

[16 Jun 2007] “Productivity starts with hiring the right people”

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Hiring the right people is a crucial task for any company. But hiring is only the first step in creating a productive work force.

“The key to success is not only getting the right people, but retaining them,” said Anne Szostak, a former executive for the former FleetBoston Financial Corp. She is president of Szostak Partners, a Providence-based consulting firm that focuses on helping executives achieve their goals.

Szostak teamed up with Barbara B. Schoenfeld of Ligature Partners, LLC, a corporate recruiting firm, for a presentation titled “Understanding the People Issue: Learning How to Effectively Staff.” It was held at the Business Expo at the Rhode Island Convention Center.

When it’s time to hire, Szostak said that employers need to provide an honest job description, and then do their best to make sure that employees fit the job. For call center jobs at Fleet, for example, prospective employees had to listen to a four-hour CD presentation to test their concentration and focus.

Some people, Szostak said, just shouldn’t be in their jobs. She told about how Bert Crenca, now the artistic director at AS220, once worked in the print shop at Fleet. He told her he didn’t like his job, that he really wanted to be an artist.

“I said to him ‘Bert, you should go. Go find your passion.’ And he did,” she said.

Schoenfeld had prepared a list of do’s and don’ts for employers when they’re trying to fill jobs.

Do’s included “hiring with discipline” — know what the job is, and exactly what’s expected of a successful candidate. And read the resume before a candidate arrives for the job interview.

Do pay attention to the small things if they’re relevant to the job. For a position that requires writing, for example, misspellings and grammatical errors in resumes and letters are bad signs.

Do try to sell a favorite candidate: court them, send them flowers, take them to lunch. “Make them feel wanted; make them feel like they’re part of the team,” Schoenfeld said.

Even before the job interviews, she said, it’s important for a company to assemble a group of good candidates.

“I always regretted it when I was forced to choose from a shallow pool [of candidates],” Szostak said. “Sometimes you have no choice, but it’s much better to be patient and get that right pool.”

Schoenfeld said smart companies try to reach passive candidates, people who are not actively looking for jobs.

One way to do that, she said, is to persuade everyone already working for your company to be a recruiter. Find out if they know anybody who's interested, and qualified, for the job.

Schoenfeld also suggested networking with friends in the industry — former employers, customers, trade groups and organizations such as the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce. And she said companies should consider using a recruiting firm for key hires — not a surprising notion considering Schoenfeld works for one.

As for the don'ts, Schoenfeld advised against asking a lot of hypothetical questions or grilling the job candidate like a would-be prosecutor.

To illustrate — and lighten the mood — she and Szostak showed a Monty Python video of a bizarre job interview, with John Cleese suddenly ringing a bell and then yelling “Five, four, three, two, one, zero!” at the hapless candidate, who cowers in his chair.

Szostak said job references can turn out to be surprisingly revealing. A lot of executives, she said, think references are useless, because the job candidates only pick people who will supply glowing testimonials. Not always so, said Szostak, particularly if you ask the right questions, such as how a candidate's peers would describe him or her.

“You'd be surprised what people will tell you,” she said, particularly after the initial compliments are over. “It's like a house inspection. Hiring someone is like buying a house, and you don't buy a house without an inspection.”

And given the recent scandals over inflated resumes — such as the dean of admissions at MIT — checking resumes has become a necessary precaution.

Szostak told about one candidate who had been offered a job at a nonprofit organization — until the nonprofit discovered he had faked a master's degree on his resume. It turned out he didn't even need the masters to qualify for the position, but the organization had to rescind the job offer anyway.

Once you've hired someone, Szostak said, the next challenge is to keep them.

She said research shows there's a high turnover rate, particularly among younger employees, during the first 90 days on the job. She suggested that companies take care to ensure that new employees are adapting, perhaps even appointing informal mentors — not necessarily their bosses — to keep an eye on the newcomers.

Beyond the first 90 days, Szostak said smart companies should make employees aware that

additional training and career opportunities exist.

She said, “There’s a feeling among some companies that ‘If you invest in them, they will leave.’ I say ‘No, if you invest in them, they will stay.’” Szostak said that if employees go to school to enhance their qualifications, companies should take care to “rerecruit” them after their schooling is done. “If you don’t rerecruit them, you will lose them,” she said.

When people leave a company, particularly high-quality people, it sends disquieting signals to the rest of the employees, she said. “People start wondering ‘What do they know that I don’t know,’ and turnover will spike.”

If there’s a lot of turnover at a particular job, she added, it’s probably time for the company to step back and ask what’s wrong. She remembers one department at Fleet that had a 180-percent annual turnover rate until the company made some changes in the way it was run and turnover got back to normal.

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Author: Andy Smith