



An Engineering Company's Greatest Assets Are Its Employees - Hiring and Retaining the Best

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1.0 Introduction

Talented resources are not only a service engineering company's greatest asset, in many ways, they are their only asset. Hiring, developing, and retaining the best employees is a great challenge, one that gets more difficult each year. With high speed communications, a shortage of engineering talent, and a global marketplace, top employees are given nearly an endless choice of career paths, employment opportunities, and technology focus.

The author has spent twenty-five years in the industrial automation and systems integration field, both as an employee and as a business owner. He has seen first-hand the challenges and rewards of developing younger engineers, maintaining an experienced staff, and retaining top talent.

The "Ten Keys" to successfully staffing and maintaining a service-oriented organization, such as an engineering services company, are:

1. Obtain a "talent acquisition" mentality.
2. Develop a corporate plan and vision for growth.
3. Market your company as an "employer of choice".
4. Hire for talent, not for filling open positions.
5. Grow your talent through focused development.
6. Make mentoring your key to retention.
7. Give credit where credit is due.
8. Mix it up: strive for a balance of experience levels, strengths, and talents.
9. Encourage a healthy life-work balance.
10. When employees talk, listen!

These "Ten Keys" are easily tailored to any organization or business type. A specific firm's plan for implementation should take on that firm's personality and style. However, in each case, the substance of the plan will contain common traits, regardless of type of firm or style. This course will focus on how to implement the "Ten Keys" to help make your organization thrive.

Valuable employees and top talent require attention, development, and grooming throughout their careers. The organizations that realize the benefit and worth of developing and retaining their best talent are the ones who will ultimately find long-term stability and growth.

2.0 Historical Background

The world is a much different place today than it was 25 years ago. When the author began his professional career in 1981, the personal computer has just arrived on the scene. There were no flexible working hours or job sharing. Telecommuting was unheard of. Outsourcing was not feasible. Designs were on paper, typed and drafted by hand. But things were built, and built well. Plants were constructed and instrumented and started up.

We coveted our jobs and worked hard to maintain them. Corporations were the best places to work because they had all of the money and resources to make a young engineer's career grow and expand. Training was paid for and mandatory. Attendance on the job every day, at starting time, and without excuse was expected. Vacations were taken in one-week blocks, at a minimum. Promotions were prizes for which there was no equal.

It was easy for corporations to hire and retain the best people. There were not the choices that exist today. The employee had a feeling of lifetime employment which came at the expense of loyalty and trust to the employer. Companies were not democracies, but they were "family". Remember Ross Perot funding and carrying out a successful, private mission to Iran to rescue two hostages who were employees of his company? That was the ultimate in mutual loyalty that existed between company and employee which was a hallmark of the era which ended not too long ago.

With the advent of personal computers, cheap long-distance air travel, and telecommunications advances, it has become much easier for employers and employees to view each other as commodities. The fierce loyalties and trust that existed between corporations and employees no longer exists. Small, efficient, privately-held companies have risen in number and power, giving entrepreneurs the same rewards once held for a chosen few corporate executives. Cheap labor overseas and a global commodities market have forced companies to expand their horizons and to challenge long-held business models.

But one thing has not changed, especially in service-related industries like engineering services. People are your greatest asset, and in most cases, your only asset. For example, Systems Integrators may sell software products, methodologies, or other tangible items, but at the core, most all revenue booked by Systems Integrators comes from the sweat and labor of its employees.

Hiring, developing, and retaining the best employees is a great challenge, one that gets more difficult each year. With high speed communications, a shortage of engineering talent, and a global marketplace, top employees are given nearly an endless choice of career paths, employment opportunities, and technology focus.

There are many strategies an employer can implement to make sure that top talent remains in his or her employ. Most people are resistant to change, especially when it comes to employment. However, they will gladly pursue a position in a different firm if they feel unappreciated, neglected, underutilized, or

threatened. This course will describe a set of “Ten Keys” to finding, hiring, retaining, and delighting your top employees.

3.0 The “Ten Keys” to Successful Hiring and Retention of Your Top Employees

From experience, every employee has a unique set of talents, goals, desires, and needs. The way an employer addresses these unique attributes to a large degree, will determine how the employee performs on the job, how they feel about their working life, and how likely they are to return the next day. In short, developing and retaining good employees requires a plan and a focus on those policies and programs that will help keep your employees happy and productive.

From the author’s experience, there are “Ten Keys” to successfully staffing and maintaining a service-oriented organization, such as an engineering design company. These “Ten Keys” could, however, apply to any organization or business type. The “Ten Keys” can be and should be tailored to your organizational style and personality.

3.1 Obtain a “Talent Acquisition” Mentality

Employees come and go for various reasons. For one employee, a spouse may be transferred to a distant city. A daily commute is too much for another. Another may retire. For others, a “better opportunity” comes along. It is a just fact of business. How the organization reacts to this reality varies from company to company. Does your company wait for an employee to resign before kicking the recruiting efforts into high gear? Are you reacting to the news that someone is leaving, or are you pro-actively looking for talent continuously?

Having a “Talent Acquisition” mentality involves planning and foresight. It gets the owners and employees in the frame of mind that “we are always looking for talented engineers and programmers” to fill future needs. That’s right, future needs. Getting the organization on the lookout for talent and having that “Talent Acquisition” mentality can lead to filling unsuspected vacancies with quality, talented individuals when the need arises, rather than with a “warm body” who just happened to be available when the opening occurred.

Plan a replacement for every employee in your organization. Who will replace you if you were to become incapacitated tomorrow? Who will lead that important project if the Project Manager decides to take a job with that upstart biotech company? Does a professional baseball team wait for a pitcher to be injured to have a replacement in mind? No, they know how to juggle the rotation in the event that someone is injured. Why, because they are always on the lookout for talent; when a need arises, the talent is already in-house! As an engineering services company, you need that same frame of mind.

Planning for talent acquisitions before a need arises allows you to hire the right people [1]. Most often, we take great care in choosing a spouse. This is someone who will be with us daily and work side-by-side with us in raising children, maintaining the household, and sharing in our dreams, assets, and

responsibilities. How many of us take the same care in choosing employees? One interview, or maybe two, for a total exposure of two or three hours is all we allow ourselves. Could we choose the right spouse given those same constraints? Having a “Talent Acquisition” mentality will allow the organization to tailor their hiring practices to give them the edge in finding the right people.

3.2 Develop a Corporate Plan and Vision for Growth

Do you have a plan to grow? Or do you just a plan to survive? Or, perhaps, you have no plan at all. Plans require thought, foresight, and a will to execute them. The only way your company can grow is to hire and utilize the right people. Remember, your employees are probably your only asset. If you want to increase the assets reflected on the bottom line, you will have to increase your staff. Increasing staff in a smart way requires diligent planning.

Planning is more than stating, “We want to double our billing revenue in the next two years.” That is a goal, not a plan. Planning says, “In order to double our billing revenue in the next two years, we need to hire three experienced Project Managers, five mid-level programmers, and four entry-level college graduates.” Even that is not a complete plan, but it is a start. In what sequence do you hire these individuals? What training will they need? What types of projects will they work on? All of these need to be considered in your plan.

When a business goes into a bank looking for a loan, they need a business plan. The plan must be more than “We want to grow”. It must show how the business intends to obtain the growth rate they expect, how to pay for it, and what obstacles are in the way. They must convince the bank that their money will be invested in a company that is likely to give them the return on investment they are looking for. The same goes for an engineering services firm, like yours. Convince yourselves and your employees that your plan to grow is backed by sound logic, a set of key clients with interesting project work, and a plan everyone can participate in and profit from.

When employees see that there is a structured plan for growth and a way for them to grow and develop within that plan, they are much more likely to support the company vision and want to remain a part of it. This vision sometimes is the key to retaining your top employees.

3.3 Market Your Company as An “Employer of Choice”

Even with the best plans in place and a mentality that has your organization “trolling for talent” constantly, there is no guarantee that the best talent will be attracted to your company. Therefore, you need to find a way to become an “Employer of Choice”. A few years ago, Roger Clemens returned to the New York Yankees. He is one of the top talents in baseball who wanted to play for one of only three teams. He had a list of his “employers of choice”.

Your organization can enjoy the same reputation. Be an “Employer of Choice”. Get to the point where people want to work for you and where top talent comes asking to work for you!

Roger Clemens wanted to go with a winner, a team he felt on which he could make a difference. The New York Yankees were that team. He also wanted to keep his local options open. The Houston Astros fit that bill. He had pitched for them previously, and knew they were a quality organization. Is the best talent in the industry looking at your organization in the same way? Why not?

Roger was looking for a winner, team with a vision, and a team with a good reputation. Roger Clemens did not make the Astros or the Yankees those types of organizations. Those organizations made *themselves* that type of team! It took years of hard work, hiring the right people, investing in the right resources, and taking corrective action, where required. It took building a reputation of excellence, one where lesser players would not survive. These two teams were not always in the World Series, but they have always had a reputation of being a place where a player's career could be enhanced.

So how does one become an "Employer of Choice"? The author believes that it takes the planning and vision described previously, mixed with a dose of hard work and ethical business practices, with a dash of luck, and a pinch of good marketing. Hiring the right people to begin with coupled with a sound vision and plan for the future will probably generate all the enthusiasm and positive word-of-mouth you will need to get the word out that you are an "Employer of Choice". Good reputations are earned and built, not bought.

3.4 Hire for Talent, Not for Filling Open Positions

Your firm always has at least one job opening. That opening is reserved for the person with top talent and skills that would enhance your organization. It does not matter if there is work available at the moment to assign him or her to. It only matters that you have hired the top talent. If you have the best people, the work will come. If it doesn't then perhaps an underperforming resource should be let go. In either case, your organization benefits from the move.

Hire talent into your organization to make your organization better, not to fill an "open" position because someone left. That takes no planning and exhibits no vision. That is purely reactionary and is a hallmark of a mediocre company. How many teams would have jumped at the chance to hire Roger Clemens, even if it meant sending someone to the minors? Most likely, all of them! Why? It is because top talent improves your organization, regardless of the present circumstance of the company.

3.5 Grow Your Talent through Focused Development

The previous four items were focused on locating, attracting, and hiring the right talent. The final six of the "Ten Keys" will focus on retaining that top talent, and just as importantly, developing all of your talent into "top talent".

Development of talent is not synonymous with training. Training is an important component of development, but development requires much more. Many organizations do not take development beyond training, and as a result, cannot figure out why after investing so much time and money in

