

White Paper: *The Pursuit of Talent: How will your organization fare?*

We know the talent landscape is more complex and most employers are no longer able to attract top candidates using traditional passive recruiting methods. Described as a “buyers” market, strong applicants enjoy the ability to be more selective when considering a new position. Don’t think your employees are actively looking? Even if that were true, your employees are still likely to get calls and messages from recruiters and contacts at other organizations looking to poach your top talent.

We can’t all be Google, but we can be jealous of some of the perks offered to Googlers, such as onsite physicians, chiropractors, physical therapists, and massage services. In addition to being able to bring your dog to work, get your car’s oil changed, get your hair cut, Google provides access for employees to use onsite washers and dryers; free detergent is even provided. Wanting to encourage employees to recharge and stay energized, Google provides ample opportunity for employees to take a break and to play. From the company pool, rock climbing wall, billiards tables, beach volleyball pit, video games, foosball, roller hockey, and ping pong, employees have many appealing onsite opportunities and perks beyond the fitness centers and their free-of-charge nutritious meals and snacks to keep employees “healthfully energized throughout the day.”

When you aren’t Google, what can you do to differentiate your organization from the competition? The best talent in your market will be considering several options. While offering higher compensation and perks may help, it's only one piece of the puzzle. A partner in our firm, Michael Kilfoyle, likes to say that great perks without a great culture of leadership is like a yacht without water. Smaller organizations offering leaner benefits packages may have to get creative to keep their best people and to maintain a pipeline of capable talent. Not only do they have a smaller pool of employees for development and retention, they likely have fewer HR resources available to help with data analytics and strategic planning. This makes it even harder to try to figure out what needs to be done to engage employees and remain competitive in a tight labor market.

High-value talent is scarce and increasingly difficult to replace. [Conference Board’s 2018 survey](#) of global CEOs again cited the “failure to attract and retain top talent” as their most critical concern. It is now “the top hot-button issue in every global region except Europe, where it is second.” In more complex jobs, this will continue to be an issue as baby boomers (and their decades of knowledge and experience) approach their mid to late-60’s and exit the workforce. There is a growing gap between the supply and demand of skilled workers. For those of us who aren’t Google, the following are key areas on which to focus to both attract and retain talent in a tight labor market (spoiler alert, I won’t suggest you build an onsite wave pool with a swim-up bar).



Focus on Leadership

Having leaders who genuinely value their employees is critical to the success of the business. According to Tasha Eurich author of the 2013 book *Bankable Leadership: Happy People, Bottom-Line Results, and the Power to Deliver Both*, "good leaders create prosperity, and it's not defined just by money, but by the emotional health of their employees. Good leaders treat employees as humans and appreciate them by creating an environment people want to be in." Applicants and employees are investigating your organization's leaders. They want to know whether your managers and executives are worthy of respect. Do they act with integrity? Are they real and genuine and honest? Both your potential applicants and current employees want to know if your leaders will do the right thing when it comes to making decisions for the company and that affect the employees.

Help your leaders understand their role in attracting and retaining talent and make sure that it is a top management priority. Recognizing that Glassdoor, Indeed, and similar sites, where employees rate and post reviews about companies, CEOs, benefits, etc. are go-to resources for job seekers looking for insights into working conditions, you should expect they will look there when researching your organization.

Provide Career Development Opportunities and Coaching

It is important to be able to show candidates and your employees how their career can grow and how the organization will support them along the way. Providing access to the appropriate professional development resources is also critical. Effective leaders, are one such resource, and they see themselves as coaches. Providing mentoring and coaching to employees in a supportive team environment is essential to offering effective skill development – including leadership development. Effective leaders engage team members on a regular basis to recognize, coach, listen, and inspire. This type of approach is also effective for managing employee performance and measuring results. The once-a-year performance review is neither effective, nor taken seriously. Your best employees want real-time feedback and coaching on how to be effective and how to grow in the organization. They will take or leave jobs based on their opportunity to work with exceptional leaders.

Gallagher Flynn & Company, a widely respected Public Accounting firm in VT and NH, provides formal mentoring opportunities for all of its Accountants. Besides sharing practical advice relative to serving clients in public accounting, mentors provide guidance and direction on how best to network, navigate firm politics, and ultimately get ahead. Every Accountant in the firm has a mentor and according to their Director of HR, Joanne Breault, GFC provides opportunities to switch mentors to gain the added benefit of varying perspectives of different leaders. She believes it to be critical to the success of their Accountants as they grow within the firm. She also pointed out that it has been key to helping individuals figure out early on if Public Accounting is not the best career fit.



Another example is Heritage Aviation, an employee-owned aviation services company (65 employees) that provides Maintenance, Avionics and Fixed Base Operations from Burlington International Airport. In 2015, Heritage launched its onsite Leadership Development program. According to Heather Jean, Heritage's HR Director, the 10-module program is offered once a year and is geared towards skill development for new supervisors and their "rising stars." One of the reasons Heather believes the program has been so successful is due to the format, which is mostly group work, role playing, and very little traditional instruction. 43% of the workforce has completed the program and there are eight employees scheduled to attend the 2018 Spring program. By investing in their team, Heritage is building its own talent pool from within. Other anticipated benefits:

- Engagement – done well, internal development can boost morale by demonstrating commitment to the career and personal growth of individuals and the team
- Eyes wide open – any gaps in development are known before an employee is promoted
- Cost savings – internal development of employees is usually much less expensive than external recruitment, selection and onboarding
- Pay it forward – show commitment to the growth and development of your employees and you will get far greater commitment and loyalty in return

Create a Culture of Openness

Remember those exceptional leaders who capitalize on the benefits of developing strong and positive relationships with their employees and teams? One of the best ways a good leader encourages and unifies her team is to create a culture of openness and honesty. Employees are resilient and we are forever doubting their ability to weather change and stormy waters. It comes down to respect. Employees value honesty and a straightforward message about where the business is headed. If you aren't sure, be open about the steps you are taking and when you will provide more information. Open and honest dialogue will help you win the respect of your people.

If it is sincerely a dialogue, your leaders are seeking input and feedback from employees. They treat feedback as a gift. Leaders who are curious and open to feedback leverage the expertise of their team and benefit during times of change, not only from the diverse perspectives, but from the engagement and problem solving of the full team. When employees feel they will be supported rather than vilified if they share concerns about problems, roadblocks, or failures, they are more willing to jump in and roll up their sleeves.

In a culture of openness there is both increased productivity and support of innovation. Open communication and cross functional collaboration prevents duplication of efforts. Team members are less likely to get off track and have to retrace their steps to try to figure out who has the necessary and most up to date information to keep moving forward. The freedom from this type of waste allows employees the ability to be creative and come up with innovative solutions. Open and supportive dialogue, collaborative teamwork and problem solving, increased productivity, and innovation are all features of an organization which appeals to top talent.



Be Flexible

Workplace flexibility is a strategic approach to attracting, engaging, and retaining talent, not simply an employee benefit. Companies willing to be more progressive about flexible work arrangements have an easier time attracting and retaining talent. According to the [State of the American Workplace Report](#), “Gallup consistently has found that flexible scheduling and work-from-home opportunities play a major role in an employee’s decision to take or leave a job.”

People want to work at companies where they are treated like adults and have supportive, engaging, progressive cultures. Being flexible with your employees is good for business. It builds employee trust and commitment. Whether it’s flex-time, job sharing, working remotely, condensed/reduced work week, leaves/sabbaticals, or phased retirement, helping your employees with their work-life balance ultimately benefits the organization.

If it is an ongoing struggle to attract applicants for a particular role in the organization, consider whether the role can be split or restructured. Research your target area population demographics and hiring trends. Be adaptive to needs of parents who drop off/pick up children from day care and school. Consider earlier and shorter shifts and part-time schedules to appeal to the aging and soon-to-be retiring segment of the workforce.

On a more practical level, remote workers may save an organization costs on supplies, real estate, and utilities. [Unilever](#), for example, permits 100,000 employees — virtually its entire workforce— to work anytime, anywhere, as long as the work gets done.

Define a Winning Employee Value Proposition and Market the Employer Brand

What is most enticing about working for your organization? Perhaps you have made the investment to grow a cohort of exceptional leaders and you offer an amazing open and innovative workplace culture and maybe, you even have an onsite waterpark... Don’t stop there! While these are commendable features of your Employee Value Proposition (EVP) - what an employee *gets* for working for your company - the perceived *value* of rewards + assignment + organization + opportunity + people, it isn’t enough. You must package and showcase the best of who you are as an organization and what you offer, in your employer brand. You want to be able to widely and easily advertise all of the potentially valuable options and opportunities to job seekers. Whether you know it or not, you already have an employer brand and it’s up to you to shape and sell it.

At SunCommon, a certified [b corporation](#), they proudly acknowledge that their mission, their promise of being a different kind of business – a force for good – appeals to both applicants and employees. Jessica Sabick, Director of Talent, shared that their EVP was born from the shared vision from their founding, that Duane Peterson and James Moore held when starting the company 6 years ago, and is indelibly tied to how they do business.



Vermont's largest solar installer is candid about their employee culture on their website. "We are succeeding by celebrating creativity, cross-functional collaboration, high energy, hard work, good play, deep networking and acknowledging that we'll each make mistakes and learn from them." They go on to say that SC knows both success and fun, and readers are invited to come do both.

Jess also shared that SunCommon is thinking strategically about how they build their talent pipeline for the future. By focusing on underrepresented groups, who might not typically apply to work in solar installation or in a warehouse, SC wants to make sure all kinds of people see themselves in the various roles in the company. One related initiative is a new partnership with local area high schools to make girls more aware of opportunities and possibilities in solar work.

Need to define your EVP? Your EVP project team will start with a focus on a broad set of questions: who are we as an organization? What do we do? Why does it matter? Who will we need to succeed, and where are they? Who are they and what matters to them? Who are our main competitors for talent? Once you have nailed down your EVP in terms of your business strategy, it is not uncommon for HR to partner with the Marketing team to create a campaign. Through social media and other forums, photos and video can help communicate your company's values, personality and culture. While the brand or reputation of a company is not the most important consideration for job seekers, according to Gallup's [State of the American Workplace Report](#), more than one-third of respondents, (36%) say it is "very important" when evaluating a potential job.

Have your EVP defined and your employer brand marketing campaign ready? Educate your employees and encourage them to be ambassadors of the employer brand. Think you can fake it? You really can't. Your employees will become enthusiastic ambassadors only if you provide an organization and a culture, of which they are truly proud. When employees spread the word to friends and family about your company's fun and engaging culture, where people do good work in a place that they love, you will significantly improve application rates and your organization will stand out in a crowded labor market, where competition for the best talent is fierce. [A LinkedIn study](#) indicated that "companies with a stronger employer brand have a 28 percent lower turnover rate than companies with a weaker employer brand."

Even if your organization is not currently struggling to attract candidates, there is a high likelihood that it will become a challenge in the near future. Most employers are unprepared for the business realities of the aging workforce and loss of skilled, knowledgeable workers. Organizations that proactively take steps to become a leading workplace to attract, engage and retain talent, will differentiate themselves and set themselves up for success into the future. With that in mind, take steps now before the organization is stuck wondering where all the best talent went.