

November / December 2007

Route to:

Taking stock of human assets

ARE THE RIGHT PLANS IN PLACE TO ATTRACT, DEVELOP AND RETAIN TOP TALENT?

THE HOLIDAYS ARE COMING – and with them an opportunity to kick back and engage in a little reflection. By then, we hope, budgets will have been completed, performance goals established and the strategic plan updated. All that is left will be the right people to make the whole thing a success.

In recent years, some organizations have let talent management plans slide. Why do they matter, the argument goes, since today's employees only intend to stay for two or three years?

That, of course, is dangerous thinking. If one expects employees to leave, they probably will. Certainly the best and brightest will. They are always in the sights of headhunters, and in times of growing employment opportunity they are especially in high demand. If those superstars see few opportunities for personal development and advancement at their present employer, they will be particularly receptive to the siren songs of competitors and others.

As to the rank and file, they need attention too. Like the residents of Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon, your employees no doubt are all above average – thanks to your organization's superior recruitment and hiring practices. Collectively they are the engine that keeps the place going, and regular preventive maintenance helps keep that engine finely tuned.

In fact, in the best companies, talent management is a never-ending process designed to attract, develop and retain high-performers at all rungs of the organizational ladder. And it never gets put off for lack of time.

Providing Real Solutions To Today's Candidate Needs

SMART EMPLOYERS hire smart people, and they go to extraordinary lengths to find them, often at a competitive company or institution. It is axiomatic in the world of executive search that almost all job candidates need a compelling reason to leave their current employer before accepting a new position – whether that reason is a bad job situation, a missed promotion, lack of advancement opportunities, corporate instability or what-not. Professional search consultants, in fact, can help identify those nagging itches. The question is, assuming that a strong reason to leave exists, do you provide the solution?

Candidates at all levels want to be sure that the reward of taking a new job exceeds the risk, and they may define that reward in all sorts of ways – some of which reflect generational attitudes and values. While better pay and benefits never hurt, and tend to validate the importance of a new position, candidates may seek everything from a more flexible, caring work environment to personal development programs that offer the opportunity for a foreign assignment. Moreover, while greater personal responsibility may appeal to the seasoned manager, it may frighten the young – increasingly used to making important decisions in close consultation with Mommy and Daddy.

As *Wall Street Journal* columnist Sue Shellenbarger notes, the uptight world of now-retiring Baby Boomers is giving way to the “we-want-it-all-right-now” world of Millennials currently in their first decade of employment. Among the most

frequently requested employer programs, according to Shellenbarger, are “wide-open flexibility” in work practices (both time of day and location); a broad range of family-friendly benefits for both men and women; open, “eco-friendly” work spaces that replace the cube farms so popular in the ‘80s and ‘90s; and lots of guaranteed vacation to relieve stress and increase family time. Conversely, more rigid, “one-size-fits-all” programs (such as organized fitness classes or five days of personal time a year – no more, no less) are out of favor.

In today’s Army, the coddling of new recruits – who now are promised a good night’s sleep – is no doubt anathema to the grizzled drill sergeant who remembers when boot camp was truly hell. Similarly, the touchy-feely aspects of the modern workplace may seem peculiar to the 60-year-old manager who always has toed the line and gladly accepted whatever perks “Corporate” deigned to dole out. However, as Bob Dylan said a mere 43 years ago, “The times they are a-changing.”

Matching Perception with Reality Can Pay Important Dividends

A WELL-KNOWN STORY tells of a freshly-minted soul arriving at St. Peter’s Gate. Peter points to two doors, one marked “Heaven” and the other “Hell.”

“Would you like to take a peek?” St. Peter asks.

The new arrival nods his head, and they first take a look at Hell. Inside are flashing lights, wild dance music and skimpily clad men and women having lots of fun. Heaven, by contrast, looks like the Reading Room at the British Museum – with people falling asleep over large tomes.

Asked to take his pick, the new arrival chooses the door marked “Hell” and is thrown through the door. Now, however, sulfurous flames lick at the feet of souls tormented by devils with long whips.

“St. Peter!” the man cries out, “This isn’t at all like you showed me.”

“Before you were a prospect,” Peter replies. “Now you’re a customer.”

And if some companies treat their customers poorly, think about their employees.

Certainly, it is dangerous to over-promise and under-deliver. If job candidates are not clever enough to spot the disparity prior to employment, they soon will discover the devils with the long whips and begin looking for another job.

At the same time, given the highly competitive nature of today’s employment marketplace, it makes little sense to under-promise – because you won’t get the chance to over-deliver.

The best policy is to make the recruitment message consistent with reality, neither over- nor under-promising. That said, consider the message’s intended recipient, making sure to emphasize the benefits of your work environment and philosophy to that individual. For example, if your corporate culture values letting self-directed teams generate new ideas, a Millennial would respond well to words such as “nurturing” and “creative.” On the other hand, if your culture is more structured and goal-oriented, you might emphasize to the Millennial that he or she will benefit from well-defined roles and a clear sense of direction.

Employees of all ages seek opportunities for personal growth and professional development. Here again, times change and organizations should promise only what they can deliver. The vaunted “corporate college” approach, where people took skill-based courses at various mile-posts in their career, made sense in large, vertically organized corporations that offered clearly defined career paths to their A-list employees. (Need a better understanding of financial reporting? We have a course for you.) By contrast, many of today’s corporations are considerably flatter and consist of highly fluid teams that add and shed members, depending on the challenge at hand. (Have a product-design roadblock? Bring in an engineer.) In the latter kind of environment, personal growth may be best geared toward participation in new kinds of work experiences, reinforced by opportunities for outside professional participation and study.

Good personnel programs, of course, vary by employer. None, however, happen by accident.

—George Snider

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