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As unemployment drops, build a bench to keep your business on track

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By James S. Cassel

As unemployment continues to drop, how can you attract and retain the quality employees you need for continued operations and growth? Already, middle-market business owners are complaining of challenges finding skilled people — ranging from top brass to rank and file. Without them, growth slows.

If you are having a hard time with staffing, you need to invest in solid recruiting, training and mentorship programs to cultivate talent from interns and trainees while continuing to promote from within. This will enable you to build a bench of up-and-comers who will grow to become tomorrow's superstars. But the work is never finished. Once you have elevated them, you will have to find ways to keep them motivated so you do not lose them to competitors.



Following are practical tips based on our experience helping middle-market business owners meet their talent needs.

- **Create a culture of learning:** Job training, education, apprenticeships and internship programs are key. While President Donald Trump has talked about this a lot, he has not done much to advance this in any meaningful way.

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- **Locally, if you are expanding your business,** you might turn to The Beacon Council or other agencies for assistance finding money available for job training as well as incentives for hiring additional personnel. An important point to note related to internships: Mind the laws and how any changes could impact you. Currently, interns must receive college credit or get paid for their work. However, there is some talk about loosening the legal requirements. Last thing you want is a problem.

- **Hire the right interns and apprentices:** Carefully screen for those with potential to eventually become full-time employees. There are tests. If your industry requires specialized knowledge, such as manufacturing or logistics, you will need to be open to recruiting folks with minimal practical knowledge. Just make sure you hire those with a demonstrated appetite to learn.

Focus on interns and apprentices who have intelligence, a good work ethic and the appropriate personalities for your company culture. Look for those who are eager, enthusiastic, willing to work hard and go the extra mile. As an added benefit, this approach enables you to “try before you buy” and minimize the likelihood of hiring mistakes.

- **Provide compelling reasons to join your company:** Beyond offering a competitive compensation package and positive workplace environment, you must roll up your sleeves and help train your hires.

Properly onboard them, meet with them regularly, and educate them. Just as important, develop a relationship with them. Give them mentors and assign them someone to shadow. You cannot expect a newly hired individual to magically learn through osmosis and start bringing value to your company on day one.

- **Institutionalize your operations and training:** Corporate “how-to” manuals with step-by-step instructions for performing job tasks, including everything from procedures for dealing with sales prospects to procedures for operating machines and equipment, can help train new employees and increase the effectiveness of existing ones.

- **Keep an eye on available U.S. visa programs.** This evolving area has been a great resource when quality talent has not been available in the U.S.

- **Promote your company as a great place to work:** Pursue media coverage, awards and other opportunities to showcase your work environment and business success. This can help attract new employees, including experienced folks who have been out of the workforce for a while, and also build morale to retain existing employees. If you build it, they will come.

Building a strong team takes time and effort, but it can bring significant value in the near and long term while giving you a significant edge over your competitors. It may be the difference between growth and stagnation.

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