

absolutely business



A basic guide to maximising employees' potential

By Denise Walker FREC

Many people think that staff recruitment and retention is easy – that it's simply a matter of picking a person through "gut feeling", telling them what to do and letting them get on and do it. Others believe that that successful staff recruitment and retention is down to the use of effective, consistent processes, which ensure that the needs of the business are aligned with individual employees' objectives. What's your opinion?

According to Hayward Associates' survey of 2005 [www.haywardassociates.com], the length of time new recruits to the recruitment industry remain with their first employer can be as little as 9 months – which is ironic, seeing as we're in the business of recruitment. And, as most clients choose recruitment consultancies based on the quality of their working relationships with individual recruitment consultants, it is logical to presume that every time a member of your staff resigns, the result will be a loss of business. So surely it is worthwhile investing in your staff from the beginning?

During my 20 years' experience in recruitment, I have managed teams of up to 24 and learned – often the hard way - from my own experiences. With the following tips, my aim is to help to de-mystify this subject and to share some practical know-how: -

1. Start with the basics

Ensure that all staff know "what looks good around here". A straightforward way of achieving this is through a values, ethics and standards policy, which illustrates how you wish your team to behave, the importance of their adherence to company standards (and the REC Code of Conduct!). It could include your mission statement and measurable service standards, such as timescales for dealing with enquiries and working on jobs. Most importantly, it is a documented statement of expectations for the business and the people who operate within in.

2. Recruit the right people – or don't recruit at all!

Most would agree that the "bums on seats" ideology just doesn't work; identifying the best person for the job is a vital skill for business owners and managers alike. However, it is even more important than simply satisfying a current need with the resources available - it is gearing up the organisation for success or failure in the future – and the failure to get the right person for the right role at the right time can have a profoundly negative effect on any organisation.

Ensure your person specifications and job descriptions are up to date and include relevant competency requirements. These are key to successful recruitment and should be specific. For example, if one of your competency requirements is tolerance for stress, you can illustrate this by adding: 'shows stability of performance under pressure and/or opposition; responds constructively when conflict arises'.

In addition to psychometric testing, criteria based interviewing (CBI) is a process of identifying what is required to fulfil the vacant role requirements by identifying and prioritising the criteria or capabilities needed to carry out that role successfully. In essence, questions are formulated and asked against each of the criterion so as to elicit relevant information from your candidates, through which you gather the evidence:

- Look for actual examples of what they did (not what they would do) against each criterion
- Establish the circumstance or situation
- Record the candidate's behaviour (i.e. what they actually did)
- Record the result or impact of the action they took.

For example, if your criterion was ability to handle change well, you might ask:
"Can you describe how you handled a change in your department to which your staff/colleagues were opposed? How did you approach the change? What was the result?"

3. Implement the right motivation tools

Operating the right bonus or commission structure should motivate your staff in the most appropriate way, to suit both their needs and the needs of the business. It is clearly a candidates' market right now and you are competing for the best. Motivate properly and the result is happy staff, who feel they are well rewarded for their skills and sales achievements; get it wrong and you could have the exact opposite, with added issues such as in-fighting and overpaying for mediocre achievement.

Whatever your decision on your bonus scheme, think it through carefully, keep it simple and stick to it.

You should also think carefully about your staff benefits – in my experience, it's a myth that most people are motivated purely by money. Staff benefits help to encourage your staff to feel appreciated and to enhance your company's reputation as a caring organisation and a good place to work.

4. Train your staff

A simple induction training system, used in conjunction with role-specific, on the job coaching and training, will help you to ensure that new staff not only have the right training for their job but also that they are inducted quickly and effectively into their new working environment.

A schedule should be drawn up to include the basics, such as alarm training, database system training, how to answer the telephone in your company style etc. It could also include visits to meet members of staff in different locations or time gaining an appreciation of their colleagues' work and details of relevant external training, (usually following the satisfactory completion of the trial period). So that the employee can see what is planned for them and in what timescales, they should have their own copy of the training schedule.

And don't forget to give your new recruit a copy of their contract and job description and go through each point with them, so that they are no doubt as to what they should be working on and what is expected of them.

5. Measure and monitor performance

I have always found that a good staff appraisal system is key to motivating teams and highlighting training needs, which often don't come to light during day-to-day activities. I personally favour 360-degree appraisals, because feedback is less two-dimensional but the benefits of this system need to be weighed up against the time needed to deliver it properly - it does not suit all businesses. Either way, every appraisal system should be meaningful and include the employee's feedback, the line manager's feedback, appraisal competencies and personal objectives (ensure these are SMART – specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound).

In addition to appraisals, key performance indicators (KPIs) are an invaluable method of facilitating good management systems enable staff to understand where they need to focus their efforts to ensure the requisite outcome. In my opinion, criteria, such as the percentage of jobs filled, interviews from CVs sent and placements from interviews attended are vital.

In conclusion, my last point is this: the trick to maximising your employees' potential clearly requires an investment of effort and sometimes money – it just doesn't happen on its own. However, I truly believe that with a few basic processes in place, you will have a much better chance of creating a happy and creative working environment for you and your team – and that can't be bad for business!

About Denise Walker FREC

Denise Walker owns and runs Absolutely Business, a specialist management consultancy, designed exclusively for the recruitment industry, delivering **business consultancy, interim management and training services**.

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