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TECHNOLOGY

Increase Your Batting Average In Employee Recruitment With Technology

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[Note to sole practitioners: Even if you don't intend to hire new staff, this article will help you develop a game plan for leveraging technology for your personal benefit.]

I'll be the first to admit that technology can't solve all of the problems of the world; in fact, it is the catalyst for some of them. However, when it comes to solving the top problem facing accounting and tax practitioners — getting and keeping quality staff — technology plays a very significant role. This article will help you understand why and how you should put technology at the top of your recruiting and retention strategy.

Time is NOT money, time is time For as long as I can remember, people have proclaimed “time is money,” and nowhere is this ideology worshipped more than in the accounting profession, where money earned is directly tied to hours worked. Fortunately (or unfortunately), depending upon your perspective, the younger generation entering the profession understands that “time is time,” and that it's more valuable than money. They also have a very keen sense of awareness of the opportunity to leverage technology to maximize the use of their time. Whether it is to carry on five separate conversations simultaneously via instant messaging while typing a term paper on their PC,

or listening to their iPod while taking their daily 10k run. Conversely, they see an organization that doesn't understand and demonstrate the value of technology to get things done faster and better as being out of touch with today's reality, and is, therefore, a company that is not on a path for future growth where challenging career opportunities await them.

I'm not an HR expert, but having a pool of 15 nieces and nephews ranging in age from 13 to 31, plus a couple of teenage kids of my own, gives me a nice "control group" for observing what makes them tick and what doesn't. Here are some of the key observations I have made about the younger generation in the workforce and technology:

- They like to work hard and play hard. This means they are looking for access to all of the tools that can help them get the job done quicker and better. In other words, they want to optimize their personal productivity.
- They like spontaneity in terms of being able to do things on a whim. This means operating in an environment that affords them maximum flexibility to get the job done at a time and place of their choosing. This is a tough concept for us Baby Boomers to accept.
- They are capable of having solid working relationships and team camaraderie without working face to face. Their mastery of cell phones, instant messaging, e-mail and personal portals is the next best thing to being there. By the way, they expect to be able to connect instantly, using these tools, to their co-workers and supervisors.

The point of all of this: You need to understand the potent value of the role technology plays in recruiting and retaining the kind of people who are going to help you move your practice forward. Let's take a look at how you can position technology as a key enticement to new recruits and compete effectively with the large firms in recruiting new staff, as well as to keep your existing staff engaged. The following is an outline for a 10-point plan for you to put technology at the forefront of your staff recruitment and retention strategy:

1 — Don't try to be something you're not

Let's start on a solid foundation. If you don't have a really compelling story to tell about how you leverage technology in your firm, don't try to mask the truth. Instead, make a commitment to build a digital practice model, and send a clear message to potential recruits about what you intend to accomplish and why you need them to help you get there. If you are sincere in communicating

this type of message, it may be the most powerful weapon you can use to compete for new staff. Everyone likes to feel like they are making a difference and to be a part of building something special.

2 — Establish an anytime, anywhere technology model

This may be easier said than done, but for a myriad of reasons this should be a key strategic objective of every firm. In regards to recruitment and retention, it expands the pool of potential prospects who will want to be a part of your team. There are two basic ways to accomplish this: Implement a remote access solution such as Citrix or MS Terminal Server to provide remote access to all of your software applications and data or leverage web-hosted solutions for all of your key applications (tax, trial balance, document management, etc.). Either approach will help you achieve the objective.

3 — Automated Workpaper (AWP) System

Going paperless is not some obscure concept anymore; it's a real practice model that provides compelling benefits. An automated workpaper system allows your staff to perform all trial balance related engagements in a truly paperless workflow model. Tools such as CaseWare, ProSystem fx Engagement and Engagement CS are some of the more commonly used solutions. This may not be the easiest initiative to undertake, but the ROI can be substantial.

4 — Document Management System (DMS)

Document management goes hand in hand with AWP systems to develop a paperless practice. The DMS replaces ALL of your paper filing systems for tax, audit, specialized services and practice management. You can't provide a paperless work environment without a DMS. If you want to develop a true anytime/anywhere practice model, you'll have to become paperless.

5 — Instant Messaging (IM)

This may be the easiest initiative to implement. Yahoo!, AOL and MSN all offer instant messaging services. Like any method of communication, instant messaging has its pros and cons. But you can be sure that if you let recruits know that it is a part of your technology strategy, you will likely get some bonus points on their score sheet. Give IM a try with your family and/or your existing staff so you can develop a comfort level with it; you may find it very helpful. IM is the method of communication used about 30 percent to 40 percent of the time with our team at CPA Crossings.

6 — Web Conferencing

This is a “must have” for every tax and accounting firm. Once you discover how effective and inexpensive this tool is for communicating with clients and staff, you will wonder what took you so long to embrace it. You can get an “all you can meet” subscription for less than \$40 per month.

This is an easy way to clearly demonstrate that your firm embraces state-of-the-art technology. If you can only pick one initiative on which to focus, web conferencing would be at the top of my list.

7 — Broadband Connectivity

Don't be penny-wise and pound-foolish when it comes to choosing your data communications service. Whether you think time is money or time is time, the bottom line is that faster data connectivity translates into less time spent waiting. If you want to take it to the next level, wireless broadband is now available in many metropolitan areas to take your broadband access to the field with you.

8 — Dual Monitors

Your initial reaction is that this may be a frivolous expense, but if you ask any practitioner who has used dual monitors for more than a month or two, chances are you'll hear an unabridged testimonial on the virtues of making this investment. I believe it is currently the one technology initiative that provides the greatest ROI for accounting and tax practitioners in regards to individual productivity.

9 — Website

I'm assuming you have a website. The question is how appealing and useful is it? In the area of employee recruiting, having a web page dedicated to postings of employment opportunities with your firm has become the rule rather than the exception. Even if you don't have a specific position available, you should provide an opportunity for website visitors to submit their contact information and their interest in joining your firm. Whatever you do, be sure to respond as quickly as possible to any such inquiries.

10 — Portal

Implementing a portal as an extension of your web page is another way to demonstrate to prospective recruits, as well as to your clients, that you are a firm that leverages state-of-the-art technology solutions. Providing employees the ability

to enter timesheets, expense reports, CPE attendance and other personnel-related information online via your portal will be directly perceived as another aspect of your firm that will let them save more time as well as allow them to work anytime/anywhere.

If you develop a technology strategy based on these points, you will be well on your way to having a powerful recruiting message that yours is a state-of-the-art firm.

Final thought

It's a pretty safe bet that in any conversation among HR pundits in the accounting profession, the topic of work-life balance will quickly surface. The concept, of course, is that employees want to balance their commitment to work with their commitment to their personal life. This is essentially shorthand for a desire to work fewer hours, which has some positive implications for both the individual and the firm. I contend, however, that the real opportunity exists in providing a work-life integration culture. Work-life balance implies that there is a black-and-white relationship between being on the job or off the job. This is in direct conflict with the 24/7 way of life to which we have evolved. Work-life integration on the other hand refers to establishing an environment where the employee can have greater control over when and where they do their work. Let them be the captains of their schedule so that they can work and play according to their self-defined schedule. I realize this is radical thinking for many of us who grew up as Baby Boomers, but we are living in different times. And if you buy into the assertion that the new workforce likes to work hard and play hard, then a work-life integration model will appeal directly to the market you are trying to recruit and put you one step ahead of your competition. And every step is a giant step in today's competitive staffing market.

Good Luck! ☐

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