far, far ahead of most tech recruiters, and will be able to laser-focus your search by finding the kind of candidates who will be naturally motivated to engage with you based on the work, the tech, the team, and the career opportunity. But how do you tailor your outreach so that it speaks to them?

Leverage Candidates' Social Graph and Their "Trending Passions"

If your orientation as a recruiter is to essentially just keyword-match résumés and job descriptions, you're likely not getting much of a response from the best, employed, passive tech candidates. Sure, you need to know that they have some relevant expertise, and keywords can help with that. But the best tech recruiters know what motivates the candidate as much as what the company is interested in. Great recruiters usually know what kind of role the candidate would be interested in before they reach out. So, how do you find this out before talking to them? Some of it is laid out for you nicely. Some of it comes from good inferences based on their online profile.

Technology Interests

Through tech sites such as Quora, GitHub, and Stack Overflow, you can see the topics candidates are interested in, the technologies they're invested in, the tech communities they participate in, and the kind of problems they like to solve. Many tech professionals work on side passion projects that don't align with their current job's focus, so if you learn about these, you may be able to start a conversation that leads to a career much more focused on their passion, versus their day-to-day job.

> *"Think of dating. You don't invite a vegetarian to a steak dinner. Why would you invite a front-end developer, passionate about amazing UI, to build the scalable infrastructure for a new data service? Use the tools you have — GitHub, Twitter, Facebook — to know your target. Make the candidate feel special and wanted."* – **Meredith Turner**, *Recruiting Manager, Marchex*

Career Interests

Now that you have a feel for what projects your candidates are interested in, you'll want to better understand what types of companies they gravitate toward. From personal blogs and other sites, you can learn more about their career interests and what kind of companies they have worked for in the past, along with how long they typically stay in one job, how they're progressing in their career, whether they like contract work or startups or big brands, and what kinds of companies they admire or follow. You can also often learn how important location might be to a prospect: Have they relocated for a job in the past, or have they lived in the same city for many years?

Personal Interests

From Twitter, Meetup and Facebook, you can discern the personal passions of candidates. Are they excited about a new video game, are they going to see a concert this weekend, are they quoting Sheldon from "Big Bang Theory," are they recommending Malcolm Gladwell's latest book? Are they following a comic you like, friends with a co-worker, or attending a hiking meet-up? All of this information can be used to personalize your outreach, and start a conversation that highlights common interests. Personal blogs are also fantastic sources: Tech pros will write about what they love.

While it may seem daunting to perform research across all of these sites, there are ways to do this efficiently. With Dice's Open Web social recruiting platform, you get a summary of activities and interests based on a candidate's social footprint across 130 sites.

Once you learn what interests candidates, you can personalize your message and stand out from the crowd of recruiters bombarding them with "me, me, me" messages.

PERSONALIZATION

Personalized messaging, sent to the right target, by a credible recruiter or tech pro, leads to high response rates. What's the secret sauce? There isn't any. There's no magic phrase that works for every recruiter, for every candidate. (Anyone that tells you this is selling you something.) But there are several keys to effectively messaging top tech talent.

1 It's All About Them, Not You

"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! This is a surefire way to get no response or a "No, thank you" from a candidate. Once you've researched their needs and interests, you must leverage a message that shows you've invested time in learning about them, and demonstrate that you're someone they should talk to. No "Send me your résumé" or "Apply here" or "Do you have any referrals?" in this first message. Instead, your goal is to simply show them that you can offer challenging work or a team or career path that appears to align with their technology, career or personal interests.

> *"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 Talent Acquisition, GoDaddy*

2 Pique Their Interest

Your goal with outreach is to tap into the candidate's natural curiosity to learn more about something that, on the surface, appears well aligned to their interests. This doesn't mean you simply keyword match ("You know Java, and we need Java skilled engineers — interested in learning more?") because that's lame. Instead, reference something really interesting and relevant your team is building or several key problems you're solving (at a big scale is even better). Then see if they'd be open to a discussion to learn more. Don't attach the job description, or link to your HR black-hole ATS. Instead, a link to a YouTube video, a Slideshare deck, a Facebook group, an engineering blog, or an article/white paper that's about the work and the tech (not just general HR accolades).

Note: Your goal is not to close the deal (i.e, to get them to apply or interview) at this stage. Your goal is to make a human connection, to sell a next-step conversation, to start two-way communication and build the relationship based on *mutual interest*. Not to close the deal after one email or call.

3 Leverage a Shared Connection

If possible, mention a shared connection in the message. It could be a current colleague who encouraged you to reach out, or a common manager you both worked with five years ago at another company.

4 **Decide Who Will Send the Message**

Generally, response rates more than double when the message comes from a technical peer, the hiring manager or chief tech leader. It's not necessary to leverage your tech team for every contact; but for critical roles or particularly hard-to-reach candidates, it's key.

Note: You can (and should) be able to very quickly get the tech hiring manager or a VP level leader 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 résumé 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-résumé) passive tech candidate, then you will likely not have a lot of success recruiting passive tech talent.

5 **Choose Your Tools of Engagement**

Many tech pros prefer to be contacted via email. Interrupting an engineer who is in

"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. The key is to get them to engage, and sometimes, you do that by being real." – **Derek Zeller**, *Sr. Recruiter, Microsoft via Search Wizards*

the zone with a call is irritating. Many don't answer their phones anyway, and even if they do, they're often working in an open space and wouldn't be able to talk right then. Start with email. Absolutely follow up with a call, and reference the email.

You also need to leverage social tools: Direct messages via Twitter (they need to be following you to receive a Direct Message) and Facebook messages are both good options if you notice the candidate is very active on social (i.e. Twitter is great if you

notice they're tweeting every few hours, but poor if you notice a tweet a month). However, be smart about using social to approach passive candidates; you generally don't want to publicly tweet them about a job, or write on their Facebook wall about your interest in talking with them about their career interests, as you may get a negative reaction. Remember, they're actively working, and may not want the world to see your non-private message. Dice's Open Web social tool gives you easy access to find a candidate's contact methods (phone,

email, Facebook, Twitter and more) so you can choose the one that's right for you—and them.

Note: Be sure you look like someone a top candidate would want to connect with on your own social profiles before you reach out. One top recruiter shared that for a big, targeted sourcing campaign, almost 75% of the people who replied, reviewed her social handles before responding. Do you look like a credible, highly recommended (by hiring managers and candidates), specialized tech recruiter who is well connected, and focused on hiring the best of the best?

6 Adapt Your Message to the Medium
Emails shouldn't be longer than 2-3 short paragraphs. They're the long-form option. Voicemails should be very short and focused, no more than 30-45 seconds, and reference the detailed email you've already sent. (Remember to smile while you leave a message—it comes through to the listener.)

Facebook Messages should be 2-3 sentences and can often sound much more casual. DMs on Twitter (if you're lucky enough to have your target candidate follow you on Twitter) are limited to 140 characters. Through Twitter, you'll want to spark a conversation on a topic of interest for the candidate and not bring up job-related info right away. Only after some real engagement (i.e., a few tweets back and forth) should you ask to connect via phone or email.

"It sounds labor-intensive compared to just spamming 500 people via LinkedIn, but if your response rate is 5% (if you're lucky), then 25 people got back to you, while 475 just blacklisted you. And the ones who respond to spam usually are not top-tier, and/or would have just applied to an ad anyway." – **Martin Burns**, *Direct Sourcing and Technology Channel Lead, PwC*

@ 30-45 SECONDS

2-3 PARAGRAPHS @ 2-3 SENTENCES f ≤140

PERSISTENCE

Most recruiters send one email, or leave one message, and move on; they assume there's no interest if the prospect doesn't reply back right away. Don't be most recruiters.

Space Your Messages Across Days

If you expect an email reply to your first and only email, you'll likely be disappointed. The best recruiters will space their messages across several days. One successful tech recruiter I worked with sends an email once a day for three days, then leaves a voicemail. That's how she starts the process each time, maintaining a non-salesy approach that's about getting this engineer connected to a

"We keep our messages short and customized based on projects they've done, Twitter posts, and articles they've written. In future messages, we share more details. Persistence is key."

– **Sam Wholley**, *Developer turned Executive Recruiter, Riviera Partners*

tech leader at her company to talk about technology and work that's well aligned to the prospect's interests. And when her own messages don't work, she gets a tech leader to email them or to call them. She persists.

Distribute Your Messages Across Platforms

Facebook Messenger is a good option (especially with better mobile notifications that recently arrived), but may not be well received if you aren't friends: Many people see Facebook as a friend-only network, and it can feel like an intrusion. (Although this feeling is changing.) InMail, while it may seem different, is actually delivered via email. So if you're not getting a response via email, an InMail will not likely have a higher hit rate. Texting (if you can find their mobile number) felt intrusive just a few years ago, but is becoming more acceptable. Tweeting is very

WHERE DO I FIND THE TIME?

Here's one of the common excuses for recruiters who just send blanket messages to candidates: "I don't have time to do this research on each individual." Here are some helpful tips for effectively incorporating research into your daily workflow.

✓ **Group your research time into blocks.** It's very hard to do the kind of exploration you need to do for that critical lead role in between phone screens, emails, and meetings. (So many meetings!) Set aside two to three 30-minute blocks in your day (reserve the time on your calendar) and hide if you have to (schedule yourself in a conference room if your cube environment is too distracting, or work from home for a few hours before/after your core in-office time).

✓ **Use tools such as Dice's Open Web** to save you from the more time-consuming site-by-site research you'll need to leverage.

✓ **Invest more time up front** with the hiring manager to get alignment on the target candidate. Leverage sample résumés and social profiles available on Dice, your ATS or from previous openings before you start sourcing, in order to calibrate on what good candidates look like.

> "I get about a 70% response rate when I get our engineers engaged in sending the message. We work to get each lead engineer about 20 emails to send/week when we're in heavy recruiting mode."
>
> — **Yoonie Kim**, *Recruiting Lead, Dropbox*

WRAP UP

What's the secret to engaging top tech talent, and improving your response rate? Learn as much as you can about a candidate's interests and motivations on social to ensure the opportunities you offer truly align with their interests. Then personalize your message to focus on what the candidate cares about, not what you have to offer. Does this take more time? Yes, but not necessarily a lot more. And it's worth it (and required) when hunting world-class tech talent.

public (your message will show up on their public timeline if you don't DM them), so it can be challenging to start (what should be) a more private conversation. Emails are usually best.

Having said all of that, you should absolutely try reaching candidates via Facebook Messenger, text and Twitter, especially if email doesn't generate a reply.

Leverage Peer Networks to Engage Candidates

If you're not getting a direct response, an indirect approach might help. Ask your engineers to follow your prospect's work on GitHub or their answers on Quora. In a non-creepy way, it can demonstrate a sincere interest in their body of work. And that interest may result in a quicker reply.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR John Vlastelica is Founder and Managing Director of Recruiting Toolbox, a training and consulting firm that has helped thousands of recruiters and hiring managers recruit and interview better at companies such as Yahoo!, Amazon, TripAdvisor, Target.com, Electronic Arts, Salesforce, Groupon, Nike, and Microsoft. He's a self-described geek, a top rated speaker at global recruiting conferences, author of popular best-practice recruitment articles, and co-founder of Talent42, The National Tech Recruiting Conference. @vlastelica

CHECKLISTS

Where to go online to research a tech candidate

Dice's Open Web gathers data from 130 social sites, allowing you to quickly and easily learn what you need to know to personalize your outreach and find candidates' email addresses or social contact information.

Avoid the 5 biggest mistakes
recruiters make when crafting messages to passive tech talent

1 **DO NOT** send out anything that resembles a mass email (or BCC them, so that it appears they are one of many candidates receiving the message)
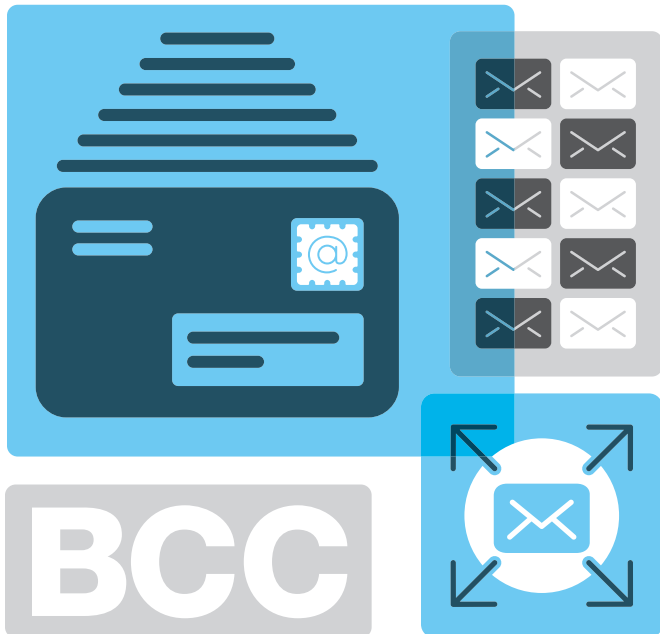
2 **DO NOT** send a traditional job description or any kind of Word doc attachment

3 **DO NOT** ask them to check out your career site or to apply online

4 **DO NOT** ask them if they're a rock star, ninja, or superstar

5 **DO NOT** write more than 2-3 short paragraphs in an email

BCC

TO:
FROM:

Tailoring the "perfect" recruiting message to a tech pro

Personalize your email or message to what you've learned about a candidate. Keep it short — no more than two or three quick paragraphs. (Two or three sentences is even better!) Ask a question — don't be a o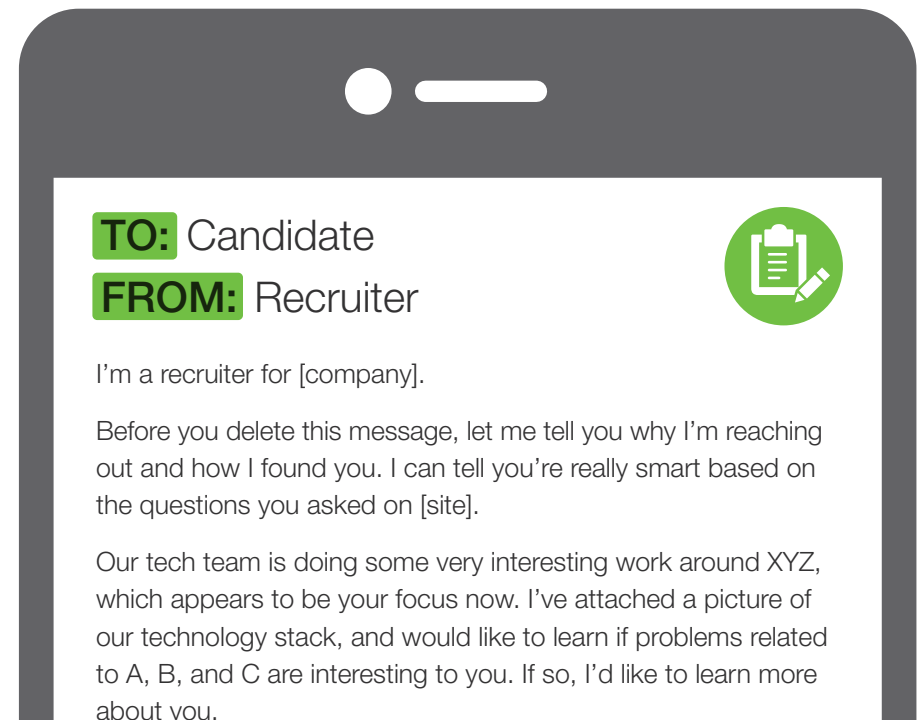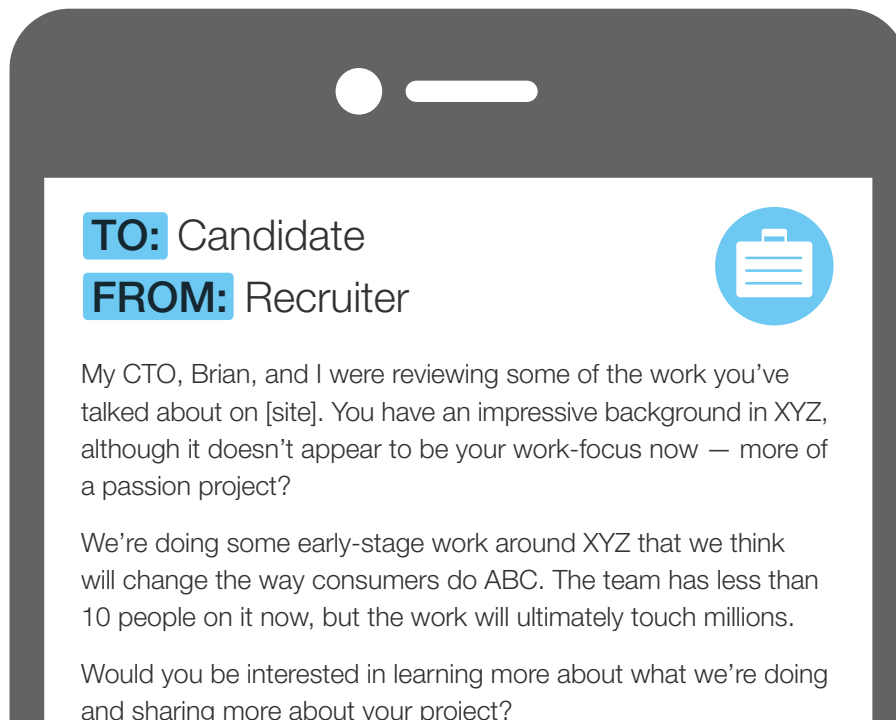ne-way "sender." The goal is to get them to the next step, which is a two-way conversation, so start the relationship with a two-way orientation.

TO: Candidate
FROM: Recruiter

My CTO, Brian, and I were reviewing some of the work you've talked about on [site]. You have an impressive background in XYZ, although it doesn't appear to be your work-focus now — more of a passion project?

We're doing some early-stage work around XYZ that we think will change the way consumers do ABC. The team has less than 10 people on it now, but the work will ultimately touch millions.

Would you be interested in learning more about what we're doing and sharing more about your project?

TO: Candidate
FROM: Recruiter

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.

Should you use these messages for passive or active candidates? Both. One of the big misperceptions is that you can simply treat active candidates like people who are dying to work for your company, with no other career options. That's almost never true when it comes to top tech talent, as even active tech talent needs to be engaged based on their interests. Starting a dialogue, and not sending a presumptuous "apply here" message, is the key to engaging top talent, whether they're passive or active. Prepare, personalize, and persist. Even active candidates are likely being courted by other recruiters. Remember, it's very unlikely you're their only career option.

TO: Candidate
FROM: Recruiter

I was speaking with [common connection], and he said "Hello," and suggested that I reach out to you.

He was telling me about your expertise with XYZ, and I was hoping you might be interested in a conversation with our engineering leader, Shilpa. She's also a Stanford grad, and is assembling the team that's building [something disruptive or interesting, based on their interests in XYZ].

Would you be open to a 20-minute intro chat tonight or tomorrow after work? Even if you're not interested in making a career change, she'd be a great person for you to know.

"My goal is to create a conversation for my hiring manager. I highlight the candidate's personal impact and ability to solve our team's problem as the big draw. It can be a long process to "yes", but it's worth it for certain talent." – **Rob Dromgoole**, *Director Talent Acquisition, Pacific Northwest National Laboratory*

Choose wisely: passive and active candidate engagement

Start by asking yourself these questions:

Q Is the candidate passive (non job seeker)?

Q Does the candidate have valuable technical skills?

Q Is the candidate also applying at other companies?

Q Is the candidate smart?

If you answered **yes** to any or all of these questions…

Follow the suggestions in this guide.

×8
APPLY
$$–$$$

or

If you answered **no** to all of these questions and are looking for candidates who are only applying to your company, completely unaware of how valuable they are in the marketplace, and in love with dated job descriptions and long online application forms, then…

Just send them a link to your career site.

???
×1
APPLY
$ HUH?

Preparing your own profile for tech candidate engagement

Make sure your social profiles demonstrate your tech recruiting credibility.

1 **Do my summary and open job descriptions emphasize my focus** and expertise in recruiting tech pros? (Include information about your company's technology stack, the kind of candidates you regularly recruit, and the kind of interesting tech problems the teams you hire for are working on.)

2 **Do I follow tech companies and tech leaders?**

3 **Do I post articles or videos** or link to information about my company's technical work, or do I just come across as a traditional HR recruiter or salesy agency recruiter looking to make a dollar?

4 **Am I connected to tech professionals or just other recruiters?** Am I part of relevant tech communities/groups?

5 **Do I have recommendations from tech candidates and hiring managers**, who rave about my professionalism, my abilities to help them in their career, my abilities as a tech recruiter, the quality of the candidate experiences I create, etc.?

Ideally, after checking out your profile, tech professionals would say something like, "This looks like a good person for me to connect with, even if the opportunity she's contacting me about isn't right for me now. She's clearly the kind of person who could help me in my career, as she specializes in my technology area and is well connected to the kind of companies and communities that interest me. I think I should chat with her."

Sample **Tweets**

You have to be careful when leveraging Twitter with a passive or active candidate, as tweeting is public, and they may still be employed. Your tweet shows up on their profile when you mention them. In general, you don't want to send any kind of "apply here" or "check out this job" tweet with a specific reference to a candidate embedded in your 140 characters. Instead, try something like this.

PASSIVE CANDIDATE (@name)
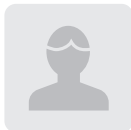
You @name
Love the article @name just wrote on the XYZ tech blog, cc @HiringManager @lifeatcompanyname
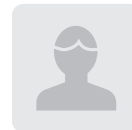
You @name
Our engineers are excited to hear @name speak at the upcoming Hadoop meetup in Seattle on Tuesday
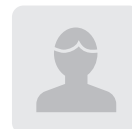
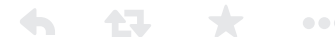## ACTIVE OR UNEMPLOYED CANDIDATE (@name)

You @name
@name we're building a top notch #devops team in Boston (link to article) @careers

You @name
@name scored in the top 10 on our coding challenge! Congrats! #winning

Messages Differ at Each Stage of the **Recruiting Funnel**

WHO SENDS

WHAT THEY SEND

TECH HIRING MANAGER OR TECH PEERS

Initial outreach should be focused on a candidate's interests, and how those align to the new position's responsibilities and technology.

TECH RECRUITER OR HIRING MANAGER

Once engaged and interested, the outreach should focus more on the team's projects, the specific job, geography and work culture.

RECRUITER

As the candidate begins the interviewing process, messaging can focus more deeply on the team, interviewing tips, specific location information (i.e., how easy it is to get to your HQ via metro).

TECH HIRING MANAGER, TECH EXECS, AND FUTURE TEAM MEMBERS

Final outreach at the offer stage should be about selling and closing the candidate with personalized messaging that's tailored to what he or she is most interested in (impact on a project, use of specific technology at scale, gaining international experience, and so on).