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Strategies for Being an Employer of Choice

For a business to be successful, its employee management, recruiting, and training strategies must be intertwined.

As our country reopens and more people become vaccinated against COVID-19, the demand for workers is dramatically increasing. While enjoying some travel in late June and July in resort towns, it seemed bizarre to see many businesses, particularly restaurants and hotels, on shortened hours or closed altogether in peak season. Simply put, they cannot attract sufficient staff.

Many restaurants shifted to take-out only, and/or online ordering and delivery services because they no longer had the capacity to do eat-in business as usual. The demand for workers, in almost all types of work, regardless of location, makes it that much more challenging to attract and retain staff. So, what is the answer? How do you get the best possible candidates, and get them to stay?

An employer I know well, who is a progressive businessperson with a well-run business, told me that, after much effort, he recently hired five individuals, only to have three of them not show up for their first day on the job. It is disturbing to learn that this is not uncommon for employers in these times. I have heard similar stories from across the country.

Given the amount of time it takes to

recruit, hire, and train a new employee, no one can afford a situation like this. So, what is the answer? Unfortunately, there is no silver bullet. People, including good people you have treated well, will leave. When they do, the question is, what will they say about you as an employer? What is your value as an employer? If they are moving within your industry, they will be talking to other industry people, and what they say could land you a replacement.

“What is your value as an employer?”

If they are leaving for promotion and loved their time with your organization, maybe they will consider coming back to a more senior position where they can contribute even more to your organization. Conversely, if you treat them poorly, do not value them, or show interest in their careers, chances are they will let others know that too. It is an ever-increasingly small world, and the employees you want will typically do their research about you before they decide to join your organization.

What incentives do you have to attract and retain people? In my day, the mere opportunity to work was enough to bring excitement. We sought to keep a roof over our heads and food on our plates. Expectations have changed, and these days, no matter whether you are hiring a professional or an unskilled worker, your strategies must change accordingly.

In the case of unskilled workers, many people who are

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considering these jobs are not planning on a long-term career, but rather an entry-level opportunity to learn some skills and then move on. It may be because they are young and new to the workforce, or newly arrived in our country and simply looking for a foothold. In some organizations, such as McDonald's, and in banks, I have known people to start in an entry-level position and end up staying and graduating to well-paid, senior positions and excellent careers.

What often motivates them to stay are ongoing training programs and opportunities for advancement that do not require post-secondary degrees. Individual small businesses do not necessarily have the bandwidth to offer pathways like that, but there are still things they can do.

I have worked for major corporations, governments, and small, family-operated businesses. Can a small business compete on infrastructure with a major corporation? Of course not, but small businesses can belong to organizations that give them access to some of the same types of resources the big corporations have. Organizations like the Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB) have great online training programs, templates for health and safety, and a plethora of other resources that, with some planning,

can get you far closer to the bar.

One thing large corporations have great difficulty with is creating an atmosphere and the sense of family common in small family-run businesses. I remember being an 18-year-old truck driver for a small family-run trucking outfit where we parked our trucks at the senior owner's house. We only had seven trucks in the fleet, so we were small, and the owner's wife was like a mom to the young drivers like me. After we finished for the day, it was not uncommon to sit around the kitchen table and visit. Many years later, I have fond memories of those times and learned a lot about running a business in the process.

How narrow are your employee training opportunities? Are they simply to allow them to function in the job they hold or will they broaden their skills and help them grow as a person and as a productive employee? In small business, we are often task-driven and train for the job-specific skills we require our employee to possess. While it is obviously pivotal for a labourer to know how to use a hammer, or I should say, an air gun, it is now equally important for the employee to feel they are developing as a person and enhancing their skills for the next level, even if they are content where they are at the moment.

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In many cases, this can be done under the auspices of succession planning and cross training, which can be a lifesaver in these uncertain times. Suffice to say, if you show interest in your employee as a person, and their dreams and aspirations, and assist in their development, they will have a greater tendency to speak well of you as an employer, recommend you to people, and be loyal, instead of looking for greener pastures.

As a trainer for many years, I have interacted with thousands of workers while delivering a variety of training programs. Training can come in many forms, including specific job skills training, online training, and formal education streams such as trades, technical schools, and universities.

We need to look at training and skill enhancements holistically. How much the employer buys in financially and otherwise is a choice, and there does need to be some

cost benefit analysis involved. If the employee is working in the automotive industry and wants to take a course to become a manicurist, chances are there is no return on investment for the employer. If the employee wishes to take management studies and there are management positions available within your organization, perhaps it would be a wise investment for the future of the company as well as the employee.

Every company should have a training policy in place attached to performance and development plans. It needs to be collaborative, and can only work if there is discussion between the employer and employee as to their performance, their aspirations, the applicability of the training to the role they hold, or potential future role. In some organizations, if the employer commits to paying for education, the employee commits to staying in their employ for a

certain period of time and often in a role that is consistent with the education. This can be beneficial for all concerned.

In these times, the old rules no longer apply, and we have to think outside the box. In fact, throw the box away! Invest in your employees by first investing your time and sincere interest in them and their dreams and aspirations while you share yours for the future. Who knows, it could be the start of a beautiful thing.

As an employer, how are you different from your competition? How flexible are you? Do you value family?

COVID-19 changed the world as we know it. Many thought you could only work at the office and productivity would suffer if the employer could not oversee staff like a prison boss on a work line. The reality is quite different. For many, productivity is actually higher when working from home.

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Additionally, the financial benefits are staggering for staff and employers. Just the cost of the commute alone, never mind potential daycare costs, etc., can have a huge impact on a family's bottom line. I think we all understand more than ever that time is a precious and fleeting commodity.

Global News reported a recent poll from Accenture that said over 60 percent of Canadians now prefer some sort of hybrid or remote work model. A progressive employer should be looking at ways to make their staff members' lives easier. There may also be cost savings in downsizing the brick-and-mortar side of the business. If we do not have an office building and core hours, and instead have staggered or flex hours, we may be able to extend our hours of operation while providing the flexibility families need in order to defray or eliminate daycare costs and attend school events, etc. This all works to improve quality of

life and, in turn, will increase your employees' loyalty and make them reluctant to leave your employ. Employers and employees are also exploring the concept of the employee working "anywhere," allowing someone who lives in Comox to move to Whistler for a couple of months without missing a beat with respect to their work.

The culture of your company will create a certain environment that will either lead people to want to stay or leave. I have spent a number of years working as a mediator, and when it came to workplace bullying and harassment issues, in almost every case there was a common thread in that the employer did not have the mechanisms in place to make bullying and harassment unthinkable, and failed to promote a respectful team environment.

Many people will do anything to avoid conflict, and managers are no different, often

resulting in them not dealing with the bullies in the workplace. This can drive good people out and create a toxic workplace and a bad reputation for the employer. One remedy is having an open and safe relationship with staff, with frequent one-on-ones so that you have your finger on the pulse of your workplace and can deal with any issues upfront. If you are uncomfortable, or do not feel you have the skills to deal with the matter, specialists like me can assist for far less money than it will cost if you do nothing.

In summary, while there are no quick fixes, creating an open and respectful workplace, taking the time to learn about your employees' interests and plans, and working with them to realize their aspirations will go a long way toward retaining them and creating loyalty. In addition, collaborating on training and development will better position your company for succession and cross training. ■

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