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For Workplace News

## **Are you just plugging the leaks in your recruitment and retention strategy?**

Down came the rains recently and literally washed my office out. While I was moving furniture and pulling up bad carpet, I used the opportunity to purge years of magazines and conference proceedings. In the process, I was given a damp reminder that what's old soon becomes new again.

Some 15 or 20 years ago, conferences focused heavily on recruitment and retention. Special sessions were devoted to behavioural interviewing and aligning recruiting and staffing with the strategic corporate agenda. Interestingly, today the same topics seem to be of top concern again. What goes around comes around.

As I contemplated my water problem and wondered why I hadn't done anything to prevent it, I also wondered why organizations are still grappling with recruitment and retention a couple decades later. If the conferences and books from

## **Crisis hiring yet again**

back then were right in their recommendations, organizations should be enjoying the fruits of sustained and engaged workforce now. Or was all that shared learning of the late '80s and early '90s misleading and ineffective when applied in the real world?

Taking stock and reflecting on what I've seen in the intervening years, I don't blame the books and the shared learning. I blame the focus on problem solving that's rampant in corporate cultures. Organizations are always trying to solve the crisis of the moment, and the areas of human capital and talent management are no exception. We hire people who look exceptional because of some urgent skill need, even when those golden-haloed angels don't fit the organization very well. Or we downsize and shed ourselves of people who do fit the organization when we no longer need to fill their roles. Or we outsource to low-cost providers without considering the larger impact on customer service. Or we react to some demographic change, like the emergence of generation X, while we forget the needs of the baby boomers.

All of this means we're not thinking of the future; we're just plugging the leaks of the moment. We're exhibiting pattern of crisis manipulation to solve problems instead of

looking for lasting and sustainable results according to a plan. Making matters worse, in the lulls between crises, we see managers become apathetic about the long term, knowing from experience that something urgent will soon show up again. That familiar oscillation between the newest and greatest talent-management intervention and a complete disinterest in people as a strategic resource leads to a lot of cynicism.

If we don't want to be in the same situation 15 years from now, we need to stop looking at the current recruitment and retention problem as a crisis to be fixed, and begin looking for solutions that will have a sustainable and positive impact.

The essential long-term priority is to recruit people who fit your organization and the job. Good fit has four components: skill, knowledge, behaviours, and values. An ideal employee needs the appropriate skill set, as well as the knowledge and ability to actually execute the work. In addition, more important than achieving results is achieving results in the right way, and when it comes to identifying those behaviours the past is the best predictor of the future. Finally, a candidate's values need to be aligned with the organization's values — an assessment which can be judged by whether the employee feels the organization

is a good place to work.

Of course, none of this is new. In fact, it's a kind of inefficient recycling. We've been saying since the late '80s that we need to hire people who fit the organization, and we've also been saying that fit and behaviours trump results and resumé. But now that such concerns are coming back into vogue, organizations are reaching, in their urgency, for the wrong solutions. Behavioural interviews, and well-trained managers who perform them, remain the best and most cost-effective means of evaluating fit and behaviours. Yet we now see a resurgence of assessment-centre type processes as the "new" solution, taking hiring and promoting away from the manager and guaranteeing that costs will skyrocket.

If you want to avoid plugging leaks and establish a long-term approach instead, here are some temporary crises to avoid.

**1. Boomers** — We've been waiting for boomers to leave organizations in droves. But what if they don't? Should you consider a valued employee who fits the organization and has a potential 10-15 years of work life left, a non-essential contributor because some trendy book or academic says a great demographic shift is coming? Some succession management experts say boomers have only one promotion left in them, but, with a possible 15 years of work remaining, many are highly promotable and have great potential.

**2. Generation Y** — The common perception is that members of gen Y are not loyal.

The truth is they are as loyal as any employee group; they just exhibit more courage than most in leaving a bad company or boss. If you hire according to fit, you can expect to retain your generation Y as long as any employee.

**3. False measures of successful recruitment** — The primary question, whenever recruitment becomes a strategic priority, is a demand for measurable ROI. But how do you measure something in advance of determining whether it has turned out to be successful? You can measure time-to-hire or cost-per-hire. I can advise on how to reduce those numbers. But doing so doesn't mean you will get more quality. Acquiescing to measure something that can't be measured just to look robust about numbers puts us in a hole. We need to speak up and offer the facts about quality measures and avoid measures that are meaningless. We'll only be able to judge the results of successful recruitment and hiring through higher levels of retention and higher levels of commitment, loyalty, and engagement.

Ultimately, managers are the main cause of good retention. People don't leave companies; they leave their immediate boss. Salary and benefits are rarely the reason. If a manager does not hire for fit, the employee is less likely to stay. In such cases, chances are, the manager him- or herself was hired or promoted without regard to fit. If you select or reward the wrong behaviours, you're guaranteed to perpetuate the recruitment problem. And you'll be feeling like you're reliving the past when the rains come, and wash your office out.

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• *The Talent Edge: A Behavioral Approach to Hiring, Developing, and Keeping Top Performers* (John Wiley and Sons, August, 2001)

• *Inside the Box: Leading With Corporate Values to Drive Sustained Business Success* (Jossey-Bass August 2006)

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