

Surfing the staff market

This time of year traditionally sees me busy with staff selection. Its predominantly driven by the dairy industry preparing for next season - but there have been a number of projects in other sectors that have given me a good feel for what is going on labour market.

My thinking about the challenges of attracting people was further stretched as I sat in a recent midweek business meeting at a venue overlooking a popular local surf beach. I was struck by the army of twenty something year olds enjoying a late summer surf. As I grappled with the labour market these possible applicants appeared to have an entirely different agenda!

It will be no surprise to anyone recruiting staff that the supply of people is very tight. Securing staff at all levels is demanding increased creativity and new ways to connect with target markets as those traditionally available are diluted by an aging population and changing ideas on work and play.

This has got me thinking about what is required to succeed in this vital area of management. While few would dispute that the market is tough, I am also conscious of a number of clients who continue to thrive despite this.

These operators seem especially good at networking and building relationships with potential applicants that they can draw on to attract staff. They maintain contact with past employees, their friends and social networks. These businesses have a deliberate strategy to offer quality career opportunities. Being a popular employment choice is a real plus in a difficult market.

This approach doesn't come naturally to all managers. It's important to realistically assess your strengths and weaknesses in this area. If you are to be a credible employment option your attitudes to and outlook on employment relationships will need to be upbeat and optimistic. There is no room for negative views about the work ethic of the modern generation or perceived unrealistic expectations for reward, time off or work conditions. As with all market driven aspects of the business, success depends on going with the flow rather than resisting the tides of change.

Tight supply also demands new skills to get the best from applicants with less experience, different backgrounds and diverse cultures. I am working with an increasing number of teams staffed by recent immigrants or new entrants to the industry. There are some very pleasing success stories built on those with the personality, skills and qualifications to adapt to the New Zealand environment or a new industry surprisingly quickly.

Capturing that resource means a different way of thinking and communicating. It means making it possible for such people to succeed and understanding that mutual commitment to progress can pay real dividends. Overcoming language or cultural barriers and being proactive about investing in the right people is all part of the skill set required of a modern employer.

Job sharing, greater use of casual staff and investment in technology also generate opportunities. Creativity to optimise people performance and capture efficiency through automation and simple systems is fundamental to making the best of a limited resource.

The reality is that low or flat population growth, greater choice and a generation Y outlook that seems to include being a teenager until at least age 40 means working smarter with staffing is the only option. The challenge is to get real, embrace change or scale back to a "one man band"

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