

Hiring and Retaining Peak Performers

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BY David Regan

Unfortunately, you all probably know this from past experience: There are few things more expensive to a company than a bad hire.

Finding top notch staff in the current economic environment is becoming increasingly difficult. Fortunately, there are some especially powerful tools at hand that can help. And, once you have identified a candidate for a position, there are testing, interviewing and background checks that are critical to help reduce the chance of making a bad hiring decision.

That's just the start. Once you have found qualified staff, keeping them motivated, challenged and their skills current is equally important. Utilizing the Internet will help you in both recruiting and retaining the people you need to keep your organization running smoothly.

Who is the right candidate? From our own experience with many printing and prepress companies, we find the following attributes always come up: Someone who is professional, understands commitment, will go the extra mile to get the job done, and is trustworthy.

In for the Long Run?

First you must decide: Is the position you intend to fill a core position (full time) or one that will flex with demand? How can you determine if a position is flex or core? It's pretty simple. If the position traditionally has high turnover or burn-out rates, if the position is seasonal or based on a demand spike, if the position is due to a vacation or leave of absence, or if you need to bring in high powered expertise for a set period of time, then we would consider it a flex position. Although you might not believe it, any level or skill set position can be filled by a flex worker—from CEO to driver—depending on the situation and objectives. Flexible labor allows a company to take advantage of opportunities the core staff would not be able to efficiently fulfill in a short period of time.

Core staff is occupied in positions of trust and respect, in which you would want little turnover. CSR managers, finance executives, most senior management, and key line employees are people you would not want to lose at almost any cost. I suspect you could name them with little effort.



Hiring peak performers—and keeping them—is at the heart of any company’s success plan.

Now, you can start to outline a basic job description and move to commence the process to find the right candidate.

Many companies create a bare-bones job description that provides a vague idea of whom they are seeking but, frankly, is usually too nondescript. A great way to start is to use the review sheet you already have for this position. Using that as an outline, you can pare the review down to a reasonably acceptable job description. If you don't have formalized reviews, there are industry resources available to help provide detailed job descriptions.

Once you know what you are looking for in skill sets, shifts and responsibilities, you need to conduct a bit of research to determine the market rate for the position. I can hear the argument now, “Market rate! We can’t afford to pay too much.” Or, “We need to keep our costs down.” I will be blunt: How much will it cost you to lose a major client? Or do work at a 10 percent error rate? Your people are your company. They are what set you apart from your competition. There are many ways to compensate someone. If you are

focusing on the simplest one—salary—then, it must be sufficient enough to attract and retain a skilled professional. Remember, your company is at stake!

As an exercise for some of our clients, depending on the area or the position, we always help determine the *McDonalds rate*. If you are paying less for any position than the wage that can be earned at Micky D's (and, don't forget that they pay full benefits), why would anyone work for you in a tougher, more skilled (and stressful) position for less? Now, I understand prepress people are usually paid a higher wage than many people in the printing industry. But you still get my point. If your position isn't paying a wage competitive to other positions both in and out of the industry, you're putting your company at risk.

The Hunt Is On

So once you have defined your job description, how do you attract a professional?

A great way to recruit for a prepress professional is via an online job board. An added benefit of

posting online is that the applicants who respond are qualified to some extent by the very fact they are using the Internet to find work. In this day and age, every adult should be computer and Internet literate—at least to the degree of sending email messages and utilizing websites. But for prepress and IT types, it is imperative!

Once you have found an appropriate board, you should inspect to see what similar postings to your

position are paying and offering for benefits. It is extremely important to be competitive, because the Internet allows workers the ability to see what the market will bear. The best boards have helpful customer service organizations to help with any question, but should also be fairly straightforward to use on your own with little direction.

Another benefit of a job board is that your posting is usually online within hours of placement, and stays online for 30-45 days. This allows you to get the response you need, when you need it, as opposed to waiting until Sunday's paper. If you find a job board that specializes in your industry, the response you get tends to be much narrower and focused. We have found that when you run an ad in the paper or generalist boards—for example, to find a preflighting expert—you get inundated with a tremendous number of responses but very few that fit even close to your requirements. If you don't have the time to review 300 résumés of inappropriate applicants, the response from an industry job board will be refreshing and honest.

In this market, with all the downsizing of the past (too many) years, many high end professionals have taken themselves—and their skills—out of the industry and applied them to new businesses. Therefore, for some positions it can be very difficult to track down the right candidate. It pays to utilize several sources to find your candidate, such as word of mouth and referrals.

You would be surprised how well referrals can work. Outplacement firms always suggest that job candidates network to find new job opportunities. The same can work for companies. On the outside,

talk with peers or vendors who may know of people looking for work. On the inside, get your employees involved. At the least, you know that the person can get along with at least one person in your firm and may be a good personality fit. Many companies offer a bonus if they find someone who is ultimately hired (with a caveat that they have to stay with the company for at least six months). It is an interesting policy to consider.

Another excellent source of candidates is an industry-focused staffing company. You can use this resource in several ways: to provide a candidate available on a short-term basis, someone whom you can use while seeking help. Often times a bad hire comes from a position of weakness: being rushed into making a decision because you have to fill the position. A flex worker buys you the time to find the right hire. You may even discover that the candidate the agency sends you is just the person you are looking for. In that case, a reputable agency will offer a flex-to-hire opportunity, where you can hire the flex employee for a set fee. The benefit is that the reference checks, skills testing, and background checks have already been completed by the placement firm. What about background checks? Many companies conduct criminal checks and drug testing. Most important, by the time the flex staffer has been on board for a few weeks, you will know whether the worker fits into your team.

We have found that hiring this way is extremely effective, and cost efficient as well. Hiring a great worker can easily cost \$5,000 to \$20,000 for advertising, screening, skills testing, interviews, reference checks and other administrative details. In addition, an agency will typically have some guarantee in place to assure they will find a temporary replacement if your new staff member has an unexpected absence, such as a family emergency. The cost of hiring a bad worker must always be calculated in your hiring process. What are the costs? Bounced work, lost clients, unhappy coworkers and production inefficiencies.

In addition, agencies offer a direct hire service where they will send you candidates—all tested and screened and available for hire—to meet with you. This service is one we use when we are looking for highly skilled employees, and we have found it to be extremely helpful especially when time is of the essence or if the caliber of person must be beyond reproach.

Keeping Your Company's Most Vital Asset

Once you have found qualified staff, keeping them motivated and challenged and their skill levels current is equally important. Suggestions include:

1. Conduct formal reviews on a regular time schedule.
2. Help employees to stay abreast of new technology and trends through online and offline training.
3. Encourage employees to stay current by becoming involved in association forums.
4. Provide cross training.
5. Maintain a positive morale in the company through team building.
6. Involve core employees in policy and production issues.



Separating the Wheat from the Chaff

If you find someone without the help of an agency, it is very important to thoroughly investigate the person. Unfortunately, sometimes résumés overstate a person's skill set. Skills testing can be done using online sources such as staffingtools.com. Internally, you can ask your department head to interview the candidate and walk the person through a few scenarios. Criminal, drug, reference and educational checks are extremely important—not only from a screening standpoint, but from a liability perspective as well. It is possible your company can be sued for not taking prudent steps in hiring. If an unfortunate incident occurs after a person is hired, it can sometimes be considered a negligent act and can pierce the corporate veil—making the hiring individual directly liable.

Many companies try to conduct personality tests. You can locate adequate tests online that will help identify a person. You can even learn what type of person fits well into a given position. But remember, the ultimate test of learning whether a person fits within a team is very difficult without a trial period. In this litigious world it makes good sense to make flexible, trial arrangements for someone if you wish to test the fit. One nice advantage: the staffing company becomes responsible for worker liabilities.

Keeping Your Most Vital Asset

Once the candidate has passed all the hurdles and interviews and is hired, keeping your new staff member for the long run is equally important. The longer an employee works with you, the more valuable that person becomes. So setting up a formal review process is extremely important. Conducting reviews every three or six months is good spacing, with a salary increase at least yearly. Equally important is allowing your staff member time to stay current in the field via online training, off-site training or even bringing instructors to your company to conduct training sessions. It is important to encourage your staff member to become involved with various online forums—like Printplanet.com's IPA Prepress Forum, where they can dispense and receive help when they run into issues.

Another area to focus on is cross training or “cell training,” where teams comprised of three or four individuals are taught to become capable of handling the others' responsibilities. The benefits to this cell

method are many, but for keeping a person challenged, this method is ideal.

Keeping a positive morale in any company can be difficult. On the one hand you want to help build a team. On the other hand, you don't want the effort to seem contrived. Here are a few ideas that you might

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consider: buying lunch for all staff; offer a rolling half day off by skill set, where the team goes on a company sponsored event; find the weekend warriors in your company and sponsor a softball team; or find appropriate charitable events. Done correctly, these are a few ideas that strengthen the overall organization and provide a sense of camaraderie.

The way employees are found and kept has changed over the years. Gone are the days when a person started in a company and rose through the ranks to retire with a gold watch. Now, people are much more mobile, looking for challenge and self-growth—with flexible hours and shifts to help each worker's unique family requirements. On average, an employee is expected to stay on board for three years. To exceed that expectation, it is important to provide some of the benefits to prevent them from moving from place to place.

There are some strong job-intrinsic benefits that can be offered to your core people to help prevent them from moving to another company. For example, get them involved in important policy issues, production issues, and other improvements to their work environment. A smart company will protect the core group by utilizing flexible labor to reduce the stress of having to lay off a core member when things get tight.

In this day and age, where companies need to change focus and products rapidly to find new profit centers, being agile and experienced in change management at the core is a critical survival requirement. Finding staff—and keeping them—is at the heart of any success plan. 