

The following article will appear in the May issue of PIA magazine

### Finding new talent starts with smart hiring practices

By Mark Shlien

Although the recession has resulted in layoffs, insurance agencies are actually hiring. But, their search for good people has been complicated by the fact that job requirements have changed. Producers must be strong sales people who can bring in new business, not just the good account managers of years gone by. Customer service people must have the right combination of insurance knowledge, computer skills and personality to work efficiently and retain clients. When searching for candidates, agency competitors know they must pay a competitive wage, but that employees also are looking for perks, such as casual dress, flexible starting times, summer hours and working-at-home arrangements. Agency employees say they value training programs, being recognized for their efforts by producers and managers, working in an upbeat environment and having a comfortable workstation with the necessary equipment.

#### Attract talent

Because it is so difficult to find the right people, especially candidates who may just be entering the work force, using recruiters often is necessary. But, there is a difference between a search firm that will look for qualified candidates and a recruiter who merely provides resumes. Search firms generally cost more, but they will screen and interview candidates and work with you to prepare a job profile of skills and capabilities. To supplement the efforts of recruiters, some firms have implemented employee referral programs. These programs work best when a formal process is in place to regularly identify candidates and keep the pipeline full. The agency employees should develop a list of the things they like about the agency and be prepared to talk about the benefits, working environment, perks or advancement opportunities the agency offers. They also should receive input from management about the skills and qualities the job candidate should have, as well as a description of the job opening.

#### Select talent

Once the candidates are identified, they should be screened and interviewed to make sure they are a good fit for the job. Employees who never should have been hired will cost the agency, not just in salary and benefits, but in the time of other employees who are involved with them. Behavioral interviewing can help managers make better hiring decisions because the interviewer focuses the questions on the experience of the candidate. Questions are designed to ask candidates to describe a situation or give an example of something they accomplished. Creating a standard list of questions that is used by all the agency interviewers assures that good interviewing is accomplished, and that the interviewing team can compare notes.

Pre-employment assessment tools also can avoid costly hiring mistakes. Insurance tests can identify the level of knowledge an individual has, but you also can test proficiency with math and critical thinking, as well as use of the computer system or other software commonly used. Psychological testing

can help assess sales or customer service capability and aptitude for the position. These tests, however, should not be used to make the hiring decision, but just to provide additional information about the candidates' strengths and weaknesses.

Even with good screening, employees will turn down offers. Their compensation expectations may be unrealistic or they may just be testing the marketplace. But in other cases, the offer is rejected because the agency made a poor impression. Unprepared interviewers delay the process unnecessarily, or fail to present the agency in a positive light. The best recruiting agencies treat applicants like their customers, provide them with feedback in a timely manner and communicate their hiring decision in a professional manner. Throughout the process, they make an effort to maintain an upbeat, positive relationship with all applicants.

#### Cultivate talent

Top performers want to know what is expected of them in their jobs and how they are doing. They look forward to reviews because these discussions give feedback about their performance. But, they also provide an opportunity to talk about goals for the coming year and the training opportunities they should pursue to develop their skills and knowledge.

Communication in general is important to modern employees. They want to know how their work fits into the big picture of the agency's vision and mission. They appreciate monthly meetings that provide updates on plans and new developments and where they can ask questions. They also are motivated by public and personal recognition. And finally, they respect organizations that ask for feedback on management and on the agency overall.

Attracting and retaining employees is as much a marketing issue as it is a management issue. Developing and promoting a positive organization and reminding employees of the value of being part of it is critical to getting those referrals and keeping the talent that you have. The best agencies always are recruiting (selling), both during the job interview and with their own employees.

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