

## Staffing – Winning the War

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We don't have to tell you it's a competitive market when it comes to staffing mechanics and technicians.

Valerie Frederickson, however, a California-based human capital management consultant, goes so far as to call it a "war for talent." And you can guess who the casualties are.

"In this employment market, the paranoid and worried are the ones who will succeed," she says. "One manager will think, 'Oh good, I've hired someone, so now I can take a break.' But the other manager will be thinking, 'OK, now I have another good technician a competitor can hire away from me.'"

It's yet another challenge when it comes to staffing, and if you have concerns in that area, you're not alone. Fleet administrators say they're not sure where to find quality hires, they're not sure how to deal with cuts in resources, and they often face a lack of understanding from other departments about just how important their employees are.

"The problem is that the fleet business is not really sexy," says Danny Johnson, CAFM, fleet management director for the City of Scottsdale, Ariz. "We don't go out and maintain the streets, catch criminals or put out fires. But everybody needs to understand that if we don't take care of the equipment that allows those people to do those things, they're just not going to happen. People are always asking about cutting the budget, but until they reduce the amount of equipment they have, we can't cut anything."

Johnson paints a pretty dismal picture of staffing in the fleet world, one in which equipment gets more and more complicated, yet training and hiring resources do well to stay the same.

But all is not lost. Frederickson, for one, has some suggestions.

The key, she says, is thinking long term instead of immediate.

"Desperately hiring an employee today will just put out today's fire," she says. "But what about tomorrow's fire? It could be a lot worse." Those facing cuts in training budgets, for example, might consider teaming with other area organizations to pool expenses. They might also consider sponsoring classes in high schools and junior colleges, and working with newly released military personnel to help them find work.

"What about telling people with car hobbies that if they work there, they can use the shop on weekends for free? Or going to the Spanish-speaking community to recruit technicians that may not speak English, but could still do a really good job?"

Keeping up with the future will require creativity in the industry, she says, and a group of people willing to work together rather than just compete. The Swiss watch companies have offered a great model to

follow: Faced with a shortage of trained technicians for their high-priced products, a number of manufacturers have come together to fund free college educations for those willing to learn the art.

"Larger fleet companies need to think about what they can do that's similar," she says.

Johnson has already begun working with other Arizona fleet managers on solutions, creating training programs on electronics, fluids and the like that help fill in the gaps.

He's also fought hard to institute an Automotive Service Excellence (ASE) program for the organization's employees.

It's part of keeping them happy once they're actually in the door.

Of course, you've still got to get those employees in the door in the first place. And Frederickson has a few suggestions for that, too. First of all, she says, managers would do well to streamline their hiring processes, and be consistent each time.

"In addition, it helps to be able to know it when you see it," she says. "Experienced recruiters like me can make instant judgments on candidates through trained intuition. But that's something managers can learn, too. What you do is put together a psychological profile, like the FBI would do for a criminal. You ask yourself: What qualities would this candidate have? Are they high energy? What do they need to know? Are they interested in how things fit together? Maybe that person doesn't have polished communications skills, but for someone like a technician, that's fine. An engine doesn't get its feelings hurt if someone doesn't communicate with it the right way. But you do need someone who's tough and can handle conflict. Conflicts are going to happen when you have tough guys working together physically under deadline all the time. So maybe you're looking for someone who's tough but a good negotiator, a hands-on person with good problem-solving skills and a sense of competition, so they'll always be seeking out better, faster or cheaper ways of doing things."

But don't stop there. It's important to find the right person for the right job on all levels, Johnson says. Consider parts people. With so much automation, they can search around the world for parts. But still, you want someone who knows the ins and outs of exactly where to look and what channels to go through.

"A parts person is really serving a technician," Johnson says. "They may be paid less, but they're still critical. You can have the best technician out there, but if the support for that person is inadequate, it's not going to matter."

Frederickson also suggests making recruiting a team effort among current employees.

"Train people on your staff to help you do it, and reward them for helping you fill positions," she says. "If you can say to the other technicians, 'We need two more people and this is why,' and, 'We'd like to get you involved so let's talk about what we need this person to do and what we'd like this person to be like,' that helps a lot. Ask them if they're willing to talk about how great a place it is to work, too. And then, let them know there's a bonus for everyone at the end. Say, for example, that if you fill two positions, you'll take everyone out to dinner. Chances are, your good employees can talk more about the success of your organization than you can possibly imagine."

And as a result, they just might be willing to enlist and help you win the war.