FROM APPLICANT TO ENGAGED EMPLOYEE: MAKING THE MOST OF THE FIRST SIX MONTHS

BY CHRIS LENNON

TO PREVENT UNNECESSARY TURNOVER, *your company must understand the importance of investing in the hiring and new employee experience. By focusing on employee engagement from the start, retention rates will improve, allowing your organization to promote longevity across the workforce.*

HEY!

WORK WITH US!

Creating an engaging environment for new employees doesn't have to start on their first day – it can begin when they first engage with employers' brands during the recruiting process. Therefore, innovative construction companies realize the need to compete for and retain great employees from the beginning.

There are many benefits to engaging employees early. Companies with engaged employees see a boost in productivity and profitability of at least 20%, and companies with high engagement see an increase in revenue that is 2.5 times higher than their unengaged competitors.[1]

Fortunately, the cost to attain these improvements is at an all-time low. Technology that previously might have been too expensive for small and midsize companies is more affordable now, making it possible for organizations of all sizes to implement engagement-boosting processes.

Investing in the following five key influencers of an employee's first interactions with a new company can guarantee a hiring and new employee experience that will keep workers feeling supported, respected, and important within the fabric of the larger company:

1) Employer branding;

2) Quality of job listings;

3) Interview processes;

4) Onboarding; and

5) Early engagement efforts.
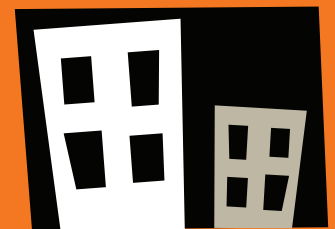
APPLY NOW!

Understanding Employer Branding

Many construction companies understand that corporate culture can heavily influence recruitment and retention. FMI's *2017 Talent Development in the Construction Industry Survey* reports that 89% of participating companies are facing talent shortages. It's imperative for contractors to make themselves stand out to potential employees from candidates' first engagement with their brands.[2]

Employer branding is the manner in which your company promotes itself as an employer and in turn, how it is perceived by potential candidates as a place to work. Even before the advent of social media, there was an expectation for companies to set themselves apart from the competition in areas such as location, company values, culture, or employee benefits.

Transparency in a company's branded messages is also important, as these are opportunities for your company to offer honest accounts of its values, mission, and vision. Be sure that these statements are easily identifiable on all marketing and promotional materials and on your company website. If potential candidates have to spend extra time searching your website to understand essential information about your company or flip to the back page of an informational pamphlet, then it's time to reevaluate your brand strategy.

It is also essential that your career page showcases your employer brand in order to further employee engagement. The career page is a great platform for employers to showcase company videos, employee testimonials, and activities that define company culture. It's critical that both brand and culture are represented accurately.

Social media has also become one of the most effective tools for employers to promote their brand to potential employees. Creating effective and accessible content for applicants is the key to a powerful branding strategy.

For example, if a construction company is seeking Millennial workers – the largest generation in the general workforce today[3] – then it must ensure that its application is available online, since these applicants search for jobs on-the-go via smartphones.

Modern job seekers will also use social media to better understand an employer's brand, so make sure that your company's Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Glassdoor, and other profiles accessible by job seekers are attractive and interesting to potential employees.

But, in order to ensure successful hires, honesty trumps attractive employer branding. Look internally to understand areas that should be showcased as examples of what makes your company excellent. In addition, take the time to notice areas that are lacking and make improving them a priority.

Job Listings

Your company should also prioritize writing and dispersing job ads to successfully target potential candidates.

Think about the language contained in your job ads – does it subtly exclude certain groups of potential applicants? Language bias, or certain exclusionary language, can make even the most qualified candidates feel they are not welcome at a company; it can also make minority groups less likely to apply.

Consider using neutral terms to make roles feel more accessible to a wider range of applicants. Specific terms, however, can be very acceptable in the body of a job ad. It's a best practice to include as many specifics as possible to help candidates really understand what the position entails.

The strategic placement of a job listing must also be considered when trying to reach as many qualified applicants as possible. Employers should have a clear picture of their ideal candidate, which in turn should help guide them to relevant job listing sites.

While industry-specific job boards can be valuable resources to find qualified candidates with related experience, it's also crucial to display job advertisements where diverse groups of people can access them. Diversity strengthens a company, and hiring candidates from unique backgrounds can drive innovation, efficiency, and improvements in company culture via fresh perspectives. Consider posting job ads on both industry-specific and general job boards, as well as sites reaching local universities and technical schools.

The job ad should point the candidate clearly to the application process, which should take no more than a few minutes to complete. Ensure that candidates can go through the application without difficulty, and observe any potential hang-ups or circular links in order to further promote a streamlined applicant experience.

Interview

The interview is usually the first opportunity a candidate has to spend significant time with a potential employer. Your company should treat the informational part of the interview as an extension of the job listing and its branding efforts; keep in mind that neutral, unbiased language, accurate job descriptions, and honest evaluations of company culture are key to a successful sell.

And while a candidate may interview exceptionally well, it is imperative to get an accurate picture of his or her skill set. For example, while a potential candidate may appear polished and professional, that same person may lack the basic technical skills necessary to successfully meet the position's expectations.

This is where an assessment of competencies come in. By interviewing with intentional questions, the manager will receive insight and understand a potential hire's behavioral responses – and the company will receive a better understanding of that candidate's strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for professional growth.

Candidate responses to questions that begin with, "How would you handle a situation in which…," can show leadership potential, problem-solving skills, and communication skills necessary for the available position.

Ultimately, a successful interview should feel more like a conversation and less like a question-and-answer panel. Interview guides are helpful, but the applicant shouldn't feel like they are being quizzed, and the interviewer should not feel limited by a list of questions.

Consider going into an interview with a list of information that the team needs from a candidate and maintain a conversation that covers those topics – as well as improvising with additional, intentional questions as needed.

If the candidate talks about working abroad, for example, it can be an effective technique to ask unscripted questions about that experience. This information could help the hiring manager better understand the candidate's problem-solving skills and personality. Unplanned conversations can also test the new hire's fit within company culture.

The interview also provides an opportunity to further reinforce a company's employer branding. Are there aspects of the company that make it unique from others in the industry? Make sure the candidate leaves knowing about those aspects.

Employers should also use this time to outline a company's plans for employee development, as that can be a huge differentiating factor for a candidate fielding multiple offers, as well.

According to FMI, 55% of construction companies do not have formal processes in place to develop high-potential employees.[4] By making the conscious choice to invest in employees, companies also choose to protect the investment they make in their workforce.

Many construction companies have adopted the best practice to have a consistent process in place for managers to discuss goals, performance, and training opportunities with employees. Managers can ask questions such as, "Where do you see yourself with this organization in one, three, and five years?"

Keep communication lines open with employees regarding additional training or new advancement opportunities. Both new and seasoned employees are more likely to stay when these processes are in place because they know their employer is dedicated to helping them become the best employees they can be.

Onboarding

One of the most common misconceptions about onboarding is that it begins and ends with the first day or week on the job. On the contrary, onboarding begins before the new employee's first official day on the job, and it continues long after their first week.

New employees need resources to help them learn to manage and complete their new responsibilities. Managers should be sure that those resources are readily available through a learning management system (LMS), handbook, or mentor.

On the first day of work, a new employee should have a ready-to-use workstation or jobsite and receive a warm welcome from existing employees. Managers and other team members should be available throughout the first days, or even first few weeks, to help troubleshoot as questions arise.

Take a few minutes to outline how to navigate the intranet, basic machine operations, or even where the nearest restroom is located. The sooner an employee feels oriented with the layout and systems of an organization, the sooner he or she will be engaged in the new role and with the team.

Onboarding should be an ongoing process of assimilation and understanding for both the company and the new employee. The new employee should feel supported throughout their first few months of work and that their work, even in the beginning, matters. New hires should also experience guidance and encouragement from their managers and team members, and even from those across the company.

Modern onboarding software can provide new hires personalized portals for them to be immersed into the company culture even more. Onboarding software also allows new hire paperwork to be handled ahead of time, keeping the first day from feeling like an endless train of signatures, policies, and rules.

Forms and disclosures can be sent out in advance of the employee's first day via e-mail or an automated system. This also makes documents easy to store electronically, saving the HR department significant time filing and retrieving documents when necessary.

Early Engagement

According to FMI's *2017 Talent Development in the Construction Industry Survey*, only 33% of employees are engaged in the workplace – so, there exists a significant opportunity for improvement in this area.[5]

To engage a new employee from the first day, a good first step is to make sure other employees know that he or she is starting. Invite the new employee to company events happening in the first few days so he or she can get to know people outside of his or her immediate team.

If using an electronic calendar, make sure that the new hire's calendar is synched with the rest of the department and company from day one. Create a culture of inclusion, which fosters engagement, by keeping new hires in the loop.

Mentorship programs can also help engage new employees from their first days at a company. By pairing new hires with seasoned employees in the same department, managers can create a stronger learning culture, empowering employees to ask questions and develop connections within teams so they can work more efficiently toward goals and project completion.

Create clear expectations and set goals with new employees within the first weeks in their positions to help them understand how their work fits in with the company's overall goals.

By making expectations explicit, managers help new hires clarify the responsibilities of their positions, especially when coming into those that have long been vacant. Setting goals also helps new employees feel productive in the first weeks and helps managers identify strengths and weaknesses for professional development.

Reward and recognition programs are also helpful in making employees feel valued early on and can help them understand how their work affects others within the company.

For example, a company can provide a new employee with slips of paper that employees use to leave notes for each other, thanking them for the day-to-day work they do. This would be a simple, low-cost way that could help employees get to know each other, and to reinforce the feeling that their contributions matter.

For those on a jobsite, surprising employees with snacks or lunch can go a long way toward creating employee engagement. This may be a more informal way that HR can reach out to employees who are always on the jobsite. Seeing that their work is valued by company leaders other than their direct supervisor can go a long way toward keeping morale high.

Conclusion

While six months may sound like a long time to develop a new hire into a loyal, enthusiastic, and engaged employee, there are many significant factors that must be addressed to guarantee employee success.

Investing in a new hire's first six months costs far less in both time and money than to replace unengaged employees who decide to leave the company. Managers and hiring staff play crucial roles in developing successful job listings and interviews, as well as offering guidance throughout the new employees' first weeks on the job.

By giving applicants and new hires the tools to confidently navigate the hiring and new employee landscape, managers can continue to foster an overall engaging and empowering work environment for all. ■

Endnotes

1. *news.gallup.com/businessjournal/163130/employee-engagement-drives-growth.aspx.*

2. *https://www.fminet.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Talent DevelopmentSurvey_FINAL.pdf.*

3. *www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/11/millennials-surpass-gen-xers-as-the-largest-generation-in-u-s-labor-force.*

4. *https://www.fminet.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Talent DevelopmentSurvey_FINAL.pdf.*

5. Ibid.

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