

Aim Higher

When You Hire

Selecting the right people for your most vital positions can be the difference between a successful business and a struggling one.

By Bob Zahra

It has never been more important to select the right employees for your key positions. For a large greenhouse, the head grower is like air, as is the top salesperson. The right general manager can be the difference between success and stress.

Surely you have heard the words “nothing personal.” Take it from me: In the universe of key employee selection and retention, it is *always* personal. To attract and retain top individuals, the Golden Rule applies: Treat others as you prefer to be treated.

As a panelist at the recent Ball Plug & Cutting Conference, I presented the primary motivating factors of a key employee in our industry, in order of importance. These are the factors a key person evaluates when determining whether to join or leave your company. Compensation is fourth on the list. The first and most important factor potential new employees want to discover is whether they will be appreciated for their contributions. The second is whether their family and friends will respect them if they work for the company. A third is geography — no matter how strong the company, employment will not work if the geographical area is unacceptable or becomes unacceptable to the candidate’s family. The fourth motivating factor, finally, is money.

management

In other words, if your key employee is happy where he lives, feels appreciated and respected, and has the professional respect of family and friends, then he will probably not resign for a higher-paying job. On the other hand, the chances of retaining the demonstrably unappreciated employee are not good, no matter how high the compensation. The take-away: Recognize that potential employees are constantly projecting themselves into an evaluation of your company in terms of appreciation, respect, geography and compensation. When I finished speaking at the conference, Sim McMurry of Metrolina, who was also on the panel, handed over his typed, preprepared notes with the same motivating factors (in the same order) that he, too, had come to identify over the years.

Breaking Down the Process

If hiring and retention is always personal, why is the recruiting process deliberately impersonal? The help-wanted classified is now the dominant mechanism for attracting talent. Your company posts a help-wanted classified on its website or a magazine. Others, proclaiming to be executive recruiters, post classified help-wanted ads on Monster and their websites and, like your company, sit around waiting for someone to submit a résumé. It is fundamentally a passive, impersonal process that more often than not fails to produce the best candidate. Why? The best candidate is often occupied at work and is not thinking about changing positions, is not reading help-wanted classifieds, may not even have an updated résumé and might be disinclined to submit a résumé if he did. (This is a small town we work in, this international horticulture industry. News travels quickly — gossip quicker — and no one wants his résumé cyber blasted onto the boss's desk.)

What the help-wanted posting lacks in quality, it makes up for in quantity, producing innumerable résumés from the unqualified, unhappy and unemployed. And provides the poster with the illusion of progress toward the goal of a successful hire. But where is the top-flight employee you really want and need? Still focused on doing a good job where currently employed, still concerned about confidentiality, still perhaps receptive to career improvement if the circumstances are right.

This is where the true, legitimate, industry-specific executive recruiter comes in, who is capable of getting directly to the top-flight individual you would seldom be able to consider on your own. It is the difference between passive hiring and targeted recruiting, and it is just common sense: If you take the time and make the effort to

identify in advance the type of individual your company requires, then directly target qualified individuals, the hiring pool is improved and the risk of failure reduced. Key employee turnover increases when the company settles for what is available instead of what it needs. ▶





And perhaps most importantly, in terms of salary and benefits, it generally does not cost any more to hire the right person, although it is certainly harder to hire the right person. It takes more work. The unqualified and unhappy are eager to accept your offer. The proven individual — the right person for the job — generally requires more effort.

Two Bad Habits

To restore something like the illusion of personal touch in the process of key employee selection, some industry companies regrettably have picked up two bad habits: gut hiring and fraternal hiring. Gut hiring is just what it sounds like, the Las Vegas idea that your instincts will tell you whom to select. Résumés are not verified, references are not checked, background investigations are not performed, the personal interview is elevated to the most important part of the hiring process and, if the hiring authority is feeling good — feeling lucky in his or her gut — the individual is hired.

A brother to gut hiring is fraternal hiring, where a pledge bid is extended to the candidate by your business (fraternity). The hiring authority is primarily interested in

how the candidate will fit in. Is he one of us? The question is not how well he can fly the plane. It is more a question of cultural similarities and comfort zones. New ideas and potential dissent are subordinated to the company's perceived culture. This candidate is so much like us that certainly he can fly the plane, although no one really checks. By definition, fraternal hiring can lead to a company-wide comfort zone that becomes a rut, which can inhibit creativity and stifle imaginative business growth.

Often, as a result of gut hiring and fraternal hiring, the peak of the employee-employer relationship occurs during the hiring interview and goes downhill from there, providing an explanation for why there are so many two- and three-year relationships in our industry. The candidate interviewed great, he seemed like one of us, my gut told me he was the right person...but his or her performance has consistently decreased.

Seek the Swift and Strong

The book of Ecclesiastes addresses time and chance. Damon Runyon says, "The race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, but that is the way to bet." In other words, if it is incumbent upon you to hire, then prepare yourself to identify both the swift and the strong; that is, either do your own background work or have your recruiter perform a professional background investigation. And again, although the swift and the strong do not necessarily cost more in terms of salary and benefits, they are more difficult to hire, unlike those who take their unhappiness from job to job.

A finalist for one of our search assignments will sign a release (required by the federal government) so that we can perform a complete background investigation. On top of traditional references and third-party blind references, we check felony and misdemeanor records; we verify motor vehicle records, credit reports and degrees; and, where permissible, workers' compensation claim history is checked. Once this work is completed, a company can intelligently determine whether the candidate has been swift and strong in the past, and can project whether the candidate is likely to be swift and strong in the future. Unfortunately, hiring authorities and executive recruiters will still make key employee selection

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mistakes — because time and chance do happen to us all — but this systematic approach will limit obvious, preventable mistakes.

Every big grower knows the story: Fewer young people are pursuing horticultural degrees. Baby boomers are retiring. Other industries are beginning to compete for our mature talent. Fewer people, in total, are entering our industry. Key employees are valuable. They are tough to hire and tough to replace. It only makes sense, in this small town we call the international horticulture industry, to appreciate the key employees' contributions, and to treat them with the respect we would prefer accorded to ourselves. ■

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