

MAXIMIZING EMPLOYEE POTENTIAL

By Norm Bobay

Making use of only your employees' most basic skills is like buying a \$20,000 computer and using it only to type. Recent research by the Harvard Business School indicates that companies that invest in their people can expect growth rates 60 to 300% higher than those that don't. Three ways that companies can maximize employee potential is by: hiring the right people, offering ongoing training and development, and by regularly assessing the effectiveness of their programs and processes.

First: Hire the Right People

Many managers feel that hiring is a hit-or-miss process that too often fails. This is because they are using antiquated processes instead of much more effective systems that are now available. Too often people involved in the hiring process have not been trained in assessing potential employees, so they focus on what is easiest to assess: skills. Yet skills, acquired by education or experience, are the most changeable of an employee's many characteristics. A good consultant can provide you with tools necessary to assess other facets of potential employees, particularly attitude, behavior, and values.

More than 90% of terminated employees are released because of poor attitude. It is not that they *could not* do the job, but that they *would not* do it. An employee with a good attitude, but limited knowledge, can be trained to far out-produce employees with only adequate skills and a poor attitude. Tests are now available to assess an applicant's attitudes towards safety, drug use, theft, supervision, training, and more. These tests remove the applicant's "interview

mask” and can provide follow up questions for the next meeting. Evaluating applicants’ attitudes toward drug use is less expensive than testing for drug usage and it is harder for applicants to “beat” the test. Time limits and other safeguards keep the results valid.

Behavior assessments tell how an applicant would approach the job. Is the person punctual, a self-starter, people-oriented? Behaviors, unlike skills, do not change easily. A good test is 90 to 95% accurate. Assessing the values of sales and management positions is critical, because they are the motivators that make people successful in such positions. A good consultant can analyze the job or individuals already successful in the job to create norm graphs and determine which characteristics indicate probable success.

Second: Offer Ongoing Training and Development

Don’t let your employees stagnate. When asked what most employees want out of their jobs, managers say “money.” The truth is that employees want to make a valuable contribution to the success of the company. There is no better way to show your employees their value than to offer training and development. It does not have to be expensive or take workers off the job for great lengths of time. Most consultants offer traditional “classroom” type training, but there are other options.

For example, you may want to “reward” an employee who has been an excellent line worker by promoting her to a supervisory position. Her excellent attitude, behavior, and values do not mean she has the skills to supervise. She may need training in communication, diversity, delegation, sexual harassment, and other matters. A good consulting firm can provide

computerized interactive training, including modules selected to meet the needs of the individual and the job. The employee can work at her own pace, completing modules and reviewing her progress with in-house training personnel.

Third: Assess Effectiveness on a Regular Basis

How do you know when it's time to change a current program or process? Program or process effectiveness and adjustments should be conducted long before a process or program becomes irreparable. An opinion survey that only includes the perspective of management is incomplete, so it is well worth the ego-swallowing necessary to seek input from all your employees. But, be sure that management is committed to the value of employee input and willing to respond to the results. Employees who take the time to respond to an assessment instrument will be insulted if they feel that their opinions are being ignored.

Because of the need for anonymity, an outside consultant generally conducts opinion surveys. A good opinion survey instrument can be tailored to the needs of the company. Do you want to know how sales people feel about the production process; how line workers feel about benefits and training; or how office personnel feel about management? Results can be produced so that you know whether dissatisfaction with a particular area of operation is felt throughout the company or only by certain workers. These results can help with planning and goal setting.

Allow yourself the luxury of a few mistakes. When one employee development approach doesn't work, try another. Times change and what was once a successful approach in the past may be ineffective in a new environment. For example, the old hard sell used to close deals;

now customers expect sales people to behave more like consultants. Even after you have committed some time and resources to a particular program or process, don't feel "stuck with it" if it's not working. Remain open to new and better ideas. And by all means, get your employees input and maximize their potential.

