

Airport Consulting

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Making Your New Hires COUNT

By Grice Whiteley, Principal, Grice Group, LLC

Remember a few years back when the industry was cranking out domestic airport projects and firms and airports couldn't get their hands on enough qualified people to employ? Things have slowed down considerably since that time, but recently, as the industry seems noticeably busier, many firms have found themselves returning to the old adage 'good help is hard to find.'

The new reality of a leaner (though thankfully authorized) FAA Airport Improvement Program sets an important framework for firms as they continue to manage employee hiring. With the new fiscal environment, it's even more critical to make the correct hiring decision because there are not as many staff positions to be filled. This emphasis on hiring talent sets up an interesting dynamic, though: When a vacancy does occur, how do you select the right person for the position? If you have a large enough talent pool in-house, how do you groom individuals so that they can stay with the organization and progress into greater areas of responsibility rather than seeking opportunities elsewhere?

Part of this process needs to be the realization that change is a natural and healthy part of any organization's life-cycle. Most people who are in leadership positions will eventually start to implement a transition plan so that the next generation can take over. Those who have spent five to ten years drawing door details, counting automobiles or designing pavement sections will need to move into more managerial roles of greater leadership and visibility.

Does your organization have a plan in place to deal with these changes? Given the population demographics, there are a huge number of Baby Boomers and a much smaller number of Generation X members. Gen X is waiting in the wings to take over for retiring Baby Boomers, and the Millennials, as the generation after Gen X, are growing out of their entry level positions and looking for the next step up.

A healthy organization can help create a culture of opportunity for its existing employees in-house if it does several things:

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Give them a chance. Provide greater roles and responsibilities. Introduce your staff to clients and give them more project responsibilities to manage. Of course, they'll need oversight as they ramp up and transition into greater positions of responsibility, but hopefully this management of staff is something your firm is doing anyway. Without a chance to advance, they'll be headed for the doors — or at least be open to people seeking to lure them away who can offer them a chance to do what your firm won't.

Give them visibility. Send them to conferences, allow them to be trained even if your competitors will be there, and allow them to have an online presence. One particular firm wouldn't allow younger employees to have individual business email accounts or voicemail. When asked about it, the principal expressed concern that "people like you" will approach them and lure them away. Trying to watch over the shoulder of every incoming and outgoing message seems a bit overwhelming and creates an atmosphere of distrust. In this day of social media, have policies that give freedom to your staff to be active in the industry. What kind of culture are you creating if you distrust your own employees and convey that you fear that they'll run for the doors if only they knew about the outside world of competitors in the industry? By the way, the people at the firm mentioned about restricted emails and voice mails perceive the principals as domineering and paranoid, and would generally look for ways to move on to a healthier and more well balanced organization once the timing is better. In other words, the strategy to keep these folks is backfiring.

So, send your people to conferences and let them see how the industry, and the relationships formed in it, works. A great event for developing staff is the Airport Planning, Design & Construction Symposium. Another method to encourage their professional development is the ACC Young Professionals Forum.

Give them a future. Provide an appealing career path within your company. Meet with your staff and give them feedback on their performance. Millennials

especially thrive on feedback. Take advantage of their eagerness to be part of a team and contribute to the bigger picture to groom your next generation of employees while you can. If they see opportunities to play important roles internally, they'll be happier, more productive and less likely to leave.

There will, of course, be employee retention issues. People get married and move away, spouses get transferred and headhunters come knocking. The inevitable truth is, as people progress through their career they meet more and more people at other firms and airports, creating relationships that can be cultivated through online social media that may result in job offers.

In fact, your company may soon have openings to fill. When you do find yourself having to make a hire at a time when job opportunities are at a premium, making the right selection is critical. Make the new hires count. How does your firm stack up in these areas?

Brand Perception: How does the industry perceive your firm (or airport)? Cookie cutter? Political? Sweat shop? Well balanced? Successful?

Visibility: Does your firm participate in the industry in a meaningful way? Is it consistently winning work? Are big names joining the firm or is it suffering from a long string of departures?

Online Presence: Is your website polished and professional? Does it represent you well and make a good first impression to people you might be wanting to recruit?

Outreach: Who is inquiring about people's interest in joining your firm? No offense to friends in Human Resources, but if you aren't having your aviation people make the initial contact with experienced prospective recruits, you're missing an opportunity. Do people get responses when they express interest in a position your firm has posted on its career page? Many firms post a solicitation

to fill a position, but drop the ball when responding to a talented individual with genuine interest.

Hiring Process: When you line people up that you might want to hire, then what happens? Many times the process drives things, rather than the end goal of getting someone — the right person — on board. Some firms are big fans of personality testing before hiring, but recruiting studies have shown that the technical fit is not the majority of what makes someone decide to hire someone. Data has suggested that the hiring official will make a decision about the suitability of an individual in the first five minutes, and spend the rest of the time together in an interview justifying to himself or herself why they feel that way about the person they're interviewing. In other words, the hiring decision is oftentimes largely emotional.

Social Media: In an age of 'wired people' with a dominant online presence, it's quite easy to see what contacts you might have in common with someone through a site like LinkedIn. That isn't a site for people simply looking for work, it's just a networking site, and not everyone is there. But it could provide a way for you to find out who might be able to give you inside information about someone you're about to hire. Do be careful though, because in this litigious society, if someone gets word that they were not hired because of what someone else said who wasn't an official reference, it can get the hiring official in trouble.

It's easy to hire someone who can feed themselves work and bring clients with them. The bigger gamble is hiring someone who you hope has the skills and personality to help grow your practice. Recognize what skill set you want to hire and see how the cultural fit will be with your organization. Many skills can be taught or improved upon, but an introvert isn't going to suddenly become extroverted just because you need them to be.

CONCLUSION

Are there still fewer hiring opportunities? Are you making your new hires count? It could be argued that the time of fewer hires is behind us. As the economy improves, those who have held off filling positions due to uncertainty or instability in the industry will be making their

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moves. There may have been a season of fewer people voluntarily changing positions to climb the career ladder, but you can bet that as conditions improve, there will be a pent up demand for change that will affect your firm.

Combined with demographic shifts in the working population such that there are fewer people in the workplace, there may be quite a bit of new hiring happening in your future. Many firms have become more aggressive and competitive in their recruiting and compensation, even smaller firms, and your next hire could be more costly and more difficult than you anticipated. Make sure you take the necessary steps and make your next hire the right hire. ➔

Clinton Webster (Why the Y?, page 5) is a project engineer with Foth Infrastructure & Environment in Johnston, Iowa. Clinton attended the 2013 ACC/AAAE Airport Planning, Design and Construction Symposium in New Orleans, Louisiana and participated in the ACC YP program, where he was selected as the winner of an article in this magazine. The networking and specialized sessions geared towards young professionals at the Symposium are an integral part of the newly formed ACC YP Forum. The YP Forum is for employees of airport development firms that are under the age of 35 and/or have less than 15 years of experience in the industry. The goal of the Forum is to familiarize YPs with ACC's unique role in the industry and provide networking, mentoring, education and career growth opportunities. For more information about the ACC YP Forum, visit http://www.acconline.org/c/a/YP_Forum.aspx.