

New Strategies on Recruitment and Retention

Coping With the Staffing Crisis

By Sharon Youngblood

I wish you were with me in the conference rooms of countless consulting engineers over the past two quarters, as executive after executive wrestled with the reality that business growth limitation in today's economic climate is the availability of qualified staff. Old approaches to recruiting and retention are limiting growth of firms all over the country.

It is not a new situation. However, in most parts of the country in the last eighteen months, qualified staff shortages have become an acute problem. For specialty disciplines like structural engineering, the problem is exacerbated by the historically small numbers of graduates and potential hires as opposed to disciplines like general civil.

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The only thing that will avert a full-blown recruitment crisis for many firms is the recent worldwide shortage of cement and other materials. The combination of demand for materials from the Chinese, world disasters such as the Tsunami and the Gulf Coast Hurricanes, as well as new product innovations such as the diverting of asphalt liquid to the shipping industry for fuel, has created a worldwide shortage of certain materials used on projects designed by structural engineers. Material costs are up 25 to 30%. This will certainly cause delays in scheduled projects and in some cases will cause the projects to go away due to lack of funding.

While the material shortages are averting a total project delivery bottleneck in our firms, we are hardly in good shape on the work force front. In many parts of the country, especially in the west, firms are already carrying large backlogs and capacity is at the limit. However, even with projected projects reduced, most firms will still need additional experienced structural engineers just to keep up with the workload.

The competition for the best and the brightest, or even the experienced and the adequate, is fierce. What is your firm doing to ensure that you can keep growing and remain profitable? If you are relying strictly on growing your own, running advertisements in local papers and association newsletters or trying to pick an engineer off from your competitor, you can be sure that you will be left at the starting gate in this race for the qualified engineer.

How can you stay competitive and hire the talent you must have to grow your firm? First, you have to change the way you think about recruiting and retention. Rather than relegating these functions to the side of your business, they have to claim a central role in both your strategic thinking and your business plan. Too many firms do their strategic planning and as an after thought include the staff needed. The erroneous assumption is that "we will get the engineers we need."

The lack of emphasis on this important business driver is apparent when you consider how little marketing effort is expended in recruiting engineers. Marketing is about positioning your firm as the best choice for the business.

Consider how many employment choices structural engineers have in the current market. You need a plan to position yourself and provide a good answer to this question: "Given all the opportunities I have, why should I work for your firm?" The elusive experienced structural engineer needs to be marketed using the same focus and relationship building that firms have historically applied to securing projects.

Four things need to happen to be able to recruit effectively:

1. Change your recruiting approach – minimize the methods of the past.
2. Recruiting in 2006 is a function that should be considered a prime business driver and be taken on by the highest-level executives in the firm. No doubt, your most capable and experienced executives need to apply their talents to solving the most critical issue facing potential growth in your firm.
3. To recruit effectively, your top executives need to develop and implement a recruiting plan.
4. Use a multi-strategy approach

It is a myth that you will have the structural engineers you need to grow your business without your most talented people involving themselves in the planning and implementation of a carefully crafted recruiting program utilizing several strategies.

You have two choices. Change your thinking and your organization to put recruiting at the center of your business and solve the short staff problem, or join the hand wringers at the local association meetings lamenting how they can't get engineers. Which choice is your firm making?

Assuming you, as an executive, are willing to take on the task of making recruiting one of your central business drivers, how do you improve recruiting when there just are not enough structural engineers to fill the open positions? The solution to staff shortages is available to



the executives who do not depend on one-trick pony solutions. That is, a firm needs to have several strong strategies and approaches to solving the staffing problems. Some of the most successful strategies are:

1. Developing and implementing a recruiting plan
2. Work sharing
3. Outsourcing
4. Optimizing current workforce
5. Growing your own

The foundation for your plan, whether you are a small company or a multi-national giant, is to have a pool of qualified candidates before you need them. The following are the basic steps to begin to build and use your recruiting pool:

1. Profile the ideal characteristics for your positions and your firm
2. Use every tool at your disposal – networking, staff connections, etc. to identify potential candidates
3. Once candidates are identified, arrange to meet and start building a relationship with them
4. Keep your list “green” – be active with your relationship building
5. As positions come up, pull candidates from your list and actively recruit them

Companies are using many strategies around the country. One client collaborated with the local university and sponsored a special training program for structural engineers wishing to switch from one discipline to another. There was no guarantee of a job for participants, but the class was filled within two weeks with people wanting the training. After five weeks, the company not only had good relationships with strong candidates but they had an opportunity to observe and determine the best fit for their organization.

Other strategies that are paying off are work sharing between offices, if the company has more than one office. If the company is small and does not have multiple offices, very good sharing partnerships have been forged with “competitors” who do not directly compete. CAD services, as well as design, have been shared by two or more companies. If firms flex their thinking and entertain new possibilities, there are many creative avenues to explore.

Outsourcing is of limited use to firms that work in the public arena, although some firms serving public entities are using outsourcing services with a low profile. In the private sector, many structural engineers are using outsourcing. Whereas in other industries outsourcing is used for competitive pricing, in structural firms outsourcing is used by necessity. Not only large firms are outsourcing. There is no reason for small firms to shy away from this resource. Although sometimes controversial, outsourcing is arguably the way of the future and many firms are using this strategy to provide the staff they need.

Another area that is often overlooked by firms that are overworked by tight deadlines and too few staff is the idea of optimizing the workforce. That is, assessing employee capacity and behavior to determine the best fit for each employee. Firms that are optimizing are improving productivity by 20 to 55%.

Clearly all of the above strategies, and others we do not have space to mention, require planning and implementation time, money and energy. Those firms who overcome their inertia and invest in their future find the returns cost- and time-effective.

However, many firms *will not* make recruiting a central business driver and many *will not* get out of denial and *will* keep recruiting using the same old methods. This provides a fabulous competitive advantage to those firms who do recognize recruiting as a central business driver and do institute new practices. After all, the statistics are clear – we do not have enough structural engineers to fill the needed positions. Assuming moderate prosperity, that situation is not changing in the near future. If thinking about recruiting does not change, recruiting results will not change. If recruiting results do not change, growth is limited. It really is that simple. ■

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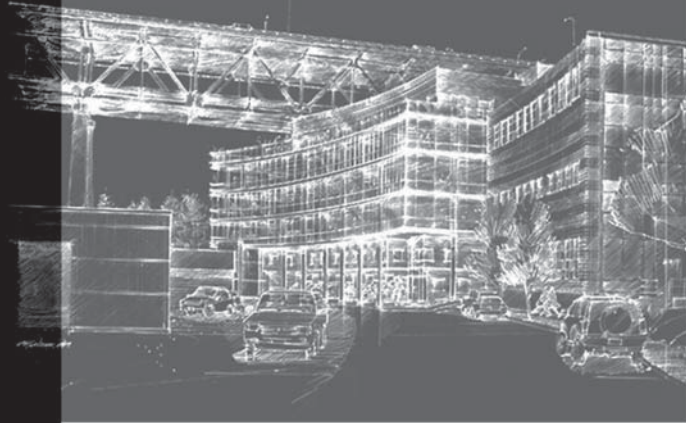
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