

Maximise the Odds of Success Before and After Recruitment

In a tight labour market, it is crucial to retain existing employees. Ideally, each new hire is the perfect choice, all employees get along well and are productive, and there is no turnover. The reality, however, is that some people have difficulty working together, there are unproductive employees, and there is turnover. While the ideal may be unattainable, finding ways to close the gap and help your staff be productive team members is critical to your company's success. From recruitment to retention, there are effective tools to improve communication, increase productivity, and lower turnover rates.

Recruiting a new employee is a time-consuming, risky, and costly process. Hiring managers identify a pool of technically qualified candidates through newspaper ads, referrals, recruiters, and Internet searches. In a tight labour market, that pool of candidates is, all too often, a small one. After interviews, background and reference checks, one puts it all on the line, making a choice that will either contribute to the company's success or cost the company countless thousands in lost productivity, recruiting and training costs, and wasted salary dollars.

Given the magnitude of this undertaking, it makes sense to invest time and money in selecting and retaining the right employees. As Bill Schult, President of Believe and Succeed, Inc., explains, "being in a tight labour market is all the more reason to be careful when recruiting. You have to make sure you are recruiting the right person, because replacing them is even more difficult." A smaller pool of candidates means it's harder to find the right fit, but it's no less important. Further, once you have hired someone, it's important to do everything you can to help him or her be successful. The costs of turnover far outweigh the costs of a thorough recruiting process. Turnover cost alone is enough to motivate managers to make any new hire work out.

Managers have a valuable tool in their arsenal to increase the chances of a success. Today, about 40% of companies are using assessment tools for recruiting and employee development, compared to less than 16% fifteen years ago. Assessment instruments offer the hiring manager a strong understanding of a candidate's strengths and weaknesses in order to select the optimal employee. According to JoAnn McMillan, an industrial psychologist with Bigby-Havis Inc., "these tests allow employers to screen in those candidates with high probability of success and avoid those candidates with a low probability." These tools have been accepted as a valuable part of the recruitment process for decades. What is new and different is focusing on their use after the hire. They offer managers an understanding of employees after the hire. They help managers understand why someone may be under-performing, identify paths for development and promotion, solve problems, and motivate people. When the labour market is tight, managers are extremely motivated to make any new hire work out. Assessment tools increase the odds of a successful fit even when the fit is less than optimal. Investing your budget in retention just makes sense.

With your existing staff, using one of these instruments can help you identify a development and promotion path for valued employees. Schult explains that, "people naturally want to do better, they naturally want to excel. They just don't often get this kind of opportunity to learn about themselves." He says the best tools, "are those that identify suggestions and solutions to overcome weaknesses, helping the individual and their manager identify a development plan." It makes sense to assess an individual's strengths and weaknesses before promotion. Obviously, though an employee may perform well in one role, it doesn't mean they will perform well in another. Schult explains that many employees who are promoted into positions that don't fit with their abilities will quit before acknowledging frustration or failure in their new role. Far better, he says, to embrace the basic principle behind the creation of these assessment tools and have the flexibility to "capitalise on what people are good at and let them excel."

Claudia Day, manager of a distribution centre for Alcan Cable in Toronto, Ontario explains that one of the greatest benefits of implementing this kind of assessment to existing employees is that it gives the team a "common language to provide feedback in the work environment." Also, she says, "it allows me, as warehouse manager dealing with personnel issues and conflicts, a way to cool people down by revisiting the theory and taking the emotion out of it." At Raleigh Consulting Group, we have been using assessment tools with companies like Alcan for nearly two decades. We have found them to be effective at helping people work together more effectively, resolving conflicts, and improving morale. They are especially effective at helping new team members, shortening the learning curve, and improving the quality of group communication.

Day points out that an assessment tool can help a manager understand why an employee is struggling in their role. For instance, if their job involves leadership and heavy interaction with others, an employee may be challenged by not being naturally adept at dealing with people. In some environments, she says, the manager "may be able to shape a job that still makes an employee very productive, but perhaps does not require as much interaction with others." She explains that, "by being flexible and seeing the particular strengths of the person, a manager can adapt a job to the person and retain a valuable employee." Of course, this is not always possible in some atmospheres, where roles are very set.

Even proponents of assessment instruments acknowledge that there are some challenges. Often new users of these tools fall into the trap of pigeonholing someone. Claudia Day points out that one "minor weakness is that people may see themselves as defined in a certain way." Day explains that one needs to use the tools to show them that "while they tend towards certain behaviours that hinder their performance, they can and should try to develop their strengths and minimise their weaknesses." Some users of these assessments bring up the issue of managers and other employees "pigeon holing" individuals into certain behaviours and roles.

"I prefer to look at it as putting a person in the job most suited to them," says Bill Schult. "Is it pigeon-holing to allow someone to excel at what they are best at?" Schult points out the lesson taught by Dr. Donald Clifton, "you can't teach a pig to sing. It annoys the pig and frustrates you to death." The simplest way to overcome this issue is to acknowledge the possibility of pigeonholing and focus on building development plans based on strengths. It is important to understand the complexity of these instruments. A person cannot be reduced to a single trait. Another method to overcome this challenge is to employ more than one instrument.

Assessment instruments can help managers make optimal selections, they can help new hires get acclimated more smoothly, while helping resolve conflicts, develop career paths and identify promotion candidates. When considering the importance of selection and retention, it is key to understand the costs of poor hires and the contribution the right candidate can bring to your organisation.