

I've Been Thinking About . . . Finding & Keeping Good People

How can you be sure you hire the best people? How can you keep them happy?

By Martha Golensky

A dedicated workforce is your most critical resource. It's too important to leave to HR specialists. Even if your organization is large enough to have an HR department, you and other organizational leaders must stay involved.

Successful nonprofit managers find ways to bring the best people aboard. They're also mindful of what it takes to retain those people. Staff turnover's expensive. It's not just the costs of replacing an employee that can destabilize your organization. In addition, clients may be inconvenienced when a staff member leaves. Other employees may feel a sense of loss, diminishing their performance.

In an organization where I was a program director, cronyism influenced many personnel decisions. I was the unfortunate beneficiary of one of the CEO's "reclamation projects" when he hired someone at a friend's request and assigned him to my department. Although it quickly became obvious the man not only was unqualified but also had a drinking problem, it wasn't until he caused an embarrassing scene at the annual dinner that he was let go. Employee morale suffered greatly.

In addition to high staff turnover and low morale, poor personnel choices can lead to lawsuits by disgruntled employees and ex-employees. Litigation can have a devastating effect on your bottom line and your organization's reputation.

How do you find and keep the right people? Step #1 is to make sure you have up-to-date job descriptions for all positions. Be sure these descriptions include the desired characteristics and qualifications of the person to fill each slot. Lay out clear hiring guidelines that are fair and meet all legal requirements, and be consistent when implementing them.


You also need to put careful thought into your hiring procedures. Who will be involved in hiring decisions? How will you advertise openings? How will the process unfold? Establish rating criteria to distinguish the best applicants from the others. Be sure to follow the same interview protocol for all candidates. Think of employee recruitment and selection as public relations for your organization, and put your best foot forward.

Although some nonprofits use standardized tests to gauge knowledge, personality, and technical ability, nothing replaces a well-crafted interview for exploring candidates' past experience and the likelihood they'll fit in. Avoid simple informational questions. You'll gain more valuable insights by asking applicants how they would handle hypothetical but likely situations, such as the loss of a major funder or revamping a program that isn't pulling its weight. Before making a job offer, do a thorough background and reference check.

Perhaps the most important hiring and retention questions are these: Do employees' beliefs mesh with your organization's values? Do their jobs meet expectations? To get a better sense of what people want from the work they do, consider Edgar Schein's concept of career anchors. Everyone, he says, has a list of basic needs. But for each person, one of these needs is more important than the others, and that primary need will anchor the person to a particular job.

For example, someone whose main need is for safety will be happier in a stable, secure job than in a career that's riskier and less predictable. People who put autonomy first will look for employment that lets them work alone and make their own rules.

Workers who want lifestyle balance will seek out jobs that let them have flexible hours and a full life outside of work. Those who are service-oriented care more about making a difference than making a big paycheck.

If people's basic needs aren't met, they won't find their work rewarding and are unlikely to stay long. If they do stay, their unhappiness will lower overall morale and productivity. Match their needs with their jobs from the start, and you'll have a workforce you can count on for the long term. 

“Do employees' beliefs mesh with your organization's values?”

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