

Recruiting and retaining the best in a difficult economic climate...

Recruiting and retaining the right people is a crucial component of organisational success. Getting it right has never been easy. A difficult economic climate can make the task at once more essential and even harder.

Challenging market conditions expose weaknesses in your business, and people issues will have an increasing impact on company performance. When times are tough it is more important than ever you get the best from your employees.

Recruiting the best

For those in a position to recruit, a downturn can represent a golden opportunity to top-up your pool of talent. With many businesses closing-down or down-sizing, the candidate pool offers rich pickings. These conditions offer a great opportunity to fine-tune your recruitment procedure. This will help you deal with an influx of applicants and ensure you select only the cream to join your organisation.

Establishing who and what you want

- **The Job.** Firstly review the job description; it is amazing how much a role can change over time. Some of the job requirements may have become obsolete, or the job may have evolved to include tasks not included in the original description. Markets and industries change so you can't rely on the past to tell you which jobs need to be done.
- **Behaviour.** Consider also the behavioural requirements of the role: what characteristics are needed to succeed in this job? Do you need someone who can work on their own initiative and who is happy taking risks, or are you looking for a team player who can work on repetitive tasks with a high degree of accuracy?
- **Company Values.** Thinking about the type of person who will 'fit in' with the cultural style of your organisation can pay serious dividends. Put simply people who don't fit, won't last – those who do are more likely to be engaged and perform to their potential.
- **Recruiting from within.** Don't neglect the talent you already have. The latest CIPD recruitment and retention survey showed that often the most satisfactory way to fill vacancies is by training people within your organisation. It's cheaper and, since you know the candidates, less of a risk.

Dealing with applications

- **Sifting.** It is likely you will have more applications than you know what to do with. Luckily having followed the steps above you should have a very definite idea of what you are looking for. By sifting applicants at the beginning of the recruitment process you can reduce the numbers to a manageable level.

Assessments that can be emailed to applicants can be a good way to begin sifting, and are particularly cost effective when you have a large number of applicants for a job. They reduce the costs of reading hundreds of CVs and will give you a better shortlist. The assessment is emailed to individuals on application and those who don't meet the pre-determined requirements are screened out. This can save a lot of time and wasted effort.

Finding the perfect fit

- **CVs and Interviews.** Interviews and CV are sadly prone to distortion, deception and downright lies! Following up references and good interview technique can go some way to establishing whether your candidate is genuine, but this is not always enough.
- **Objectivity.** However hard we try, none of us can be completely objective. For some, relying on 'gut instinct' is how they prefer to work, but in a recruitment situation is important to be fair, non-discriminatory and crucially not blinded to a candidate's unsuitability because you get on like a house on fire! Remember, the people who can 'talk the talk' at the interview are not always the best people for the job.
- **Testing.** Psychometric assessments can be a good way to objectively evaluate candidates preferred working style, aptitude, ability and knowledge. Before choosing an assessment think about what you need to know, or what might be difficult to confirm from a CV or interview alone. Do your homework: Is the test valid? How long does it take to complete? Is it easy to administer, do you need any training? How quickly can you get the results? A good test will help you filter out unsuitable candidates, provide 'more meat' for your interview and help you build a rounded picture of each individual.

Retention and engagement

For many companies a downturn in business will mean recruitment is the last thing on their minds. However, your people issues are no less pressing. In difficult times it is easy for staff to become de-motivated and insecure. To succeed in a tough market you need to maintain productivity and make sure you hold on to your top performers.

Getting the most from people and retaining them successfully go hand in hand. The engaged, motivated employee is more likely to stay with your organisation than the bored, despondent one. So what can be done?

- **Job Evaluation.** Just because you're not recruiting doesn't mean you can't examine your job descriptions as well as the people performing each role. Are the right people in the right jobs? As outlined earlier, start by reviewing the job itself and then the behaviours required to perform it well. If you find people who are not suited to their roles make some changes – can responsibilities be re-distributed, employees re-deployed or jobs swapped?
- **Motivators.** Understanding what makes your employees tick is crucial - different people respond to different motivators. Some people crave money and prestige, others want security and sincere recognition of a job well done. Talk to your managers and find out if they already have a feel for their teams' motivators. If not, profiling tools can be used to establish them quickly. Making sure each individual is managed in the most appropriate way will help keep them onside and performing well.
- **Communication.** If there's one thing we all hate it's being kept in the dark. Make sure you communicate regularly and effectively with your staff. Where you face problems try to involve them in forming solutions. Employees whose opinions are valued, and who feel their ideas can impact on company direction will feel more aligned to company goals.
- **Team work.** There are a whole raft of reasons why some teams don't work as well as they should – and an equally vast number of ways to tackle team problems. Ironing out team problems will benefit the people in the team, those that work with them and the company as a whole.

- **Development.** While sales might have slowed, your employees' need for learning and development opportunities won't have changed. In fact they may increase as markets change quickly. This is particularly true of your high-flyers who will always be looking for the next rung on the career ladder. Providing opportunities for growth demonstrates your commitment to your employees. Offering training and internal promotion are a great ways to keep staff engaged and incentivise top performers.

As many articles over the past few months have reported those who make ill thought-out cut-backs, or who fail to hang-on to top performers, are likely to struggle in the current climate. When markets do begin pick up those with a strong and motivated workforce are the ones who will benefit most quickly and in the greatest measure.

This is a great time to think about your people issues and to take time to get things right. When you have the right people with the right attitude at the helm of your organisation you should be in great shape to sail through whatever economic storms we face.