



How to Choose **THE RIGHT PLASTICS, PRINTING, & PACKAGING RECRUITER**

The Questions Smart Plant Leaders Ask
Before Signing Any Staffing Agreement



If you have been in plastics, printing, or packaging manufacturing long enough, you have a staffing agency horror story. Maybe they sent you an "experienced press operator" who had never touched your type of equipment. Maybe they charged you a 50% markup for a candidate who no-showed after three days. Maybe they disappeared the moment the invoice cleared and left you managing their workforce on top of your own.

Most plant managers and operations directors have been through some version of this. And the natural reaction is to swear off staffing agencies entirely and go back to posting on Indeed, asking around, and hoping for the best.

The problem is not that staffing agencies are useless. The problem is that most of them have no business recruiting for your floor. They are generalists filling warehouse roles, office temps, and light industrial labor all in the same week, and they treat your injection molding tech search the same way they treat a forklift driver requisition.

This guide gives you the specific questions to ask any recruiter before you sign an agreement, the red flags that tell you to walk away, and a clear picture of what a qualified manufacturing recruiting partner actually looks like. Use it to evaluate anyone you are considering working with, including us.

A Letter from BJ Ruble

Hey,

I wrote this guide because I kept hearing the same story from plant managers. They worked with a staffing agency, it did not go well, and now they do not trust recruiters. When I dug into what happened, it was almost always the same thing: the agency did not understand their equipment, their processes, or their floor. They sent warm bodies instead of qualified candidates and called it a day.

That is not a recruiting failure. That is a vetting failure. The plant chose the wrong partner because they did not know what to look for.

I run the plastics, printing, and packaging manufacturing division at Cannonball Recruiting. This is all I do. I know what separates a recruiter who understands your floor from one who is guessing. And I know that most plant leaders have never had a reason to evaluate a staffing partner at that level, because they have never been given the right framework.

That is what this guide is. Every question in here is one that a qualified manufacturing recruiter should be able to answer without hesitation. If they stumble or give you a generic answer that could apply to any industry, that tells you everything you need to know.

You will see contract-to-hire referenced in a few places. It is worth asking any recruiter you talk to whether they offer it and how it works. The answer will tell you a lot about how they think about risk and accountability.

Use this however it is useful to you.
And if you want to talk shop,
I am always up for that conversation.

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Why Most Manufacturing Hiring Falls Apart

Before we get into the questions you should be asking recruiters, it is worth understanding why most manufacturing hiring goes sideways in the first place. The problem usually starts before a recruiter is ever involved.

The DIY Trap

Most plants handle hiring the way they always have. Post on Indeed. Put a sign on the fence. Ask the floor if anybody knows somebody. Wait.

Sometimes you get lucky. More often you get a pile of applicants who have never run your equipment, cannot work your shifts, or no-show for the interview. And while you are sorting through all of that, your line is still short, your overtime budget is getting crushed, and your best operators are picking up the slack and getting more irritated by the day.

DIY hiring works when the labor market has slack in it. Right now, with over 55% of manufacturers citing workforce as a primary challenge and the talent pool for specialized roles shrinking every year, posting and praying is not a strategy. It is wishful thinking.

The Generalist Problem

When the DIY approach fails, most plant managers call a staffing agency. The problem is that the agency filling your injection molding tech role is the same one that placed a warehouse picker last Tuesday and an office admin on Thursday.

They have never been on a plastics floor. They do not know what barrel temperature profiles mean on an extruder, what color registration issues look like on a flexo press, or why a candidate's experience on a specific brand of equipment matters. They screen resumes the same way they screen for every other role: match a few keywords, confirm availability, and send them over.

The result is predictable. You get candidates who cannot run your equipment. You burn a full day on safety orientation for someone who washes out before the week is over. And the next time you think about calling a staffing agency, you remember how that went and decide you would rather just be short-staffed.

What It Actually Costs When You Choose Wrong

A bad staffing partner does not just waste your time. They cost you real money and create problems that outlast the hire.

You are paying 45-55% markup on an operator and the agency's contribution was an Indeed scrape and a five-minute phone screen. No skills testing, no reference check beyond dates of employment, no site visit to understand your operation. The margin they charged did not match the effort they put in, and you felt it every time you got a candidate who could not do the job.

Then there is the floor impact. An underqualified operator on an injection molding machine or a flexo press does not just run slow. They generate scrap, create rework, and produce quality escapes that reach your customer. In regulated industries like food packaging or pharmaceutical packaging, that carries compliance risk on top of the financial hit. One bad run can mean tens of thousands in wasted materials and a customer who starts looking for another vendor.

The right recruiting partner understands all of this. The wrong one has never thought about it. Here are the ten questions that tell you which one you are talking to.

The 10 Questions to Ask Any Manufacturing Recruiter Before You Sign

These are not gotcha questions. They are the basics. A recruiter who specializes in plastics, printing, and packaging manufacturing should be able to answer every one of them without breaking a sweat. If they hesitate, dodge, or give you a generic answer that could apply to any industry, you have your answer.

1. Do you recruit specifically for plastics, printing, and packaging, or is manufacturing one of many verticals?

This is the one that matters most. A recruiter who fills manufacturing roles as a side offering alongside office temps and warehouse labor does not have the candidate relationships, the equipment knowledge, or the screening depth that a specialist brings. You want someone whose entire week is spent in your industry, not someone who dabbles in it between other requisitions.

2. Can you describe the difference between the machine-specific roles on my floor?

An injection molding tech is not an extrusion operator. A flexographic press operator is not the same as someone who ran a digital press. A blow molding technician who spent ten years on one brand of equipment is not plug-and-play on another. Your recruiter should be able to talk about these distinctions the way your floor supervisor would. If they cannot, they are matching keywords, not evaluating candidates.

3. How do you verify that a candidate can actually run my equipment?

This is where generalist agencies fall apart. Anybody can put "injection molding experience" on a resume. The question is whether they did their own setups, what tonnage they ran, what resins they worked with, and what quality standards they were held to. A good recruiter digs into these details before a candidate ever gets presented to you. Ask them to walk you through how they validate technical claims.

4. How do you find candidates who are not actively looking for a job?

The best operators and techs are employed and not on job boards. If the recruiter's strategy is "we post the job and wait for applicants," they are only reaching a fraction of the available talent. You want a recruiter who maintains relationships with passive candidates in your space and can source directly from competitor operations when needed.

5. How do you assess whether someone will fit our floor culture and shift dynamics?

Your second shift runs different than your first. Your floor has a pace, an attitude, and expectations that either work for someone or drive them out within 90 days. The recruiter should ask you detailed questions about your environment and then screen candidates against that reality. If they never ask about your culture, your shifts, or your supervision style, they are filling a slot, not making a match.



6. What does your screening process look like beyond the resume?

The depth of a recruiter's screening is the best predictor of the quality of candidates you will see. You want to hear specifics: technical questioning that goes beyond job titles and years of experience, reference checks that contact former supervisors rather than just confirming employment dates, and some form of skills validation before the candidate shows up on your floor. If their process is "we review the resume and do a quick phone screen," you are going to be doing all the real vetting yourself.

7. What staffing models do you offer?

Direct hire, contract-to-hire, and temporary staffing carry very different risk profiles. A recruiter who only offers direct hire is asking you to commit fully based on an interview. Contract-to-hire, which is standard practice across manufacturing, lets you see the candidate work on your floor before making a permanent commitment. Ask whether they offer it and how the conversion process works.

8. What happens if the placement does not work out?

This question tells you how much skin they have in the game after the hire is made. Ask about guarantee periods, replacement policies, and what happens if the candidate quits or gets terminated in the first 30, 60, or 90 days. A recruiter who disappears after the invoice clears is not a partner. They are a vendor who got paid and moved on.

9. How many candidates will you send me, and what does "vetted" mean in your process?

If the answer is "we will send you a dozen resumes," they are making you do their job. You want a recruiter who sends you three to five candidates, each one pre-screened for technical ability, floor fit, and genuine interest in your specific operation. Ask them to explain what their vetting process actually includes. The answer will tell you whether they are doing real work or forwarding resumes.

10. Can you tell me what operators and techs are earning in my market right now?

A recruiter who specializes in your industry should know current pay rates in your area without having to look them up. They should be able to tell you what the shop down the road is offering, how overtime and shift differentials factor in, and what it takes to be competitive for the roles you need to fill. If they cannot speak to your local market with that kind of specificity, they do not operate in it deeply enough to help you.

Red Flags That Tell You to Walk Away



The ten questions in the previous section will tell you a lot. But sometimes the warning signs show up before you even get that far. These are the things staffing agencies hope you do not notice.

They Flood You with Resumes

A staffing agency that sends you fifteen resumes for one press operator opening is not doing their job. They are dumping a pile on your desk and hoping one of them can run your equipment. Every resume you review that misses the mark is time you are not spending on production. A qualified manufacturing recruiter sends you a short list of candidates they have already screened at a technical level. If the stack is thick, the screening was thin.

They Never Ask About Your Equipment, Your Floor, or Your Shifts

If the first conversation is about the job title, the pay rate, and when you need someone to start, and they never ask what machines you run, what your shift structure looks like, or what kind of operator works well on your floor, they are filling a requisition, not making a placement. In a manufacturing environment where equipment specificity and shift culture determine whether someone lasts or washes out, skipping those questions is not an oversight. It is a disqualifier.

They Cannot Speak to Machine-Specific Skills or Processes

Ask them what the difference is between injection molding and blow molding. Ask them what a barrel temperature profile is. Ask them why a candidate's experience on a specific brand of press matters. If they hesitate, redirect,

or tell you they will look into it, they are not equipped to screen candidates for your floor. You would not hire an operator who could not answer basic questions about your equipment. Hold your recruiter to the same standard.

They Offer No Guarantee or Accountability After Placement

A staffing agency that collects the markup and disappears is not a partner. Ask what happens when the placement does not work out. Ask about guarantee periods and replacement timelines. If the answer is vague or the guarantee window is suspiciously short, you are absorbing all the risk while they absorb none. A confident recruiter stands behind their placements because they trust their process.

They Send Your Candidates to Multiple Plants Simultaneously

The agency submits your candidate to three other plants in the same industrial park. Your offer gets countered, the candidate no-shows, or they start and leave after a week for fifty cents more across the street. There is no loyalty, no exclusivity, and no effort to match the right person to the right operation. If your recruiter is playing both sides, you are not their client. You are one of their options.

They Pressure You to Sign Before You Have Done Your Homework

A staffing agency that pushes you to commit before you have had time to evaluate their process, ask your questions, and check their track record is prioritizing their pipeline over your decision. A confident recruiter welcomes the scrutiny because they know their answers hold up. If you feel rushed, slow down. The right partner will still be there after you have done your due diligence.

What a Great Manufacturing Recruiting Partner Looks Like

You know the questions to ask and the red flags to watch for. Here is what the right answer looks like when you put it all together.

Manufacturing Is Their Focus, Not a Side Gig

A great manufacturing recruiter is not dabbling in your industry between office temp placements and warehouse staffing. They spend every day in the plastics, printing, and packaging talent market. That daily immersion is what builds the candidate network, the equipment knowledge, and the screening instincts that a generalist simply cannot develop by filling a manufacturing role once a month.

When this is all they do, every conversation with a candidate sharpens their understanding of what plants need. They learn which machines matter, what certifications carry weight, what shift structures retain people, and what floor cultures churn through them. That accumulated knowledge is what you are paying for.

They Reach Candidates You Cannot

The best operators and techs are not on Indeed. They are employed, performing well, and not looking. A great recruiting partner has relationships with these passive candidates built over years of working in your space. When they call, the candidate picks up because they trust that the opportunity is worth hearing about.

They also know how to source from your competitors. They know which plants in your area run similar equipment, which ones are going through layoffs or restructuring, and which operators might be open to a conversation if the right opportunity came along. That is access you cannot get from a job posting.

They Screen at the Technical Level Your Floor Demands

A great recruiter does not send you candidates based on resume keywords. They dig into the details: what equipment, what materials, what speeds, what quality standards. By the time a candidate reaches you, the recruiter has already validated their technical claims, checked references with former supervisors, and confirmed that this person can actually do the work you need done. You are not sorting through a pile. You are meeting people who have already been through a real screening process.

They Offer Contract-to-Hire to Share the Risk

A great recruiting partner does not ask you to bet everything on an interview. They offer contract-to-hire so you can see the candidate run your equipment, work with your crew, and handle your pace before you make a permanent commitment. That model spreads the risk between both parties and produces placements that stick at rates direct hire cannot match.

They Stay on It After the Hire Is Made

The relationship does not end when the candidate starts. A great partner checks in after the first week, the first month, and beyond. They want to know if the placement is working because their reputation rides on it and because they want to be the first call you make when the next opening hits. If they disappear after the placement, they were never invested in the outcome.

They Bring Certifications That Help Your Business

This one is specific to Cannonball, but it matters for a lot of plants. We are MBE-certified through the NMSDC and veteran-owned. If your company works with procurement, responds to RFPs, or has supplier diversity spend requirements, those certifications can strengthen your bids and help you meet compliance targets. We also maintain a network of certified partners across SDVOSB, WBE, VBE, DBE, Hub-Zone, and 8(a) designations. Not every recruiter brings that to the table.

The Choice Is Yours

This guide was built to be useful regardless of who you work with. Print it out. Bring it to your next conversation with any staffing agency. Ask the questions. Watch for the red flags. Hold every recruiting partner to the standard your operation deserves.

If a recruiter can answer every question in this guide with machine-specific depth and without flinching, they are probably worth your time. If they cannot, you now know exactly what that means.

At Cannonball Recruiting, this guide describes how we operate every day. Plastics, printing, and packaging manufacturing is our entire focus. We screen at the technical level your floor demands. We maintain relationships with passive candidates who are not on job boards. We source directly from competitor operations when the situation calls for it. We offer contract-to-hire so you can see the candidate work before you commit. And we stay on it after the placement because our reputation depends on results, not invoices.

We are also MBE-certified and veteran-owned. If your company has supplier diversity requirements, we can be part of that conversation too.

We built this division on a simple principle: plant managers deserve a recruiting partner who knows their floor as well as they do. Every question in this guide is one we welcome, because we know our answers hold up.

Whether you have positions open right now or you want to get ahead of the next vacancy, it starts with a conversation. We will talk about what you have got open, what has not been working, and whether we are the right fit. Even if we do not end up working together, you will walk away with a better picture of the talent market in your space.

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