Winning with Talent

STRATEGIES FOR ATTRACTING AND KEEPING THE BEST PEOPLE

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The strength of an organization, present and future, rests on the quality of its people. As Jack Welch, the legendary former CEO of General Electric, counseled: “People first, strategy second.” But finding and keeping the best people doesn’t just happen. Rather, it’s the product of smart thinking and careful planning both on strategic and tactical levels. A systematic approach makes the job less daunting.

A winning talent strategy cannot be created in a vacuum. Often the first step is to create a steering committee to guide development and implementation of the strategy and monitor its progress. The committee should consist of leaders from both executive and operational units, ideally including the CEO, CFO, chief marketing officer and, naturally, the head of Human Resources. The committee’s purpose is to:

- Articulate the organization’s strategic vision,
- Identify organizational philosophy and guiding principles applicable to its people strategy,
- Provide a general forecast of talent needs based on the organization’s strategic goals, and
- Approve and support the talent strategy’s operational plan, once established.

Steering committees work best when:

- They have a clear mandate, set of deliverables and timetable,
- They are small enough (generally no more than six members) that nobody feels superfluous or unaccountable, and
- An acting secretary/facilitator is appointed to keep the committee on task.

When the steering committee has provided the talent strategy implementers with sufficient guidance, components of the strategy can be developed.

**Defining Talent Requirements**

The first step is defining talent requirements, without preconceptions based upon your organization’s current staff. It’s easy to assume the way things are today (e.g., head count, distribution of skills, compensation structure) is the foundation for what comes next. However, that assumption impedes your ability to quickly move to a talent configuration that will not only best meet your needs today, but also in the future.

The process of defining talent needs grows out of business goals and the skills needed to achieve them. For example, if you have a three-year, geography-based market expansion plan, such as moving to several foreign markets, when and where will you need people with essential local knowledge to execute that goal?
Another example: If you’re planning to adapt your product line to appeal to a new generation of customers within the next five years, what kind of product development, engineering and marketing talent will you need to make that happen?

Or if you plan to take advantage of your financial institution’s integrated receivables processing system through a lockbox service next year, how can you redeploy internal accounting staff to more productive activities?

In mapping out a plan to meet these impending talent demands, you’ll need to determine:

1. Your current talent’s capacity to meet these demands without significant re-training,
2. The extent to which your current, internal talent pipeline can be adapted to meet these new requirements, and
3. Gaps that will need to be filled by attracting new talent from external sources.

**Talent Identification**

After defining your talent needs, the next step is finding the talent. Everybody in your organization can be a talent scout. Deploying your workforce in that fashion lets you cast a much wider net. You’ll need to be very clear about the kind of people you are looking for, and, typically, offer a “finder’s fee” when a position is filled based on an employee referral.

Employee talent scouts should be constantly on the lookout for the kind of talent you seek, regardless of whether there is an open position. Having strong prospects in mind accelerates the process of deploying talent when it’s needed.

Also, there are two special benefits to asking employees to serve as informal recruiters:

1. Employees appreciate your vote of confidence in their ability to play such an important role, and
2. When prospective recruits are approached by your employees as job prospects, their takeaway is your organization must be an attractive and progressive place to work.

Often the talent you need for a key job is right under your nose. Most human resource information systems have search functions that make it easy to identify personnel with the set of attributes and experience you seek.

Such systems can only support or supplement human effort; however, managers can be tasked with identifying strong candidates from within their own departments. While a department head might be reluctant to give up a star performer to another part of the company, the organizational culture should encourage such sacrifices for the greater good. Talented employees will look elsewhere if they are overlooked for internal opportunities.
A comprehensive talent acquisition effort cannot neglect tapping major online sourcing tools, such as LinkedIn, CareerBuilder and Indeed.com. External recruiting professionals may also play a vital role, particularly when executive or highly advanced and specialized skills and experience are sought.

Assessment and Selection

The leap from promising prospect to smart hire can be a long one. Therefore, in this critical third phase of the talent-planning process, it is prudent to take advantage of sophisticated assessment tools to help you bridge that gap. “The desire to rapidly separate pretenders from contenders in high-volume hiring situations, and reduce costs early in the selection process, is driving the use of pre-employment assessment technologies,” according to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM).¹

Preliminary assessment resources include testing systems, which can be grouped into those seeking to determine the cultural fit and those evaluating technical competence. Some of the same assessment tools are also being used with current employees. They are being integrated with talent management systems “for internal recruiting, learning and development, performance management and succession planning,” SHRM research has found.²

You may seek advance assurances that the assessment systems you plan to use are “validated” by suitable experts. This technical scrutiny is intended to establish that job candidates are judged purely on job-related criteria and are not inadvertently screened out by untested questions, possibly giving rise to charges of discrimination. For example, a question about a job candidate’s criminal history could be discouraged for some job categories.

When candidates have cleared the initial winnowing hurdle, there is no substitute for behavioral interviewing techniques. The premise underlying behavioral interviewing, in which job candidates are asked how they have responded in particular work scenarios, is that past performance is the best predictor of future behavior.

“Behavioral interviewing is said to be 55 percent predictive of future on-the-job behavior, while traditional interviewing is only 10 percent predictive,” according to the Career Services Center at the University of Delaware.³ Traditional interview techniques involve asking job candidates general, open-ended questions like: “Tell me about yourself.”

Behavioral interview guides can be customized and used consistently for different job categories to assure consistent outcomes.

² ibid.

Culture Sustains Talent at BB&T

Attracting and retaining the best talent requires a strong and inspiring organizational culture.

It’s one thing to post a statement of vision, mission and values and hope it will rub off on employees. It’s another to work diligently to ensure those values are embraced. Employees can easily discern whether an organization lives by its values or merely pays them lip service.

“While our industry is changing rapidly and we often introduce new products and services, enter new markets and strive for continuous improvement, we have never lost sight of who we are, what we stand for, and who we serve,” writes Kelly S. King, chairman and CEO of BB&T, in a letter introducing the BB&T culture. “The BB&T culture [is] lived as a commitment to our vision, mission, and values.”

BB&T’s values include the traditional ones, such as integrity, teamwork and justice. But another attractive value to potential employees – happiness – is also on the list. As BB&T explains it to its staff in a brochure that describes its culture: “While good character and sound judgment typically lead to success, ultimately, most of us are searching for a sense of happiness for those we care about and ourselves.”
Acquisition and Deployment

Offering a position to an attractive job candidate comes with neither a guarantee of acceptance nor a smooth transition to a productive employment relationship. However, if the talent assessment and selection process has been thorough, you should have a reasonably good sense of what it will take to get to “yes.”

It’s important to keep the concept of “total compensation” in mind. That embraces both tangible forms of pay, such as salary and core employee benefits, as well as all other resources available to employees intended to make them want to work – and keep working – for you.

For example, some employees are willing to take a modest cut in pay in exchange for greater flexibility in their work schedule or more vacation days. Similarly, a forward-looking employee might find a generous 401(k) contribution-matching formula more attractive than a slightly higher salary and a bare-bones retirement plan.

In recent years, most employers have come to recognize the importance of new employee onboarding programs that counter the “sink-or-swim” approach. Onboarding and “pre-boarding” (i.e., onboarding that starts before a new hire’s first day of work) not only orient new hires to the practical aspects of their jobs and work environments, but align them with your expectations, vision and values.

Retention

According to Aberdeen Group research, 90 percent of businesses believe employees make their decision to stay with their employers within their first year of employment.4 “When onboarding is successful, new employees will feel more engaged, they’ll be more motivated to perform well, and they’ll be that much more ready to contribute to the bottom line,” the firm reports.5

Onboarding can get new talent off to a strong start. But ensuring valued employees remain with you and stay motivated and productive for the long haul requires additional efforts on multiple fronts.

Employees assign varying values to various job attributes and forms of compensation. For that reason, maintaining an ongoing dialogue with workers about their performance, goals and expectations is perhaps the most critical factor in assuring their retention.

Inevitably, your talent requirements will continue to evolve. But with a dynamic, sustainable, strategic talent acquisition and deployment strategy in place, you will be well equipped to continue meeting those evolving requirements.

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4 Aberdeen Group study: “Strategic Onboarding 2013: A New Look at New Hires,” available upon request via email to: member.services@aberdeen.com
