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A CIO's Secrets of Successful Staffing

By Erik Goltzer

Attracting and retaining excellent staff is certainly more art than science, but it is also a skill learned through years of experience, and one that no amount of book learning will replicate. Some of the best opportunities to realign your current staff and/or add to its existing capabilities present themselves when positions are vacated or are newly created. Such opportunities don't come along often, so when they do, you want to make sure you hit a home run. Ask your HR manager if you can sit in on interviews so you can develop some practical experience about interviewing. After all, being the interviewer is quite different from being the interviewee!

Start With a Successful Search

Begin by defining your internal needs and take the opportunity to redefine the vacant role to meet those needs. Also take the time to do some planning on paper, looking at "what-ifs" and realigning responsibilities within the department. Quiz and discuss with your department team and see what input they have. Note any gaps in service or friction among the team members that can be corrected. Not only does opening the discussion up to your departmental team afford them the opportunity for input, but it also gives them a stake in the hiring action. Involving your team is a key part of retention. Indeed, adding a new team member, realigning existing team members and the calculus used to come up with a solution can be mystifying, so don't keep your team in the dark!

Remember that your human resources (HR) department is a critical part of this process, so involve them early and often all the way through hiring. HR can provide a lot of valuable assistance in the early realignment and position description development that, quite frankly, we might not fully appreciate. Additionally, this involvement invests HR in the position itself, helps them appreciate the salary requirement and often the complexity of the hiring action itself. If you only consult them at the end of the process, you'll find yourself in a defensive position. HR should know in advance and take part in discussions with your departmental team about the new role and any possible realigned roles within the team. Trust me: HR involvement will go a long way with firm management when you are both standing together on a position's role, salary and realignment.

"Retaining staff is really about fostering a work environment that is challenging, satisfying and fun."

Once you have approval, you're set to post the job. Though HR will handle most of this, along with sorting out the flood of resumes, you'll want to design the ad such that the right people apply and the wrong ones are deterred. Screen out potential applicants up front, zeroing in on the experience you want by using explicit key words and phrases, experiential requirements and specific technologies. In short, don't be vague. Be as specific as limited space allows. These phrases will make the experience and skill level stand out to attract the candidate you want. In the following examples, which is better?

Five years senior MS SQL experience with two years on 2008 version

OR

Five years MS SQL experience

Once you've selected your resumes, work with HR and set up your interviews. I like to partner with HR on these and have them do the initial screening, because they can explain the basic backgound of the firm and act as a great measuring stick to ensure a good personality and culture fit. This approach also ensures that HR knows who will be made an offer, which again puts you in a position of harmony with HR when briefing firm management.

Size Up Your Candidates

For the interview, develop a script that covers the key technology and project skills you are seeking. This ensures you cover the position requirements and that the process will be fair. Typically, I circulate this script among those who will be peers of the new hire and let them flesh it out. Again, this helps them feel involved and is crucial to retention.

My interviews are pretty tough. Usually I open with some introductory comments about the department and about some of the most interesting things we're doing. I ask them some general interview questions and a few open-ended questions. I want them to talk a lot and I take copious notes. Usually I'm looking for items for which they claim success and technologies in which they claim expertise. With my notes and interview script, I then begin to drill into the areas our position requires and those in which they claimed success or expertise.

The first 15 minutes of an interview are collegial. The next 30 minutes are interview "whack-a-mole," which means a fairly rapid fire style with a series of questions meant to separate fact from fiction. We all know interviewing for a job is about presenting yourself, your skills and capabilities in the best possible light. That's why my job is to confirm that what you are saying matches my needs and isn't inflated.

For instance, a candidate says she was the project manager for an application upgrade. I'm going to ask a litany of questions on project management, what she managed, how many personnel, timeline, how she tracked deliverables, internal and external team members, etc. I will repeat this type of question and answer cycle for 20 to 30 minutes.

Why do I put candidates on the spot and change the tenor of the interview? I want them to feel some stress, see how they react to a change of tone in the interview. What I'm looking for are the three Cs — confidence, competence and candor. If I find those traits in candidates, I tend to hire them, often on the spot. Ensuring that these qualities are reflected in each person working in your department will make staff retention much easier.

Keeping Your Staff Means Keeping Them Smiling

Retaining staff is really about fostering a work environment that is challenging, satisfying and fun. Often those three contend with each other. We all know the ebb and flow between daily support and projects, and it is a constant war trying to find enough time in your day to address both. The stress of that balancing act can build within your team and can fray relationships and tear down departmental harmony.

When the pressure cooker is boiling away, keep your team informed via meetings, give them opportunities to express ideas on how to handle issues and make them laugh. Acknowledging the stress of the moment, week, month, etc. is critical, and adding some humor along the way helps folks laugh off what can be long meetings about adding to the pile of work to be done. People feel better when they have a "say so" along the way and know that you are aware how hectic it is, even if you don't have a "fix" for it.

Make an effort to encourage communication across your team. Often, a project team might not appreciate the stress your helpdesk folks might be under — perhaps they're fighting off an outage or degraded system. Members of my team know I expect them to go chat with anyone who is rubbing them the wrong way or overtasking them. If I sense that isn't working, it's time to get them in a room together and sort things out. Don't let these kinds of issues, typically simple miscommunications, fester, because it is amazing how fast they become intractable.

Involve your team in developing solutions to new projects or changes in SLAs even for the relatively simple stuff. Often the way they solve it is what you would have directed anyway, but you gain much more ground with them by asking rather than telling. This doesn't work all the time — sometimes you have to be directive in nature and take command — but it does work most of the time.

Keep the grapevine tame! Not always possible, because often you're the last one to know when it is out of control. Still, try to be up front with folks on changes the firm has made and how these changes will impact them. Don't let them hear this from other personnel and then be on the defense. It's often the case that changes in other departments can affect your team's friendships and business relationships with those departments, and these disruptions can quickly cause issues within your department.

Hand out recognition among your team at meetings or on the spot when deserved. Often folks work through complicated support or project issues without a whisper of praise. Yes, it is their job; but it is human nature to crave approval, and it is your role as a manager to pass along recognition of work that goes above and beyond.

As for discipline, make sure it is proportionate to the "crime." If employees aren't pulling their weight, are coming in late, etc., make sure you handle any infractions in accordance with firm policy and involve HR. Also, let the team members who are adversely affected know that you are aware of these issues and that you're working on them. If you keep these matters completely confidential, you're only adding to a perception of unfairness. By the same token, make sure legitimate mistakes are handled with understanding and equity. We all have issues beyond our control, and after years of faithful service, no one should be treated harshly when there are extenuating circumstances. Being strict but fair when disciplining staff will be apparent and appreciated.

If there's a secret to successful staffing, it is to make sure you hire the right person for the right job. After that, ensure you cultivate an environment conducive to teamwork. Keep your team involved, solicit their input, praise their success and deal with their failures or shortcomings as they arise. You'll know when you have a great team because it will be evident in the praise from both your user community and from the staff members themselves. **ILTA**

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