



How to Choose

THE RIGHT STEEL & METAL TRADES RECRUITER

The Questions Smart Shop Leaders Ask
Before Signing Any Staffing Agreement



If you have been in steel fabrication, machining, or metal trades long enough, you have a staffing agency horror story. Maybe they sent you an "experienced welder" who had never welded to code. Maybe they charged you a 50% markup for a candidate who failed the weld test on day one. Maybe they disappeared the moment the invoice cleared and left you managing their workforce on top of your own.

Most shop owners, foremen, and operations managers 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 trade. They are generalists filling warehouse roles, office temps, and light industrial labor all in the same week, and they treat your structural welder 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 steel and metal trades recruiting partner actually looks like. Use it to evaluate anyone you are considering working with, including us.

A Letter from Brett Secor

I wrote this guide because I kept hearing the same story from shop owners. 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 codes, or their floor. They sent warm bodies instead of qualified tradespeople and called it a day.

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

I run the steel manufacturing and metal trades division at Cannonball Recruiting. This is all I do. I know what separates a recruiter who understands your shop from one who is guessing. And I know that most shop 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 steel and metal trades 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.

Brett Secor
Founder & President,
Cannonball Recruiting

Steel Manufacturing &
Metal Trades Division

brett@cannonballrecruiting.com





Why Most Steel & Metal Trades Hiring Falls Apart

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

The DIY Trap

Most shops 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 welded to code, cannot read a print, or no-show for the interview. And while you are sorting through all of that, your shop is still short, your overtime budget is getting crushed, and your best tradespeople 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 a projected shortage of 400,000 welders, nearly half the welding workforce over 45, and federal infrastructure spending pulling skilled tradespeople into every bridge, structural, and defense project in the country, posting and praying is not a strategy. It is wishful thinking.

The Generalist Problem

When the DIY approach fails, most shop owners call a staffing agency. The problem is that the agency filling your structural welder role is the same one that placed a warehouse picker last Tuesday and an office admin on Thursday.

They have never been in a fabrication shop. They do not know what AWS D1.1 means, what the difference is between SMAW and FCAW, or why a candidate's experience on a specific type of CNC control matters. They do not know that a fitter-welder is a different skill set than a production welder, or that a machinist who ran manual Bridgeport mills is not the same hire as someone who programmed 5-axis CNC. 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 pass a weld test or hold a tolerance. 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% to 55% markup on a welder or machinist and the agency's contribution was an Indeed scrape and a five-minute phone screen. No weld test verification, no code qualification check, no reference beyond dates of employment, no visit to understand your shop or your standards. 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 work.

Then there is the shop floor impact. An underqualified welder on a structural job does not just run slow. They put down welds that fail inspection, generate rejected joints that need to be ground out and re-welded, and create rework that backs up your entire production schedule. On code work, a bad weld is not just a quality problem. It is a liability. If your shop does structural steel, pressure vessels, or any work governed by AWS, ASME, or API codes, a failed weld can mean rejected inspections, project delays, and risk exposure that follows your shop's name.

Replacing a skilled tradesperson costs roughly 75% to 100% of their annual salary when you factor in recruiting, training, lost productivity, and scrap. For a welder or machinist earning \$55,000 to \$75,000, that is \$40,000 to \$75,000 gone before the replacement is fully productive.

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 Steel & Metal Trades Recruiter Before You Sign

These are not gotcha questions. They are the basics. A recruiter who specializes in steel fabrication, machining, and metal trades 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 steel and metal trades, 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 trade 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 trade-specific roles on my floor?

A structural fitter-welder is not a production welder. A CNC machinist running Fanuc controls on a lathe is not the same hire as someone who programmed Siemens on a 5-axis mill. A press brake operator who has formed heavy plate is not interchangeable with someone who ran light gauge on a smaller brake. Your recruiter should be able to talk about these distinctions the way your foreman would. If they cannot, they are matching keywords, not evaluating candidates.

3. How do you verify that a candidate can actually do the work my shop requires?

This is where generalist agencies fall apart. Anybody can put "welding experience" on a resume. The question is what processes they have run, what codes they are qualified to, what positions they have welded in, and what base metals they have worked with. For machinists, it is what controls they have programmed, what tolerances they have held, and whether they did their own setups. 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 welders, machinists, and fabricators are employed and not on job boards. Roughly 70% of the skilled trades talent market is not actively searching. If the recruiter's strategy is "we post the job and wait for applicants," they are only reaching about 30% of the available talent. You want a recruiter who maintains relationships with passive candidates in your trade and can source directly from competitor shops when needed.

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

Your second shift runs different than your first. Your shop has a pace, a safety culture, 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, verification of code qualifications and certifications, reference checks that contact former foremen and supervisors rather than just confirming employment dates, and real 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 and maybe a weld test. Contract-to-hire lets you see the candidate work on your floor, weld your joints, machine your parts, and fit in with your crew before you make a permanent commitment. Ask whether they offer it and how the conversion process works. In the trades, where you learn more about a welder in two weeks of production than you do in any interview, this model changes the math on every hire.

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, code qualifications, 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 welders and machinists are earning in my market right now?

A recruiter who specializes in your trade 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, what certifications command a premium, 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 welder opening is not doing their job. They are dumping a pile on your desk and hoping one of them can pass a weld test or hold a tolerance on your machines. Every resume you review that misses the mark is time you are not spending on production. A qualified steel and metal trades 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 Codes, or Your Shop

If the first conversation is about the job title, the pay rate, and when you need someone to start, and they never ask what welding processes your shop runs, what codes your work is held to, what CNC controls are on your machines, or what kind of tradesperson works well on your floor, they are filling a requisition, not making a placement. In a steel and metal trades environment where code qualifications, equipment specificity, and shop culture determine whether someone lasts or washes out, skipping those questions is not an oversight. It is a disqualifier.

They Cannot Speak to Welding Processes, Machine Types, or Certifications

Ask them what the difference is between SMAW and FCAW. Ask them what AWS D1.1 covers versus ASME Section IX. Ask them why a candidate's experience on Fanuc controls versus Siemens matters for your shop. 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 a welder who could not answer basic questions about the processes they claim to run. 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 Shops Simultaneously

The agency submits your candidate to three other shops 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 Steel & Metal Trades 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.

Steel and Metal Trades Is Their Focus, Not a Side Gig

A great steel and metal trades recruiter is not dabbling in your industry between office temp placements and warehouse staffing. They spend every day in the steel fabrication, machining, and welding talent market. That daily immersion is what builds the candidate network, the trade 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 shops need. They learn which welding codes matter for which types of work, what CNC controls are running in your region, what certifications carry weight, what shift structures retain people, and what shop cultures churn through them. That accumulated knowledge is what you are paying for.

They Reach Candidates You Cannot

The best welders, machinists, and fabricators 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 trade. 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 shops in your area run similar equipment, which ones are going through slowdowns or losing contracts, and which tradespeople 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 Shop Demands

A great recruiter does not send you candidates based on resume keywords. They dig into the details: what welding processes, what codes, what positions, what base metals. For machinists, what controls, what tolerances, what materials, and whether they did their own programming and setups. By the time a candidate reaches you, the recruiter has already validated their technical claims, verified code qualifications, checked references with former foremen and 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 and a weld test. They offer contract-to-hire so you can see the candidate weld your joints, machine your parts, or fabricate your assemblies under real production conditions 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 shops. 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 trade-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. Steel fabrication, machining, and metal trades is our entire focus. We screen at the technical level your shop 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.

I built a national agency's skilled trades division into a \$100 million+ revenue vertical in just a few years. I brought that same playbook to Cannonball and built a firm with an 80% close rate on sales meetings and an 87% conversion rate on contract-to-hire placements. Those numbers come from doing this work the right way. We are also MBE-certified and veteran-owned. If your company has supplier diversity requirements, we can be part of that conversation too.

I built this division on a simple principle: shop owners deserve a recruiting partner who knows their trade as well as they do. Every question in this guide is one I welcome, because I know my 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.

Brett Secor

Founder & President, Cannonball Recruiting
Steel Manufacturing & Metal Trades Division
brett@cannonballrecruiting.com

Let's get your shop fully staffed.

BOOK YOUR CALL

