

Features

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Hiring for the Long Haul

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Labor shortage. Two words no employer wants to hear, particularly right before hiring season. However, if you've started your hiring process already, you may be coming across a climate that favors the candidate because of shortages in the workforce. With unemployment at 4.7% nationwide, some of the lowest figures we've seen in 10 years, the hiring game gets a lot trickier, particularly when you're looking to hire not just seasonal employees, but game-changing, long-term employees who you hope will stick around.

I talked extensively about this issue with Suzanne Kludt, director of human resources at Al's Garden Centers & Greenhouses in Portland, Oregon, and founder of HireHorticulture.com, a match-making website for hort industry companies and prospective job candidates.

"It's definitely completely different in 2017," she notes. "You've got to change your mindset. It's no longer what we call 'the post-and-pray method.'"

"Two years ago you would receive several hundred applications and pick through them, taking your time, and that's just not the case anymore."

Changing the Mindset

Most retail garden centers and greenhouse operations can't add tons more money to the financial offer to attract talent. So what's the solution? We in the horticulture industry have to become better marketers and show candidates the opportunities available for them. That means HR needs to take some lessons from the marketing department when it comes to writing job postings.

"When interviewing or going out looking for candidates, it's more about talking about your culture and the type of people they'll get to work with," Suzanne says. "People really want to feel a part of something."

That's means brag a bit. She mentions one garden center that built a garden on top of a children's hospital, which really made the employees feel good about their jobs (and rightfully so). If you're giving back to the community, and you're enriching your employees in the process, make sure potential job candidates know about that. In other words, it's about the intangibles of the operation, not necessarily the dollars and cents. Let them know they could be a part of something bigger.

Once a candidate comes in for an interview, have them interview with possible future teammates who are happy at their jobs, too, Suzanne recommends. They'll get a better feel for the job and your employees can reinforce the culture.

A New Day

The luxury of two and three interviews or interviewing dozens of candidates may be a thing of the past. The one key Suzanne stresses is if you think you've found the right person, pull the trigger quickly and make the offer. Don't let them get snatched up by a competitor or another industry. Again, it's quickly turning to an employee's market out there.

In fact, more and more of the entire employment process is turning to favor the employee, including the review process. Suzanne says it's less the boss telling the employee what their goals are and where improvements are needed to understanding what the employee would like from their job and what kind of goals they would like to set for themselves. Also, 2017 is the year bosses say thank you more. Make sure the ones who've stuck around know you appreciate them.

"Be open. It's all about improvement. They're the ones in the trenches," she adds. "It's all about asking, 'What are your goals and how as a company can we get you there?'"

It's all about being challenged and having room to move forward. If an employee has no room to advance in the company, they aren't going to stay very long.

Be Flexible

This is going to be a difficult one to hear, but with labor shortages and little room to move on wages, employers have to be flexible in other areas, like vacation time and work/life balance.

"You've got to look a little bit deeper for what you can do to attract that person," Suzanne says, giving the example of a retail professional who's been at their job for years and has accrued three weeks of vacation, but would only get one week if they moved jobs. If an employer wants experienced workers, they're going to have to acquiesce to candidate requests to match vacation time.

Work/life balance is also a key, particularly with the Millennial generation. In a survey last year by Ernst & Young's Global Generations Research, lack of flexibility was one of the top reasons Millennials would quit a job. "You don't want to be the company where I've worked really hard for you and I've missed every single one of my kids' soccer games," Suzanne says. "If we're building culture, you want to have some flexibility.

"When you say you have a family atmosphere, you want it to feel like that instead of just talking about it. Anything we can do to show people we care about them."

Benefits—That Tangled Web

Not every operation can offer every benefit, like health care, dental, paid vacation, etc. There are many small retailers or growers who just can't afford it. And that's okay, as long as you're within the federal guidelines. But be honest and transparent about what you can offer. If you can provide a stipend, or even just resources for finding health insurance, make sure you go the extra distance so candidates know what they're getting.

Also, there are benefits you can offer that cost the company next to nothing, or even nothing—it's just facilitating benefits. For example, Suzanne notes dental insurance is a minimal investment for a business, and long- and short-term disability group policies can be paid either by the employer or the employees. Most importantly, make sure the HR person is a resource for employees—Suzanne says to consider them the customer service department for all employees.

Back to That Job Posting

So now that we've covered all of these aspects, let's return to that job posting you're about to hit send on. Does it detail all of the hard work an employee must be able to do? You know—"Must be able to lift 50 lbs." and "Stand on their feet for eight hours a day"? Sure, that's part of the job, but it's not the whole job. Look over your posting again to make sure there's some aspect of it that would entice someone to apply, besides pay and hours. Be transparent. Talk about your business and the role the candidate would play in achieving the company's goals.

Think marketing and how to capture someone's attention as you're writing that job posting. Reach out, have some fun with it. Suzanne recommends videos of the team or just pictures. Something to show it's a great work environment.

"They all have choices. We're all paying about the same," notes Suzanne. "So what makes me choose 'A' company over 'B' company?" **GP**