

Frontline Views

To keep tabs on some of the more visible trends taking place in the industry, *CropLife* asked some industry insiders to share their views on these subjects.

Employee Concerns

Finding, hiring, and retaining top people can be a challenge. Here are some tips for keeping this issue at bay.

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As principals in a private equity firm focused on agrifoods, we are often asked how we will find and manage employees in companies in which we invest. This is a critical question, since we firmly believe that the value of most businesses is largely derived from the quality of the people they have recruited and retained. We sat down recently at the request of the *CropLife*® team and highlighted some of the practices we think about when trying to locate, evaluate, and retain great employees.

Locating Potential Employees

Of course, many companies use the newspaper to recruit employees, or its more modern equivalent, online job listings on the Internet. While those methods may work, you can also waste a lot of time with people who aren't even remotely a fit for your business. We have five favorite non-traditional sources we like:

■ **Current Employees.** One of the best sources of finding employees is through your existing ones. They know the business and should be able to represent it well to others. Current employees also have an added incentive to identify people who can really get the job done — because if new hires are not carrying their weight they will pay the price! Having/earning a reputation among your current employees for being a great place to work will attract people to your organization without you actually having to recruit. Consider a “bounty” for current employees who recruit others to join; just make sure payment is contingent on them staying around for a while.

■ **Former Employees.** Many times an employee jumps to another

the grass isn't always greener on the other side of the fence!

■ **Business Professionals.** Networking with other business professionals is a good way of keeping your eyes and ears open for candidates. Your bankers, attorneys, accountants, and consultants can help recruit for you if you take the time to tell them what you are looking for and ask them to keep their eyes open.

■ **Associations.** Professional membership associations are a great way of meeting talented people. Even if the people you meet are not looking for a change they may know of other people who are. Even local service organizations like Kiwanis or Lion's Club can be a source of leads, and many organizations (like a CFO forum) will let you e-mail the entire group announcing a position that is available.

■ **Professional Recruiters.** Particularly for senior and mid-level employees, developing a relationship with an experienced recruiter can be highly valuable. These people are professionals with many contacts who spend nearly all their time searching for people; once you have built a relationship with them they can often

substantially reduce the time necessary to find the right person.

Evaluating Potential Employees

By using some of the sources mentioned above you can actually make the interview less about screening people out and more about looking for the five key personality characteristics we look for in new team members:



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job and it turns out to be far less than he or she had hoped. Whenever current employees choose to leave, treat them well and ask them what you can do to ease the transition ... and genuinely mean it. They'll tell everyone they know because so few companies practice this! Also, stay in touch with all of your alumni in a positive way ... you just might get the ones you didn't want to lose back when they realize

■ **Cultural Compatibility.** Try to envision how a person's personality will work with your team. Are they optimistic, positive people who will lift your team up, or are they "glass half empty" people who look for the rain cloud in every silver lining? Work-related behavior and motivation profiling tools such as Myers-Briggs, Forte, and Predictive Index can be used to predict compatibility. Weeding out people with an oversized ego, for example, can avoid lots of internal chaos (and loss of good people) later.

■ **Fire In The Belly.** There is really no replacement for a strong work ethic. People who are just plain focused on getting the job done will fit in immediately and will be embraced by quality teams.

■ **High Integrity.** Integrity is not a sliding scale from honest to dishonest; it is more like a light switch — you are either honest or you are not. Often people's anecdotes about totally non-work related things provide many clues as to whether "fudging a little" is a way of life. If they cut corners in the rest of their life, do you really think they won't at work?

■ **Willingness & Ability To Learn.** Always look for strong signs of intellectual horsepower — you can't make people smarter once you hire them. We often hire someone who seems very bright but has little experience in our business. Almost

as important as brains is the willingness to learn new things. For many jobs it is the people who can roll up their sleeves and want to learn new things that excel.

■ **Problem Solvers.** Look for people that know how to solve problems and that can demonstrate high accountability. We've all had the experience with shrugged shoulders from folks who "did their job" even if the result was poor, or who have said "that's not my job." You want people who worry less about exactly what their job is and more about exactly what the company is trying to accomplish.

Keeping Great Employees

Of course, the best way to manage the whole employee recruitment thing is to never have to do it in the

first place, by not losing great employees. We have observed 10 common characteristics in companies that seem to be able to retain great people over time:

■ **Candor & Communication.** Nothing keeps employees motivated like managers who communicate openly about where the company is and where you are headed. Make sure every employee in the company has a perfectly clear understanding of the company's goals and objectives and understands exactly what his or her role is in accomplishing those goals and objectives. Don't hide your views on the strategic challenges facing the company — most employees are already there and probably have a much scarier view of what could happen than you do. Blending candor about where you are with optimism about your plan moving forward keeps great employees focused and challenged.

■ **Care & Flexibility.** We are all on this Earth for an incredibly short time. During that time, your business

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should not be anyone's top priority. Employers who take a personal interest in the lives of employees (e.g., birthdays, kids, parents, etc.) over time experience greater employee loyalty and less turnover. In addition, being flexible enough to let someone work from home with a sick child or maintain flexible work hours, for example, can be the key to allowing motivated employees to gain some balance in their lives while meeting rigorous work deadlines.

■ **Training.** Training does two powerful things for companies. Its core purpose, of course, is to allow employees to conduct the company's business more efficiently or effectively. But it also sends a subtle but important message to employees that you value them and are willing to in-

vest in developing personal skills they can take anywhere. Invest heavily in training — it improves both employee loyalty as well as the bottom line.

■ **Measurement.** We are constantly amazed at how many otherwise great companies do an absolutely abysmal job giving employees feedback on their performance. Companies must provide measurements/metrics that clearly define expectations and are aligned with overall company strategic direction. Deep down, people want to know how they are doing. Companies that invest the time to allow people to perform better through feedback are rewarded with more loyal employees.

■ **Replacing Underperformers.** It may seem odd that a key to keeping employees is firing employees, but that is the truth. Your best employees know who is not performing, and their morale slowly declines as they see themselves "picking up the slack." This is particularly problematic when some of those underperformers are managers who take credit for the hard work of great employees while not pulling very hard on the oars themselves. Many agribusinesses seem to value loyalty over performance. Companies that are willing to remove or reassign poorly performing people often see a huge spike in the morale and performance of the rest of the team when they realize

management really is paying attention to who moves the needle.

■ **Opportunities For Growth.** One of the most common reasons we hear from people leaving a company is "I just didn't have any room for growth there." Great managers are smart enough to see when employees need new challenges and personal growth to keep them engaged and focused. Letting employees take on new challenges, and then being patient as they struggle through those new roles, builds incredible loyalty and commitment among employees.

■ **Walk The Talk.** Great employees like to be part of teams where performance and hard work are valued more than status or class. Companies where ownership is on "autopilot" and not pushing very hard for the compa-

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ny to succeed are highly de-motivating for employees, particularly the best ones. Companies must celebrate “servant leaders” who create a sense among employees that teamwork and extra effort are more than talk.

■ **Skin In The Game.** Many family-held businesses have done a good job treating employees well but failed to align their goals with shareholders. Great employees need to be monetarily rewarded with the business success — weekly, monthly, quarterly, or yearly depending on the position and impact to the success of the organization. Top management should become stakeholders with equity upside. Family businesses need not worry that they lose the ability to pass on their company to the next generation — these days there are many tools (e.g. phantom stock) that can give employees a stake in the upside without creating family ownership or transition problems. Employees with a share of profits are motivated to grow profits, not just collect a paycheck.

■ **Grow Your Business.** Imagine two scenarios — a growing business where everyone works very hard but new markets are being developed and the future looks bright, or a mature, tired business that is playing defense and trying not to lose. Where would you want to work? The best way to retain employees is to have a vibrant, growing business that people want to be a part of.

■ **Have Fun.** Human beings have an amazing ability to tolerate hard work, strategic challenges, and business obstacles when they are enjoying themselves. Create a sense of humor, joy, celebration, laughter, happiness, etc. — make it fun to come to work and don’t take yourself too seriously. After all, life’s a bit like a game of Monopoly — when the game is over, all the pieces go back in the box! ▶

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