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Traci Tapani,
Stacey
Stratton,
Hudda
Ibrahim and
Mary Nutting

TALENT SEARCH

SMART HIRING IN A
MEGA-HOT MARKET »27

Low unemployment rates may require a little out-of-the-box thinking when it comes to hiring.

Exemplary candidates are few and far between these days.

That's not a knock on the quality of the labor force. It's a reflection of reality: Most working-age people who want jobs, have them. Between 2009 and the end of 2016, Central Minnesota job vacancies per worker dropped from 3 to 1.6, according to the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development.

Since then, conditions have only tightened further.

"With the state unemployment rate hovering at 3.2%, virtually everyone is having trouble finding the best people for their team," says Stacey Stratton, president and CEO of Edina-based True Talent Group. Hiring and retaining talent is the number-one challenge companies are facing today.

True Talent Group recruits marketing and creative professionals, and digital talent; it also consults with companies on job descriptions, strong salaries, the market and more. But Minnesota's talent crunch leaves no industry untouched. In the hard-hit manufacturing sector, employers have all but given up on finding their dream candidates — if they ever existed.

"We've not seen applicants with 'ideal' skill sets in quite some time," says Traci Tapani, owner and co-president of Stacy-based Wyoming Machine, a sheet-metal fabricator with about 55 employees. Welders, ever-prized in Minnesota's competitive sheet-metal industry, are in short supply. Workers with CNC-controlled press-break operating experience are



"needles in a haystack," and growing scarcer, says Tapani. Many followed sheet-metal manufacturers fleeing Minnesota; few remain in circulation locally.

TALK IS CHEAP

Minnesota is indeed facing a shortage of qualified labor. It's likely to persist — or worsen — as long as the economy keeps growing. What can employers do about it?

The first step, says Stratton, is to think outside the box.

"I say to clients, 'Hey, maybe the absolute perfect employee isn't out there, but you can bet there are lots of trainable candidates who want to work and are willing to learn,'" she

says. In other words, employers succeed in a tight labor market when they're willing to expand their conception of the ideal employee.

Don't call it settling. Think of it as prospecting for high-potential candidates who, with training, coaching and time, will reward you for taking a chance on them.

Here's how Minnesota employers and employment experts are widening their searches for promising prospects.

LIMITED OR INDIRECT EXPERIENCE

Candidates with limited experience, or experience in seemingly unrelated lines of work, comprise an obvious source of untapped talent. The catch: You need processes to



Mary Nutting and Stacey Stratton

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GROW INTO ROLES.”
—Mary Nutting, CorTalent*

identify high-apptitude candidates receptive to on-the-job training.

“When you only have a couple years’ work history, there’s not a lot of proven experience for employers to work with,” says Mary Nutting, owner and president of Bloomington-based CorTalent. “Candidate assessments help em-

ployers understand candidates’ potential to grow into roles.”

Nutting uses Prevue job-fit exams to ascertain aptitude and predict suitability for specific positions. The exams include three distinct assessments:

- » Prevue Numerical Reasoning Assess-

ment, a cognitive reasoning test that, Nutting stresses, is not an IQ test

- » Prevue Interests Assessment, which examines three “occupational interests” scales
- » Prevue Personality Assessment, a 13-scale personality test

Each assessment produces a “sten” score, placing the candidate’s results on a bell curve comprising the entire workforce. To determine fit for a particular role, employers compare candidate sten scores to benchmarks defining that role’s ideal characteristics. For instance, one of Prevue’s personality scales compares “diplomatic” and “independent” characteristics. The ideal benchmark range for sales representative candidates is more independent than diplomatic: the fifth to eighth sten, where the first sten is ultra-diplomatic and the 10th is ultra-independent.

Beyond assessments, Nutting encourages her clients to partner with high schools, community colleges and four-year universities to shore up candidate pipelines and increase their visibility among job-seekers with lots of options.

Wyoming Machine offers on-the-job credentialing opportunities in partnership with Pine Technical & Community College in Pine City. New hires spend several hours per week in a classroom on the company’s Stacy campus, watching lectures and demos at Pine in real time. The rest of their time is spent “joined at the hip” with veterans on the production floor, learning the ropes. Wyoming Machine covers their tuition and pays them a decent starting wage. “They’re earning college credits — and, ultimately, portable credentials” that will advance their careers, says Tapani.



Hudda Ibrahim

Sometimes, you may need to take a more active role in shaping talent. Maple Plain-based Protolabs' CEO, Vicki Holt, is a fierce advocate for the smart factory and cyber-physical systems, known as the next industrial revolution or "industry 4.0," says Renee Conklin, vice president for human resources at Protolabs. Holt sits on the board of Dunwoody College of Technology in Minneapolis, and her input shapes Dunwoody's high-tech manufacturing curriculum, providing a vital pipeline for a cutting-edge company that's trebled its workforce since 2014.

And there's no need to dismiss applicants whose work experiences might not seem relevant. Both Tapani and Conklin extol the virtues of employees with prior experience in foodservice, a high-pressure gauntlet that rewards fast thinking and adaptability. National organizations, such as Grads of Life pair employers with training providers serving young, driven candidates whose rich life experiences compensate for lack of traditional credentials.

TOO MUCH EXPERIENCE

It's easy to stereotype "overqualified" candidates.

"EMPLOYEES WHO DON'T
FEEL RESPECTED AND
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—Hudda Ibrahim

They're expensive; they're finicky; they don't play well with less experienced (often younger) employees; they resist coaching and training.

Not every experienced applicant fits the "overqualified" mold, though. Millions of older workers put off retirement out of financial necessity. Others continue working because they're not ready to retire. Not all seek senior- or executive-level positions commensurate with their experience levels; many are content to work under younger managers, especially if they've switched careers later in life.

"We're seeing more workers retiring in their 40s and 50s, then pursuing second careers," says Stratton. "Employers see them as valuable assets, as long as they're content with mid-level pay and limited advancement opportunities."

Contrary to popular belief, second careerists are often fantastic employees.

"Just because they're farther along in their careers doesn't mean they don't have passion, energy, drive," says Nutting.

Regardless of their official titles, older employees can serve as mentors and coaches for younger employees, adding valuable institutional knowledge to the mix. That's especially important in high-tech segments — where engineering aptitude or natural sales ability can't compensate for street smarts — and in manufacturing, where growing reliance on computational skills lengthens training periods.

BEYOND CENTRAL CASTING

Few employers admit, or even realize, that they have a "type" — that they prefer employees who look, speak and behave a certain way.

Vicki Holt



But just because they may not recognize their biases, doesn't mean they don't have them.

"Minority groups and people with disabilities frequently find themselves on the sidelines of the workforce or not rising on merit, due to barriers to gainful employment," says Wyoming Machine's Tapani. That includes women, she adds: Just one in five manufacturing workers is female. In her industry, it's even worse: Women comprise just 5% of the sheet-metal production workforce, though Tapani's production floor is 15% female.

"It has taken an absolute crisis for our industry to get to the point where owners are saying 'we need to recruit women,' she says, citing cultural resistance and gender stereotypes. "We try to create an environment where everyone knows they'll have an equal shot."

Hudda Ibrahim is principal at St. Cloud-based Filsan Consultant, faculty member at St. Cloud State University and diversity chair at the St. Cloud Area Chamber of Commerce. She helps midsize and enterprise businesses attract and retain emissaries of a changing Minnesota, notably first- and second-generation members of the state's East African community.

"These people are here, and they're already contributing to the economy: operating restaurants, shops, production businesses," says Ibrahim. "They came here from a war zone; they're ready to work."

Much of Ibrahim's work involves breaking down stereotypes, dispelling myths and mediating conflicts that arise from cultural misunderstandings. During Ramadan, for instance, she advises manufacturers running second and third shifts to send observant employees to lunch soon after sundown when it's time to break their daytime fasts. She demystifies fundamental cultural customs, too: drawing comparisons between prayer breaks and (probably more frequent) smoke breaks, both of which span about five minutes. Ibrahim and her company also translate employee handbooks and policy materials into Somali, lessening the learning curve for new employees not yet fluent in English.

These accommodations aren't difficult for most employers to make, and they're essential for morale and retention. "Employees who don't feel respected and valued, don't stay," she says.

SECOND CHANCES

Individuals with criminal histories comprise the most controversial candidate pool of all. Not surprisingly, they're sorely underutilized.

"Some employers have very strong opinions about hiring [people with past criminal convictions], but these folks are not un-hireable," says Tapani. Tapani sits on the welding advisory panel at the Minnesota Department of Corrections facility in Stillwater, where aspiring machinists and welders can enroll in technical courses and earn credits remotely — just like new hires at Wyoming Machine. Upon release, they're just as qualified as workers who successfully complete those certificate programs.

Wyoming Machine doesn't conduct criminal background checks, but Tapani knows of employees with past convictions, and she's willing to go to the mat for them. She sits on the Governor's Workforce Development Board, an executive branch body devoted to broad-based skill-building across the entire workforce, including post-release job-seekers. Her role on the National Skills Coalition's small- and midsize-employer subgroup finds her in Washington, D.C., several times per year, lobbying policymakers on Capitol Hill, senior leadership at the Department of Labor and White House policy advisor Kara McKee.

"The reception has been positive," says Tapani. Amid persistently low unemployment, second chances are possible. 🍌

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