

By Brian Townley



The next generation of recruiting the best & brightest

Editor's note: This is the first in a two-part series on recruiting and retaining the best employees. Part one focuses on recruiting, and part two, in the September issue, will offer steps to take to retain your best employees.

Recruiting the right people for the right job and utilizing their talents to enhance products and, ultimately, profits doesn't happen by accident. In fact, companies that do this well tend to reap the benefits of happy employees who know how to make clients feel appreciated. In turn, the sequence is complete when those satisfied clients become loyal customers and the best word-of-mouth advertisers for your company.

These companies who "get it" recognize talent and, thus, are willing to invest in developing it through proper hiring, training, evaluation and feedback. It's an ongoing cycle, and its success depends upon an integrated program that goes beyond what was once called the "personnel department."

Instead of merely going through the motions of hiring, generating paychecks and processing paid time off and other benefits, today's "human resources" is more than just a business function. It's a partnership that provides a cohesive system to govern the company's most precious resource and ensure that the best talent is not only recruited, but also retained.

As with any investment, it takes time, patience and a focused plan, but the payoff is worth it.

WHERE TO START?

This position is more than a job: It's a mission

Collecting resumes is not the first step to creating a staff of motivated, committed professionals. Take a moment to step back and evaluate the scene. Research it. Talk about it. See it for what it is. Either a new position has been created or an existing position has been vacated. This is the ideal time to talk to other employees associated with that position (i.e., they rely on this person to make decisions, they produce reports for that employee, their roles interact regularly on projects, etc.) Both subordinates and supervisors related to that role have information to offer.

In addition to these individual relationships, look at the bigger picture. Are everyone's talents being used well? Perhaps it's time to redefine and reorganize prior to just hiring to fill an opening. Review the job description. Is it thorough? Does it accurately address the expectations of the employee? Does it call for someone creative, technically oriented or who can be a "face" for the company? Does it ask for all three of these key qualities? What about education, experience and that intangible "spark"? Getting the job description right is more than just listing duties. This description syncs with the company's mission. It's actually a mission in itself, a microcosm of the well-oiled machine that customers experience every time they interact with your company.

That means finding the right person to challenge with this mission is not only important—it's critical. From the motor teller to the senior vice president, the phrase "an organization is only as good as its people" is more than just cliché. When employees are this important, they know it. That relationship becomes two-way and the company becomes just as important to them as they are to it.

Lack of clarity about expectations is cited as among the reasons why employees express dissatisfaction and ultimately decide to take their talents elsewhere. It's basic to start on day one letting a new hire know the parameters of their mission.

While this process takes time, it's "money" well-spent because it could mean retaining a trained employee who may decide to forge a new path elsewhere. The conversations spent in "research" will no doubt open dialogue with staff members who value that communication and could lead to tweaking other job descriptions as well.

A simple summary should encapsulate the job in one sentence while a more detailed description adds the level of expectations, such as "greeting customers in a professional and pleasant manner" and "handling coin and currency transactions quickly and efficiently." Explain who the position reports to, experience and education requirements and personal characteristics.

Net that talent: Savvy tactics yield the right people

As the Baby Boomers retire during the next few years, Generation X will begin filling in the gaps. The problem is that with 44 million people in the 25-to-34 age bracket, compared to 76 million soon-to-be retirees, fewer people are available to work.

That means finding and keeping the right people will be even more important and more competitive. Good companies know this and go after the best talent in the marketplace.

"If we weren't still hiring great people and pushing

ahead at full speed, it would be easy to fall behind and become a mediocre company," said Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft.

Taking an integrated approach to hiring is fundamental.

The ABCs of hiring start with a thorough application, assessment testing to identify strengths and weaknesses and a three-part interview process.

Personnel should cull applications for the ones that meet requirements. We post requirements on job postings for a reason. It's important to stay on course with them.

Supervisors need to interview applicants who possess the skills and requirements for the position. It's important for human resources to teach interviewing skills as a part of their leadership training.

The next interview should focus on the persons and their behavior patterns. I like to see if they can sell themselves to me. If they can do that effectively, I am confident they can sell the bank's products.

I like to walk them around to meet other employees to see how they interact with them and how interested they are in the bank as a whole. I observe their eye contact, handshakes and how they introduce themselves. I listen for higher-level questions regarding the bank's systems, policies, procedures and, more importantly, customer service philosophy.

When interviewing, I also like to give assignments that will illustrate their abilities. We recently needed to hire a branch manager. I created a situation analysis and sent it to the applicants prior to the interview. It included a background on bank policy, procedure and an employee problem. The assignment was for them to take the information and to write out a plan of action on how they would correct the problem. I asked for these to be turned in 24 hours prior to the interview. During the interview, we role play with a third person sitting in the room and I ask questions about the situation.

Each position is unique, so different scenarios might apply to bring out those qualities that might not be evident on a resume or application. When hiring a creative Web designer, I sent 20 questions for the applicants to answer about themselves using any format of their choice. The most impressive response was an actual Web site that had been created. This illustrated the applicant's skills in a way that a resume could not.

For supervisory positions, I give the applicants a conflicting employee situation and ask them how they would resolve it.

Also, remember the best employees are not looking for jobs. We actively shop our competition for the best employees. We also have an employee referral incentive program for employees. They can earn up to \$750, paid in installments, for referring an employee that stays on for at least one year.

Now that you've hired the best employee, it's time to focus on retention. Next month, I'll outline steps to take during that crucial period that ranges from the first day on the job to the first quarter. I'll also discuss employment measurement, training and performance support, transition planning and compensation and benefits. ♦

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