

Branding a special value

Training, rewarding and promoting staff are vital, as is getting bosses to walk the talk

BY RICHARD CHU

With a tight labour market, it's no longer enough to provide a competitive salary and comprehensive benefits package to attract the best talent to a business.

Employers are finding the next generation of workers is looking for an additional combination of tangible and intangible qualities in choosing from the many employment opportunities in the talent-starved workforce.

Many of these qualities are part of what human resources experts call a company's employment brand.

"In this market, it's important because of the shortage of skilled workers. If a person had a choice of 12 possible places to work, why would your company stick out and what would make it attractive for them to join you instead of the other 11?" said Cissy Pau, principal at Vancouver's Clear HR Consulting.

Some of the elements potential employees look for include:

- Special qualities of a company's corporate culture;
- How well employees are treated or rewarded;
- Good opportunities for advancement;
- Training and development opportunities;
- A company's corporate social responsibility policy.

"People out in the job market are the ones who are really in control and they're looking for a fit," said Henryk Krajewski, vice-president and national



Amber Roberts of Houle Electric, left, and Cissy Pau of Vancouver's Clear HR Consulting: "people out in the job market are the ones who are really in control and they're looking for a fit"

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consulting practice leader at Right Management.

Companies not only have to be successful in communicating their employment brand to potential recruits, they need to be sure they're genuinely walking the talk and following through on their claims.

He said the best companies that have a strong employment brand and are able to attract quality talent are ones where the president or CEO is directly involved, having created systems in the organization to nurture the values he or she wants to exhibit.

Companies can reinforce its values, not only in nurturing supportive relationships within an organization, but in how it rewards, promotes and trains its staff.

"There's a whole system point of view: reward recognition, performance management, succession management, leadership development and selection. On the very front-end of the organization, all of those things need to speak to what the organization stands for. If it doesn't, it can fall apart very quickly," said Krajewski.

When it does come together, companies can find their staff, not only con-

tent, but extremely productive. A Watson Wyatt study found that companies with a highly committed workforce outperformed companies with uncommitted staff by 200%.

Krajewski noted that these more emotional and intangible human resources issues are not just about making staff feel good, but ensuring the business maintains a consistent message to a company's clients.

"What's interesting about an employer brand is that it has to be very close to what the customer experience feels like. [Employees] are driving your profit, and having a compelling employee experience can deliver a brand promise to a customer."

A strong employment brand also helps with retention.

"While some people join companies for the job itself, the reason they stay isn't because of the job, necessarily, it's because of their boss. It's because of the culture, the colleagues and the people they work with," said Pau.

Burnaby-based electrical contractor Houle Electric has managed to not only attract new staff, but retain key personnel throughout the organization.

Amber Roberts, Houle's human re-

sources manager, noted that staff retention is very strong with the company, with many employees working at the company for more than 25 years. Despite a skills shortage in the trades, they've also been able to attract a lot of quality talent, about 20 new people in the past year alone.

Having a strong culture of trust between management and employees is one of the key elements to the company's strong employment brand that's been led by the company's president.

"Our reputation precedes us," said Roberts.

"Whenever I interview someone and ask what they know about Houle, anyone that's been in the construction industry is quite familiar with us. We have a reputation for being very ethical, very loyal and hardworking, so that helps us get people who are familiar in the industry."

For companies that have a strong employment brand, it's important to continually nurture it and ensure the lines of communication stay open with employees in the good and bad times.

Said Pau: "If you don't communicate the message the way you want it, the message is going to be created for you by your staff, by your reputation." ■