



managing a work force

Employment Practices

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Just-in-Time Talent Resources

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Even as companies dramatically reduce their workforces, the need to meet business demands continues. To respond to today's challenges, some forward-thinking organizations are creating more flexible staffing models that include a percentage of just-in-time talent resources.

Why now

In the current economy there is interest in taking advantage of talent on an as-needed basis to fill in gaps created by layoffs.

But Kimball Norup, chief marketing officer for M Squared Consulting, a consulting industry pioneer and recognized leader in the field of flexible human capital, finds what is going to happen long term of greater significance.

The long-term trends indicate that the flexible workforce will grow even more, Norup tells *HRWire*.

As you look at it, three dynamics are at work, he says. The actual workforce is changing; the nature of work is changing; and the workplace is changing.

Although the temporary or contingency staffing model used to apply to production environments, these changes impact the way companies tap into the talent of knowledge workers.

Understanding the changes

With regard to a changing workforce, demographics figure heavily in the equation.

The fact that baby boomers are indeed aging can't be disputed. True, in light of the economy, some boomer employees have postponed retirement. But, as Norup points out, "the reality is, we can't fight age" and these workers will eventually retire.

Looming retirement of these key members of the workforce presents challenges for employers.

"They are today's executives and managers," Norup says. "They hold a huge amount of knowledge and experience."

The situation is further complicated by the size of the generation next in line. The number of Gen Xers in the workplace is dramatically smaller. It's not until you get to Gen Y that you have a cohort of the same size, says Norup. What results is a gap driven by demographics.

Factors like an increasing number of women in the workforce also contribute to change, Norup points out, because women drive the need for flexibility.

Immigration is likewise a hot button, he notes, indicating that it was once thought that knowledge workers could be imported. However, it has not turned out to be as easy or as convenient as originally perceived.

Outsourcing has not proved to be all that easy an endeavor either; and, in some cases, work that has been outsourced offshore is starting to come back onshore.

Temporary talent

Contracting with talented professionals on an as-needed basis is by no means a new concept. Companies have worked with consultants for decades.

What's different now is the availability of consultants, the caliber of consultant talent, and the types of assignments in which these individuals are engaged.

Take M Squared as an example. The firm has a network of 14,000 consultants that it matches with organizational needs.

Although M Squared serves a wide range of clients in the private and public sectors, the company's primary focal points are financial services, technology, and life sciences, which includes health care, medical devices, and biotech.

Within each industry are a variety of clients and various kinds of projects. Employers generally utilize the talent of consulting professionals on a project basis, whether on an individual or team basis. Professionals sometimes take on interim roles as well.

Operations management, HR, and marketing are among key areas where companies seek temporary talent.

Why not employ full-time professionals?

"Companies deal with the peaks and valleys of their businesses, and often can't afford to keep talent on staff," says Norup. "Many of our projects are of that nature, and we parachute in a seasoned expert."

The just-in-time talent model offers organizations a level of affordability as they gain access to an experienced individual who is versed in best practices and has an array of knowledge that can be readily applied.

There's a cost savings as opposed to hiring, Norup explains, because they buy the person only for the time they need expertise.

Many companies use the expertise for best practices purposes, to gather outside perspective, he tells *HRWire*.

Driving JIT

While lower costs and greater accessibility to high-caliber professionals are drivers of interest in just-in-time talent, so too is technology.

The fact that technology has allowed people to act on their desires for more flexibility has meant that the very nature of work has largely changed, Norup says.

Work has become unbundled, he says, and this allows work to be done in smaller and discrete segments. As a result, the scope of projects becomes clearly defined, which in turn makes it easier to convey deliverables to the professionals responsible for them, even if those professionals are not company employees.

HR professionals, for example, are brought in to a company to help establish policies and procedures. In other instances, they get involved in training projects.

There are a variety of opportunities in HR, as in other departments, to use the just-in-time talent model.

What should companies consider when looking at just-in-time talent as a solution?

"Companies need to start from a perspective of reality. The workforce has changed, and it will continue to change," Norup says.

Right now, as a side effect of the downturn, many baby boomers are continuing to work. Some will also work part-time going forward.

However, five or 10 years from now, when boomers retire, there will be a shortage of knowledge workers. At that time, there's likely to be a rude awakening on the part of a lot of companies unless they've planned ahead.

Meanwhile, however, there may be a more pressing need. Because so many companies have cut to the bone in order to cope with the downturn, there may be immediate staffing requirements as the U.S. economy recovers.

As Norup points out, the work still needs to get done.

The time, it seems, is ideal for organizations to think about the composition of their workforce.

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