

Winning the war for talent

Creative strategies for recruiting and retaining staff

In today's tight labor market, you may find it hard to get and keep top talent. Nonprofits can have the disadvantage of less-competitive pay and fewer benefits than for-profits. So it's essential to employ more creative recruitment and retention strategies, while playing up your organization's strengths.

Choosing — and leaving — nonprofit careers

People pursue nonprofit careers for generally intangible reasons. They may come on board for the meaningful and challenging work, to serve the community, and to help others. Their reasons for staying often are intangible as well. As focus group participants in a 2004 study conducted by the Initiative for Nonprofit Sector Careers reported, "family, flexibility and fun" keep workers in the sector.

By contrast, people leave nonprofits for reasons that are more tangible. Low pay, reduced or no benefits and long hours were cited by the nonprofit leaders and staffers who participated in the Initiative study.

While the intangible rewards of nonprofit work can be enticing, the drawbacks may push otherwise interested and qualified people from the sector. Certainly, bringing pay and benefits into closer alignment with the for-profit sector would be ideal. But what if your organization lacks the resources to do so?

Recruitment ideas

Traditionally, nonprofits have relied on networking to fill staff vacancies. Word of mouth, employee referrals and drawing from your own ranks remain some of the most effective ways to recruit. But it may be time to deepen your applicant pool. You might want to:

Target students and recent grads. The 2007 National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) Recruiting Benchmarks Survey showed that employers recruit nearly 32% of new college hires from internship programs. Establishing intern positions at your organization can be a great way to attract individuals with a passion for your cause. And, it can help them envision the possibilities of a long-term career with your organization. Internships also allow you to assess a candidate's skills and fit for nonprofit work before making a permanent offer.

Developing relationships with local colleges is also important. Of the participants in the Initiative study focus groups, only 30% used college career centers as a recruitment tool. This appears to be a lost opportunity. Making the right contacts — say, with a department head from the public administration school — can put you in touch with top candidates. Although these relationships take time to build, the benefits of doing so can be worth the effort.

Recruit volunteers. Not only does enhancing your volunteer ranks increase your capacity to staff programs and events, it also provides a great source of job applicants. Volunteers who apply for permanent positions already are committed to your mission, are familiar with your vision and understand your culture. Plus, a volunteer-turned-permanent-hire usually can hit the ground running more quickly than an outside recruit.

Consider employees with for-profit experience. Many retired baby boomers, midlife career changers and new immigrants are looking for a more meaningful work experience. Be sure you aren't unnecessarily ruling out candidates with for-profit experience because you can't match previous salary levels. Instead, pick the most qualified people to interview, tell them the pay scale upfront, and let them decide whether they still want to pursue the position.

Take advantage of technology. Nonprofit-specific job boards, which usually are free of charge to employers and prospective employees, can be a cost-effective recruitment tool. Post your openings on sites such as www.opportunitynocs.org, www.idealists.org, or www.nonprofitcareer.com.

Retention strategies

Once you have the right people on board, how do you ensure they don't take their training and experience elsewhere? Consider creating an entry plan that helps new employees understand and feel fully vested in your organization. Introduce new recruits to other staff members, actively teach them the culture and make them an integral part of the team from day one.

You'll also want to define a career path for all employees. Lack of a defined career path can be particularly frustrating to junior staffers. Without positions to aspire to, they may leave for greater challenges. Even if your organization has a small staff with infrequent openings at the senior level, creating opportunities to gain new knowledge and experiences can go a long way toward keeping junior employees engaged.

Further consider that the majority of job seekers are looking for a better work-life balance. You might offer flex time (where employees pick the work hours that best fit their schedules), telecommuting options or different types of compensation — such as more time off. Younger workers tend to be particularly appreciative of these types of benefits.

Play your strengths

In the end, your best recruitment and retention tools are your mission, vision and culture. Play up organizational strengths throughout the recruitment and training process, and the best fitting candidates will be more likely to follow.