

A New Wake-Up Call for Community Colleges

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America is about to experience the greatest labor shortage in its history. Unless your organization prepares for this impending national crisis, it will be severely restricted from meeting its mission. If you can't afford or attract qualified nursing instructors, your college can't teach nursing. If you can't retain qualified administrators, your college's leadership will weaken. Consider these facts:

- The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that there will be 168 million jobs in our economy by 2011, but only 158 million workers will be available.
 - American employers are facing a crisis in finding skilled workers.
 - According to an Associated Press story, Siemens recently received 1,000 applicants for 500 new manufacturing jobs, but only 35 had the skills necessary to perform the job.
- America's hospitals and public schools are already desperate for skilled workers and teachers.

Community colleges are not immune to this growing labor and skills crisis. I have written this piece as a wake-up call for community college leaders to position their colleges for success during this nation's looming labor and skills shortage.

America is already experiencing a labor shortage, and there is a skills gap that is growing as technology jobs replace lower-skilled jobs that have become obsolete or have moved offshore. Skilled workers, of which there are already too few, are more independent and mobile than ever. If chief executive officers don't give increased attention to the business of human resources, their strategic plans will be useless. If human resources personnel don't understand and connect the organization's strategic plan to their worker acquisition and professional development plans, their efforts will not be productive.

The survivors of the labor and skills shortage will be those who strategically position themselves to meet their future human resources needs. Smart colleges will prepare for and succeed in attracting, developing, and retaining peak performers throughout the tight labor market we are about to experience.

Demographic Realities

Even though unemployment in the United States is currently hovering around 6 percent and 3.9 million jobs have been cut from 2001 through 2003, close to 500,000 new jobs have emerged in the first two quarters of 2004. The consequences of a tight labor market will begin soon. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that there will be 168 million jobs in our economy by 2011, but we will be short 10 million workers (Cam

Report, 2004). Labor economist Tony Carnevale predicts that the supply of labor is about to fall very short of demand. A serious lack of skilled workers will begin in 2005 and grow to 5.3 million by 2010 and to 14 million by 2015. If the need for unskilled workers is included, the shortage will be 7 million in 2010 and 21 million by 2020. The shortages will be most acute among managers, who are approaching retirement, and skilled workers in high tech jobs (Kaihla, 2003).

Baby boomers are retiring in record numbers, and there are not enough people in succeeding generations to fill the need. Further, the pressure to find and keep skilled workers is becoming serious in 2004 and will get progressively worse. American public and private organizations, including community colleges, are facing the dual challenge of decreasing numbers of workers and decreasing worker skills.

Employers are understandably concerned about the lack of labor and the skills gap between their needs and the applicants' skills. A chapter by U.S. Senator Tom Harkin in a recent League for Innovation publication points out that America is facing a dramatic crisis in the workforce arising from a worker gap, a skills gap, and a wage gap (Harkin, 2003). A recent white paper published by the National Association of Manufacturers reports that the manufacturing sector has lost 2 million jobs in the recent economic downturn, yet 80 percent of large and small manufacturers report a moderate to serious shortage of qualified applicants (Keeping America Competitive, 2003).

What To Do About It

While community colleges are being increasingly depended upon as the solution providers for these labor-force issues, they are also facing the same challenges. Our colleges must first address our labor issues before we can expect to assist other employers with their labor problems. Many community and technical colleges are reacting to these challenges while sustaining serious budget cuts. Fortunately, these colleges can help themselves and other employers in their communities by learning to successfully attract, develop, and retain peak-performing employees, even in these austere times. Most managers and business leaders lack the knowledge that is necessary for acquiring and keeping skilled employees. This situation provides a wonderful market opportunity for astute community colleges, even as they attend to their own labor needs (Zeiss, 2003).

At Central Piedmont Community College, the president's cabinet and principal human resources and research personnel have held two retreats to better position the college for the anticipated labor and skill shortage. Indeed, the college has already experienced challenges in attracting qualified applicants, including nursing, health science, and trades-technical faculty. We have had to postpone the beginning of new programs in building maintenance technology and in manufacturing because we couldn't find or couldn't afford faculty members. Fortunately, we are well on our way toward developing a good succession plan, and our professional development program is very effective in growing our own leaders. We have also developed a two-plus-two teacher education program with the University of North Carolina at Charlotte as one means of establishing

a reliable supply chain of teachers.

Attracting Peak Performers

The most important step in attracting peak performers is to set it as one of the college's highest priorities. Once this strategic step has been accomplished, use your college's expertise to

- Establish a broad reputation for being a great place to work,
 - Establish a reliable worker supply chain,
 - Provide competitive compensation and incentives,
- Closely match candidates' abilities to the job profile, and
- Support your employees the way you support your students.

Developing a worker supply chain is critical to your college's success. Posting a nationwide advertisement and hoping to attract top faculty and administrators is no longer a reliable method for attracting peak performers. Many colleges are now strategically identifying and encouraging skilled people to apply for positions. Existing faculty members and administrators can be your best source of information for qualified candidates.

If you haven't reviewed your hiring procedures, your compensation plan, and your benefits package lately, I recommend you do so as soon as possible. It is wise to include a broad sector of your employees in these processes. Someone once asked me how to determine which benefits he should adopt that would help his college attract and retain good people. The answer is simple: Ask them. Our college has conducted two recent broadcast email surveys to our employees and held several focus group meetings to determine their needs and interests relative to compensation and benefits. This information is invaluable as we update our compensation and benefits plans.

Developing Peak Performers

If we hope to maintain our relevance as training providers, we must be best at training and retraining our own employees. Employees are the greatest assets of our colleges, and yet it is easy to take them for granted when we are traditionally so focused on students and the communities we serve. We must remember that our success in the professional development of all our employees is critical to the college's continued success. There are three keys to developing peak performers:

1. Effective and relevant training of all employees
2. Effective employee motivation activities
3. A supportive and caring environment

Besides the standard professional development activities provided by internal experts, astute college development units are continuously developing and sometimes hosting outside trainers to present the newest computer certifications, student learning

techniques, and personal development modules. These colleges also tie their training content to the strategic goals of the organization and to any new state or federal regulations that college employees need to know.

American workers have always responded well to recognition, a sense of belonging, and fair compensation. Today's younger employees are seeking these same time-tested worker motivators, but they are also searching for significance. Teachers have little difficulty finding significance, but classified staff and other nonfaculty may not find it so easy to find meaning in their professions. A research-based program of employee relations activities can be helpful. The four main motivators for employees are

1. Recognition,
2. A sense of belonging,
3. A sense of significance (making a difference), and
4. Fair compensation (salary and merit pay tied to achievement and productivity).

Retaining Peak Performers

The fundamental tactic for retaining peak performers is to hire the right people for the right jobs in the first place. The next important strategy is to treat them with respect, trust them, support them, and do what you promise. It is then essential to understand why your good employees leave and minimize the circumstances that result in voluntary separations. The most common reasons people leave their jobs are

- Distrust,
- Little or no recognition,
 - Feeling left out,
- Little sense of purpose at work,
- Inadequate compensation or no chance to make significant salary increases,
 - Poor work environment,
 - Poor supervisor,
 - Perceived job insecurity, and
- Perception of being undervalued.

Most people are gregarious and love to celebrate. The employees at my college just told us through a recent survey that we don't celebrate enough. They clearly said, "We are so busy serving others, we don't serve each other enough." We will be celebrating more this year! We are looking at adopting additional employee-relations activities and benefits beyond their compensation and merit plan. Many colleges now provide or are considering

- Personal amenities such as day care, fitness centers, dry cleaning, car washing;
 - Competitive pay and benefits including dental and eye care;
- Growth opportunities such as travel, professional development, and college tuition;
- Incentives including released time and seed money for research and new projects;

- Royalties for developing intellectual property (books, DVDs, research);
 - Flexible work schedules;
 - Single parent support plans;
 - Campus-based chaplains; and
- A friendly, inclusive environment that celebrates each other.

All of these suggestions are people centered, and therein lies the real secret for strategizing to be successful during a tight labor market: Treat people the way they want to be treated.

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