



The Resourcing Crisis: Identifying, Attracting, & Retaining Top Talent

Throughout the industrialised world, organisations are in crisis. Customers are becoming ever-more demanding, and merely giving them what they want is no longer good enough to ensure an organisation's survival, let alone profitability – customers will only stick around if they receive outstanding service.

Technology is another major challenge. The Internet has created an entirely new type of market, where the past history of an organisation is comparatively irrelevant compared to its passion for innovation, and its ability to use e-commerce as a way of winning new customers – plus as a way of keeping them loyal.

It's easy to believe that the biggest challenge facing organisations today does indeed consist of the need to master state-of-the-art technology, and create website-based product and service delivery resources.

Looking For Talent

Certainly, these are important requirements, but there is a far more fundamental challenge confronting organisations – the problem of identifying, attracting and retaining a sufficient number of high-calibre, high-performance people – talent – who will develop winning strategies and know how to implement them today and in the future.

As Warren Bennis says in his book *Old Dogs, New Tricks*: 'Today's leaders must not only have the stature to attract top talent, they must have the character to retain it. Talented people have options. They can walk out of the door at any time to go to a competitor. In this environment, leaders don't automatically command respect. They have to earn it.'

The problem of finding and keeping the right people is not a new problem. There have always been pockets of specialised human skills which have placed the people who possess them at a premium.

Historically, even during periods of extremely high unemployment such as the 1930s, there was almost always plenty of work available for the most able specialists; it was the unskilled who suffered the major consequences of unemployment. Nonetheless, in the winter of 2000, Barbara Roche, the Home Office minister responsible for immigration, underlined the chronic shortage in Britain of skilled employees such as IT workers, teachers and doctors.

However, the resourcing problem that organisations face today is not, at a fundamental level, one of a dearth of technical specialists. On the contrary, universities and colleges are turning out tens of thousands of such specialists every year.

Ultimately, the technical specialities that these people have to offer, while important, are not the highly prized attributes that organisations crave. These technical specialists may or may not be the people to drive an organisation forward and to maximise its competitive edge.

Whether they are or not depends not just on their technical ability but on their sheer talent for making things happen, getting projects to work, inspiring and leading colleagues and subordinates; in short, on their other abilities that differentiate them as a total package – talented and innovative high-performers. These are the sort of people organisations desperately need to identify, attract and retain if they are to win the battles that the competitiveness in their marketplace forces them to win.

What To Look For

So, what exactly defines a high-performer? It is difficult to avoid an essentially tautological definition ('a high-performer performs at a high level'), but organisations have to do better than that. In practice, the high-performing people we are talking about are easier to define than to find. They are people with apparently limitless energy and enthusiasm that shines through even on the 'bad' days; people who are incandescent with ideas and who get things done quickly and efficiently; people who inspire others not just through pep talks but through the sheer inspiration of their example.

Such people are like diamonds, and their lustre can propel an organisation to greater and greater heights. The trouble is that, like diamonds, people of this calibre are coveted by others and, hence, easy to lose.

Many organisations do lose such people, suffering the cost of expensive training gone to waste, and a loss of productivity and inspiration which that person would have brought to the organisation. There is also the obvious risk that the talented employee, who holds critical, confidential and strategically valuable information about your company, will be courted by the competition, who are sure to welcome him with open arms.

Organisations lose such people because they don't know how to retain them. An all-too-typical scenario is an organisation run by a board consisting of experienced senior directors. Their prudence and caution at handling the kind of new ideas talented newcomers bring often simply ends up frustrating and demoralising those exact same people, who feel that their talents are not fully recognised and appreciated in the highest echelons of the organisation. Too often, talented people's ideas are crushed with little or no sensitivity for the effect that this will have on the person in question, or on those around them, let alone on the organisation's performance.

Out With The Old?

One big problem is that the old, hierarchical way of running an organisation – logical enough in the past when an organisation essentially consisted of a founder and numerous people running around actioning his wishes – is not appropriate in an age when organisations desperately need true talent in order to succeed in viciously competitive markets.

Furthermore, the old way of letting rewards and extensive responsibility accrue in the fullness of time does not necessarily work. This is particularly true in an environment where, for example, someone just out of university has the uninhibited competencies and ideas to revolutionise an organisation's activities through developing an entirely new Internet initiative, as opposed to any of the board members who have hundreds of years of service between them.

Nobody is saying that experience no longer matters, or that prudence and caution have no role to play in business during the Internet age. They do, but not on their own. What needs to be said is that, if organisations really do want to identify, attract and retain high-performers – many of whom will be comparatively young, possess highly challenging ideals, and see innovation as just part of the package they're expected to deliver – they need to rethink their strategies for doing this so that the strength of the old and the new come together to add value. In particular, they need to consider the following points:

Money: this is an important motivator, but don't make the mistake of imagining it's the only one that matters. In practice, high-performers tend to take for granted that they'll have a good financial package, and will seek real motivation elsewhere.

Empowerment: this is an essential motivating force. Ideally, a high-performer will need to feel that they 'own' a project both in a creative, or, more importantly, in a literal sense.

The challenges of the job: also an essential motivator. A high-performer is never going to want to do a job that they don't find challenging. Such people always prefer to be pushed to their limits rather than stuck in a rut.

A feeling of participating in the organisation's vision: high-performers easily get demoralised if they feel the organisation that employs them has little or no real sense of where it is going, or is treading old ground.

A platform for self-development: high-performers crave the confidence that they are developing their competencies, ideally an entire raft of skills and behavioural knowledge.

Time for regeneration: this is a crucial motivator if organisations are to retain high-performers. Those who consistently deliver at the edge are constantly asked to do even more because they have a reputation for high-performance delivery. Average to low-performers, however, keep their heads below the parapet, adeptly avoiding the request to

deliver. This short-sighted approach by the organisation leads to burn-out and low morale amongst high-performers, as well as high-performers making potentially costly mistakes in their work. A much better approach is to give these high-performers time for regeneration and recuperation, both in and out of work. People need time in the day to be creative, time to think and time to learn new things.

Provision of a coach or mentor: this signals that the organisation has a commitment to fast-tracking an individual's development.

Provision of good administration: individuals will thrive in an environment where they can depend on good support and resource access.

Avoiding Complacency

These points, and many more, if put into practice, can make an enormous difference to an organisation's ability to attract and retain high-performers. However, even organisations with a good track record of doing this cannot afford to become complacent.

The fact is that, compared to the past, there is a shocking lack of investment, of both time and money, in people in industry and commerce today. If you want to focus on profit, then you need to invest more into both the immediate and long-term development of staff.

If high-performers come to an organisation and find that it's not interested in them as people at all but only as a high-performing commodity, it is hardly surprising that such people are unlikely to be particularly loyal – and loyalty will be the key weapon in the talent war.

If, on the other hand, an organisation does invest in its people, it is much more likely to win loyalty from them, and create a community of talent and high-performance that will make competitors tremble.

The question is, do you have the right strategy, not just to win the battle, but to win the war?

For more information:

www.quogroup.com