

# Pandemic Proof Hiring

By David Castlegrant

For the better part of the past year, almost all service-related businesses (retail, restaurants, personal care, etc.) have been experiencing a hiring crisis unlike any in recent memory. With unemployment at an all-time high and people still psychologically tied to lockdown mentality, people do not bother to apply for job openings at many businesses. Nationwide, this is even more prevalent with service industries jobs that are paying less than \$15.00/hour. Many of these companies have closed or dramatically altered their operations due to COVID-19. All remaining companies are having to rethink their existing recruitment plans that may have worked in the past.

Another factor that is puzzling to most small businesses who are hiring is the uncertainty that when things eventually get back to normal, the really good hires made from workers who eschewed collecting COVID-related unemployment benefits will automatically leave for their old job. Thus, companies must also have to become more creative to keep good employees once they find them.

Have a recruitment plan

Like any other aspect of a business, it is essential to have a plan before you begin to look for that seemingly elusive help. Let's start with the first step: Do you have job descriptions for your staff? The job description is important because it outlines the duties, responsibilities, span of control, work environment, physical requirements, educational level, chain of command and pay structure.

It is important to craft job descriptions for all positions within

your business because these tell a story of how the work gets done and who does it. Job descriptions are also important for the recruitment plan because they provide the wording for the help-wanted ad. If you do not have written job descriptions, a quick way to get these is to ask your current employee to write down what they do when they are on the job. Once you review these, you can formalize the language and make them available for future use.

Ideally, a recruitment plan is used when the company is planning for future additions to the staff. Unfortunately, most

small businesses routinely find themselves blindsided when their employees give their notice or simply stop showing up for work. This more common scenario may come as a shock to the more frugal business owner, but if you want to stabilize your store operation, open your wallet and at least pay the prevailing wage in your area or continue to suffer the consequences of poor customer service, loss prevention gaps, a store to-do list that never gets touched and increased headaches and backaches for store owners.

Keep in mind, it is imperative that the recruitment plan include emergency contingents so that it can be launched swiftly and efficiently.

Where do I find help during a pandemic (or anytime, for that matter): Social media

In days gone by, the most frequently used methods for communicating help wanted needs were the classified pages in the local newspaper and the community network: high schools, community colleges, religious organizations, civic groups, etc. While these still work, there are additional platforms that can be used to get the word out that you are hiring.

If your business has a Facebook or LinkedIn page, you can utilize those for letting other users know that your business has a job opening. Both platforms are suitable for sharing and forwarding information so others can help you get the word out. Although both of these sources have pay-for services, using them can improve your chances of finding a viable job candidate.







Use your company website and email announcements for jobs as they become available. Sometimes, your best candidates may be customers who are already familiar with your business. Never underestimate the networking capabilities of your customers, either. Almost everyone you come in contact with always knows of someone who is looking for a new job opportunity.

A recent study by Pew Research concluded that four out of five workers are seeking job opportunities online. Services such as Indeed and Craigslist can work; however, there is a cost associated with both sites. The aforementioned job sites are far less expensive than Monster, CareerBuilder or ZipRecruiter, which would be better utilized if you needed to look for managerial, technical or administrative staff. Most community colleges and state unemployment offices also have job posting boards that are free to employers.

**What are you paying for this job?**

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the pay for the median retail store help position is \$12.23/hour. If you are having a difficult time recruiting, or if you cannot retain good employees, you will

need to research how your starting wages stack up against other similar companies in your marketplace. With a robust economy, employers are competing for employees at all levels of the business. If your starting wage is under the average, raise it. There are a number of legislative initiatives around the country that are pushing for a \$15 minimum wage. If you can gradually be there, it will be less of an economic hit if a mandate demands it.

**The job interview...**

Once you begin receiving resumes, sort through these and pick the ones that contain two things: 1) past job responsibility or experience that is a close match to the job description, or at least to the information you included in your help wanted posts; and 2) stability - how long does the candidate tend to stay at a job? Job hopping is commonplace in today's economy, but don't hire a job hopper. Look for candidates that are staying at a job for two years plus.

During these pandemic times, you may want to stick to telephone interviews or set up a videoconference. One of the positive outcomes of the COVID-19 lockdowns has been the advance of video conferencing platforms

that are now becoming a normal part of the business and social landscape, so much so that "Zoom" is becoming part of the vernacular. There are other video conferencing platforms besides Zoom, too – Microsoft Teams, Facebook Video Chat, FaceTime, Google Hangouts, GoToMeeting, etc.

Review and scrutinize the resume beforehand. Present a realistic job preview by communicating both the positive and the negative aspects of the job and the business. There is an adage at the prominent place of customer service training, The Disney Institute: "You can train for skill, but you cannot train for attitude." Try to get a sense of applicants' attitudes for getting along with people, quality, customer service and work in general by their responses to the interview questions.

Keep the interview questions open-ended. After a few get-to-know-you questions and a summary of the job duties of the position requirements, use some of these more thought-provoking ones to fuel the conversation:

Can you tell us something about what you learned about our company?

- What were the responsibilities of your last position?
- How do your qualifications fit with the this job?
- What kind of people frustrate you? How do you resolve conflict? Can you give me an example?
- Ask the candidate to give you a job description for the position they are interviewing for.

After the initial telephone or videoconference, and after you have had a chance to review all candidates, you can hire via telephone or invite better candidates for a final face-to-face interview. If you opt for the latter, just make sure that you follow your COVID-19 protocols that were put in place after the lockdowns were eased.

It is essential that you do not rush into a bad or mediocre relationship with new employees. TAKE YOUR TIME. And stay away from hiring friends or relatives. I have seen countless bad outcomes from doing this over the past 28 years of consulting with small businesses.

Lastly, never wait until you desperately need someone. Preplan for filling openings; have job descriptions, and want ads ready to go.

**Retention**

After you say, "You're hired," you need to try to keep them that way! Retention must be taken as seriously as the hiring process or a vicious cycle will ensue. As the business owner or manager, what is your work environment like? Is it open, friendly, helpful, encouraging, knowledge enhancing? Or is the climate more hostile, even toxic? No new employee starts a job in order to fail. However, most new employees fail because the owner/manager didn't live up to their end of the deal by providing the new employee performance feedback.

It is important to have meetings with staff at least once a month to be sure everyone is on the same page. Strive for continuous improvement within your entire business, and communicate these expectations with staff. Treat employees with respect, and expect the same from them. All people have a need to be valued and understood. Make sure you recognize good performance and expand job responsibilities to those who are taking initiative.

Do not be your employee's friend, but be friendly. Be careful not to share personal information, primarily financial or other private data. The first 30 days of employment are critical; the next 60 are more so. Write up any infractions and have them sign them - tardiness, poor work performance - and be specific. If job performance is poor during this timeframe, do what you can to turn it around, but do not take letting someone go personally, either. It is for their good as well as yours.

**If you enjoyed this article, be sure to join the author for a webinar on this topic during the ANME Online Trade Show Winter 2021 on January 17-19. For the full schedule of events and to register visit [www.anmetradeshow.com](http://www.anmetradeshow.com)**

***D**AVID CASTLEGRANT has extensive work experience as an executive retail operations manager, university professor and business consultant. Over 200 for profit, non-profit and higher education organizations have been served since the establishment of David Castlegrant & Associates in 1992.*