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Human Resources
Finding and Retaining Qualified Employees

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HUMAN RESOURCES

Finding and Retaining Qualified Employees

By Betty S. Jones and Samantha L. Lucy

Like most industries, the seed industry is in a continual state of change. Its significant number of mergers and acquisitions in recent years has created new organizational structures and company cultures. In many cases, flatter chains-of-command call for different capabilities for high-performance employees. Not only is the landscape of the seed industry evolving, the landscape of the workforce is changing as well. If people are one of the primary driving forces behind the success of a business, what can managers do to find and keep the most qualified employees?

What are employers looking for in new hires?

In the past, an employer might have sought out candidates with extensive knowledge of an industry or company, assuming that skills related to business management could be taught on the job. In today's work environment, this approach to hiring may not be the best. Most employers understand that effectiveness often isn't directly tied to an employee's previous knowledge of a specific industry. While industry-specific knowledge is important, other factors are equally important like business management experience, motivation, and "fit" with a company's culture. In other words, employers shouldn't rule out prospective employees simply because they don't have a background in agriculture.

A 2004 study sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and conducted by Kansas State University and Purdue University (www.agecon.purdue.edu/cab/NFAMEC/home.htm) asked a group of 24 food and agribusiness executives to comment on the capabilities they looked for when seeking a new college graduate employee. Not surprisingly, communication and interpersonal skills – including the ability to get things done with others, influence the behavior of others, and effectively communicate in diverse situations – were the top priorities. Knowledge of food and agribusiness markets ranked in the middle of 17 topics and ranked lower than knowledge of general business management.

At first glance, this would seem like good news for employers looking to fill vacant positions. If business skills are as equally desirable as industry-specific skills, then the pool of qualified candidates for any given job in the seed industry is likely larger than initially thought. However, the opposite may actually be true. For those searching for graduates in agricultural disciplines, a 2005 report (www.csrees.usda.gov/newsroom/news/csrees_news/USDA_05_Report2.pdf) released by the USDA and Purdue indicates that the number of job openings in the agriculture industry will exceed the number of graduates in the next five years.

The job market currently favors those seeking jobs, rather than those hiring for jobs. As the job pool broadens, new skill requirements put seed companies in direct competition with other industries for talent. For seed industry employers, competition is no longer just other seed companies. Now they're competing with nearly every other agribusiness and quite possibly a few non-agricultural companies as well. So while employers have more job talent to pick from, they also have more competition trying to hire the best candidates.

How do companies find the most qualified applicants?

If an employer wishes to hire the best candidate for a job, he or she needs to be much more active in the search process. The old school “Field of Dreams” concept (build it and they will come) no longer gets the job done. Employers must be creative, innovative, and persistent in their pursuit of the top candidates for a job. Regardless of whether a job is for an experienced employee or a new graduate, it must be clearly defined in writing or otherwise. An employer should take the time to define the position description, specific requirements of the job, and what skills are necessary to be successful in it.

There are many options available for seeking job candidates. Traditional recruitment methods include job postings in newspapers and on company web sites. However, if an employer’s goal is to increase the number of *qualified* applicants for a position, he or she might consider some non-traditional recruitment methods.

One method to consider is cultivating a relationship with academic institutions that have students with training and education that closely match an employer’s needs. Whether it’s a college, university, technical program, or vocational school, developing a standing relationship with the institution will give an employer easier access to graduates and help the company become part of the placement process at that particular school. These types of relationships might also have some long-term benefits, such as continuing relationships with the faculty and staff charged with preparing graduates to join the workforce.

New technologies allow an employer to broaden the geographic region for which the search is being conducted, while targeting the search message to increase the number of qualified applicants. Everyday, the “power of the web” is discussed, but other than posting a job on a company web site, many employers haven’t fully explored how to harness the Internet’s potential. A relatively new online recruiting tool is AgCareers.com, which has become a primary resource for recruiting in the agriculture, food, natural resources and biotechnology industries. In addition to offering a significant database of potential employees, AgCareers.com offers human resource tools like conferences, workshops and career fairs.

While employers may have become familiar with the term “blog” – an individual’s collection of thoughts, ideas, research or other information shared online in a chronological format, they may not have thought about how blogs could help with hiring and recruitment practices. Many recruiters and executive placement firms advocate the use of blogs as a means for a job seeker to share information that they couldn’t typically include in a résumé, such as their personal thoughts on management, leadership styles, employee evaluations, and a host of other business topics. If employers do their homework, they can learn a lot about candidates and their potential “fit” at a company and in a position before they even set foot in an office. Blogging isn’t necessarily a means for excluding or ruling someone out from a job search, but it can create a more complete picture of a candidate and his or her ideas prior to an interview.

Networking with other companies in the industry is also important for a number of reasons, including watching industry transitions. During times of industry volatility, one company’s downsizing could be another company’s ticket to a great employee. It seems there is a fair amount of experienced talent floating around at any given time.

How do employers retain great employees once they've hired them?

Once an employer has found, hired and trained the ideal candidate, how does the organization ensure that the employee stays long term? If the best of the best was hired to work at the organization, clearly, the employee will also be highly sought after by other organizations. Not only do employers need to have a strategy in place to find the best job candidates, but they also need to give careful consideration to ways to retain great employees.

When talking with managers from several different companies, Purdue's Center for Food and Agricultural Business heard time and again about the importance of ensuring that all employees understand their contribution to the overall success of the company. While this might be accomplished differently in different companies, allowing employees to share in the success and profitability of the business is a powerful tool in maintaining loyalty and ensuring employee buy-in of company goals.

Loyalty and buy-in are two of the keys to successfully retaining employees. However, the means by which you generate loyalty can vary a lot by the age and experience of the employee. Tamara Erickson and Bob Morrison of the Texas-based consulting firm The Concours Group (www.concoursgroup.com) have examined changes in the workforce and gained insight into how to best engage employees at different stages in their careers.

With employees in the early stages of their careers, charge direct supervisors with the responsibility of employee retention. Younger employees are more likely to be loyal to a relationship than they are to a company. By making supervisors responsible for retention, an organization gives itself a face and helps employees understand exactly who they are being loyal to and why; personalization is key.

Mid-career employees respond well to engagement and challenge. These types of employees are generally loyal to a company in the hopes of being promoted to a higher level. If opportunities don't become available within a certain time frame or an organizational structure is designed to be flat, these employees may begin to consider alternatives outside the organization. Employers should try to find creative, but legitimate means of recognizing and addressing their needs for advancement and renewal in their careers. Are there special projects or assignments that can take an employee away from day-to-day responsibilities and provide a different and perhaps intriguing challenge? Consider an assignment that has opportunity for visibility and supporting change in the organization.

Finally, with more experienced staff members, loyalty is often a by-product of their senior status with the company. However, employers need to be cognizant of the dynamic between co-workers when a younger manager leads older workers. The latter employees respect the rules and tend to trust authority, but they also want to be valued for the experience and perspectives they bring to the company.

Additional Thoughts

Remember, it's not just the industry landscape that is changing – the workforce itself is also in a state of change. As in other aspects of business, discovering and staying ahead of trends can have

a tremendous impact on success. The Families and Work Institute (www.familiesandwork.org) identifies a few important trends and ideas about the national workforce that organizations might consider in their employee retention strategies:

Most employees are no longer primarily work-centric. According to the institute, 77 percent of workers who have families identify themselves as either dual- (work and family) or family-centric. This brings quite a different philosophy to the work place.

Only 43 percent of college-educated workers that are mid-career and primed for positions of advancement actually want positions of more responsibility. In looking at employee management strategies, recognize that not everyone is looking for a ticket upward.

Flexibility may be a key strategy to retaining good employees. Offer “on-ramps” and “off-ramps” that literally allow people to move on and off a career track with no penalties. Ernst & Young, a large, global consulting firm, is rated in the top 100 companies to work for because of its “people-first” culture, including an aggressive program that allows flexibility in employees’ career paths. They calculate that they save \$10 million each year through flexibility programs, which improve employee retention rates. If a company of this size can implement broad policies like these, imagine what other employers can accomplish.

Making employee retention work for you

Once an employer has invested in an employee and that person has proven his or her value to the company through exceptional performance and professional growth, the employer should do everything possible to capitalize on this investment. Employers should treat the process of selecting and retaining qualified employees with the same careful consideration and thoughtful action taken with the most valuable customer. Every action – and often lack of an action – speaks to employees about how an organization measures their value and worth.

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