

SOUTH FLORIDA BUSINESS JOURNAL

August 19-25, 2016



Company culture paramount when navigating tough times



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Managing lean and smart hiring



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Editor-in-Chief Mel Meléndez, far right, moderates the HR Roundtable: *Managing Lean* at the *Business Journal's* Miami offices on July 29.

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Regardless of economic climate, human resources executives have to find a balance among boosting company and employee performance, overseeing hires, training managers, and complying with federal and state regulations. And that's just part of an HR professional's many different responsibilities.

But in the post-Great Recession world, HR executives are often tasked with doing their jobs with less. To address these concerns, five HR experts broke down the different ways to navigate difficult challenges at the *Business Journal's* HR Roundtable: *Managing Lean*.

The closed-door discussion, held at the *Business Journal's* Miami office on July 29, was sponsored by Randstad Professionals and Marsh & McLennan Agency. Editor-in-Chief Mel Meléndez moderated the discussion with the panelists, who hailed from industries including hospitality and insurance analysis.

It turns out that when the going gets tough, what helps a company stay on track is hiring and retaining employees who mesh with the company's culture and goals. Culture and personality fits tend to succeed and cause the least headaches for managers. But, as it turns out, even the best HR directors and interview processes sometimes let a less-than-ideal fit through.

The five panelists discussed what to do when that happens, and much more when it comes to the realm of HR.

Company culture trumps economic concerns when it comes to hiring

Human resources managers and directors deal with the human aspect of a business, from staffing to promotions to training and more. Unfortunately, when the economy is in flux, sometimes an HR director can be charged with cutting back or leaning out operations.

But thus far – despite a rocky start to 2016 and some economic uncertainty heading into the upcoming presidential election – the heads of HR at companies across the tourism and hotel industries, insurance analysis, education and financial sectors in South Florida are reporting smooth sailing.

"At this time, Cruise Planners hasn't been impacted, thankfully," said Lisa Granata, human resources manager at the Coral Springs-based travel agency. "We've actually seen tremendous growth; over the past 2.5 years we've nearly doubled. ... What we're trying to do now is to fill in and round out the team."

These HR directors are able to keep their companies on track despite economic and political uncertainty because of a strong company culture that infiltrates every part of the hiring and training process. And that strategy is the same whether the business is a hotel or a credit union.

"It's [about] the right fit. ... For us, what's necessary is a positive attitude toward traveling in

"We have long-tenured employees, as well. Our average tenure is 12.5 years and employees love it there. It's a great work environment."

BRADLEY KITCHENS, chief human resources officer, National Council on Compensation Insurance

general," Granata said. "And each person is going to have their own definition of what it is."

What ensures a strong company culture is hiring those with complementary personalities.

"If it's the right individual with the right personality ... then the training will allow them to be successful," said Michelle Hedges, executive VP and chief talent and knowledge officer at Pembroke Pines-based Power Financial Credit Union. "I've been with the organization for 25 years. I'm currently an executive vice president, but I started in a branch on the teller line."

At Power Financial, potential economic worries haven't slowed growth. The key to weathering turbulence is to hire individuals who fit the credit union's culture.

"We're also still growing. Our biggest challenge will be finding the right skill set," Hedges said. "Finding the right individuals with the right skill set that meets our needs."

She noted that the average term of service at the credit union is nine years.

Attention to personality and culture fit pays off in another industry: insurance analysis.

"We have long-tenured employees, as well. Our average tenure is 12.5 years and employees love it there. It's a great work environment," said Bradley Kitchens, chief human resources officer with the Boca Raton-based National Council on Compensation Insurance.

South Florida's financial talent pool is often characterized as being particularly shallow, so Power Financial takes the approach of grooming talent to fill positions. As a result, the organization looks at personality to figure out whether someone will be a fit in the long term – even if they don't necessarily have the right skills set at the moment.

"It's extremely competitive. Where we set ourselves apart is that we are willing to hire individuals that meet the minimum skill set, but we are



What helps a company stay on track is hiring and retaining employees who mesh with its culture, panelists say.

very strong on the organizational and development side," Hedges said.

In the education world, where positions are dictated by credentials and degrees, grooming staff can be difficult.

"With our credentialing for our faculty and our staff, you have to have a certain type of degree or background. ... Trying to find employees [who fit the] specific round-peg/round-hole can be difficult," said Bill Searle, associate vice chancellor of human resources at Fort

Lauderdale-based Keiser University.

What's ironic is that Keiser students would often be good fits for open roles at the university, but they would have to earn their degrees before they can assume a professorship, Searle said.

On the guidance side, it's a good idea to train managers to help employees navigate company culture.

"It's not about orientating your employees; it's about making sure your managers know what to do," Searle said.

For HR directors, sometimes ensuring company culture means knowing who can and can't have the tough conversations.

"It's taking the time during the interview and being honest about what is expected," Hedges said. "If you have managers that aren't good at hard conversations, and you know they aren't, have those conversations for them. Be honest with them and let them know what they need to do to be successful."

Economic concerns aren't necessarily top of mind when it comes to staffing for the Fontainebleau Miami Beach. While clients the hotel's various amenities may be affected, the operation itself is still moving forward as usual.

In fact, a flood of new hotel inventory in the greater Miami area means that the Fontainebleau has even more competition for hiring talent, something indicative of a strong economy.

"For us, as well, it has not really changed things for us; we still have a lot of openings. There is a lot of competition out there, a lot of new hotels have opened," said Silvia Pereda, the Fontainebleau's VP of human resources. "We continue to move forward." ❧

Ensuring a hire is the right fit, and what to do if they aren't

One of the many keys to success for any business, regardless of industry, is ensuring that its hires are cultural fits. If a company's environment is focused on flex time and remote work hours, a new manager who comes in and tries to apply more traditional office boundaries may end up being more trouble than he or she is worth.

"That's what's important: hiring the right person that believes in our philosophy," said Michelle Hedges, executive VP and chief talent and knowledge officer at Pembroke Pines-based Power Financial Credit Union.

And, as it turns out, it's much easier to catch an employee who isn't a good fit in the hiring process than it is to let that employee go after they start work.

"It goes back to training your managers and making sure that they know the right questions to ask," said Bill Searle, associate vice chancellor of human resources at Fort Lauderdale-based Keiser University.

Rooting out who may or may not be a good fit comes down to asking the right questions. There are some queries that are out of bounds for a hiring manager to ask, but there are ways to get a sense of someone's work style during an interview.

"We had somebody, a couple weeks after being hired, [who] went on a leave of absence because he is an active [military] and the manager was upset," Searle said. "But did you ask the right



Lisa Granata of Cruise Planners, Michelle Hedges of Power Financial Credit Union, and Bill Searle of Keiser University.

questions? 'Can you work the hours from X to Y?' It would have given a heads up about travel in the future."

In addition to the interview process, some companies are turning to third-party personality tests and assessments to further narrow down potential hires. These tests, such as those administered by Predictive Index, Select International and Kenexa, allow employers to look at how a person responds to certain scenarios, and then compare that to what they've determined are the ideal characteristics

for the open position.

"There is no right or wrong, but it gives you general information about how a person behaves in certain situations," Searle said. "We were able to reduce our turnover - specifically in our admissions group, where the most turnover was - simply by implementing this survey."

Silvia Pereda, VP of human resources at the Fontainebleau Miami Beach, also touted the tests' effectiveness.

"We actually use Predictive Index, as

well," she said. "I love it."

At the Fontainebleau, Predictive Index is used for different positions, and the responses of potential candidates are compared to the different competencies the brand wants in each role.

"We do use Predictive Index with our job [profiles]. It really helps you hire the right candidates," Pereda said. "If you are looking at hiring a room attendant and what is the best functioning room attendant, what are the competencies, you create a profile and look for similarities. It's about the right person for the role."

In the hospitality and tourism industry, personality and culture fit is very important. Any potential disruption could interfere with guest experience, so ensuring that each employee is wedded to the culture and vision of the company is paramount, she added.

But despite all the preparation, there is always the possibility that someone who isn't the best fit will be hired.

If someone who's not the right fit makes it through the interview process, the various hoops and tests, it's typically pretty clear once they assume their role. Often times, it's clear in the first couple of days. In organizations where there are multiple offices or a huge footprint where it is impossible for an HR director to meet with a candidate, it's often up to a manager to give the final OK.

In that case, it comes down to managerial training.

"We're so decentralized, we have campuses all over, so I have to trust my managers to ask the right questions and do the right hiring. But if someone isn't the right fit, we'll normally know by 90 days, and they need to be let go," Searle said. "It's a hire slow/fire quick kind of thing. We try to have our managers ensure that they document what is going on so that we can weed them out faster."

Constant training may be the point of contention for employees in operations; it's hard to pull away staff for hours or days at a time. But ample training can help teams avoid potential HR disasters down the line and, in the end, save more time.

"There is never enough training," said Lisa Granata, human resources manager at Coral Springs-based Cruise Planners. "If you have initial training for new managers and consistently conduct ongoing training, it's a must. You have to continue to do it. It's the foundation for a successful organization."

Training and experience complement one another, but it's

important that staff and managers remember their HR directors' advice. Whenever there is a problem, it's important to document events and contact an HR director quickly.

"Managers need both training and experience," said Bradley Kitchens, chief human resources officer at Boca Raton-based National Council on Compensation Insurance. "Our managers work directly with their human resources directors. We want them to call their HR directors early and often."

After all, it's an HR director's job to know how to navigate the human events that occur at their company. Whether it's a promotion, hiring, firing or something else entirely, consulting an HR director can help to ensure that any process is completed as smoothly as possible.

"The main message is: Please contact human resources," Pereda said. "Because we are the experts and that is what we do. We don't want to pull them out of the operation, so it is a fine line of spending as much time as you can spend coaching and mentoring and making them stronger to make better decisions." ❧


▶ MEET THE PANELISTS



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WHAT ARE SOME HR OBSTACLES AND HOW DO YOU NAVIGATE THOSE ISSUES?

Michelle Hedges, Power Financial Credit Union: We have a very formal policy that states if you have a concern about your position or feel you aren't being treated fairly, you go directly to your supervisor. If you feel like you can't go directly to your supervisor, you go directly to HR. They are told that we are there to provide guidance. However, there are certain issues we have to share, certain issues that we are legally bound to share if something falls into a certain category or situation. Because HR isn't only HR; we are very active in employee development, in the different activities that we do. 

HOW IMPORTANT IS IT TO HR THAT A MANAGER DOCUMENT EVERYTHING ABOUT A POTENTIAL PROBLEM?

Michelle Hedges, Power Financial Credit Union:

If a manager does not document - unless it's a large, out-of-balance condition - we will not take disciplinary action. They are required to document. We all look at it with a different set of eyes. Ultimately, it's on the manager. And if the manager hasn't documented, then shame on them. Now, if the employee has been given very specific instructions, has been documented, then maybe it is not the right fit. I wish we could say we hire perfectly, but that's not the always the case.

Bill Searle, Keiser University: My first question to a manager who wants to terminate an employee is: "When you go to terminate this employee, will they be surprised?" or "Do they know that this kind of behavior that they are doing could cause termination?" And if they tell me no, then they really haven't done their job through documentation and conversations. I say let's look at performance evaluations, and if over that last four years they've been given [raises] based



Managers 'have to have accountability and promote the kind of environment where everyone knows what their role is,' Cruise Planners' Lisa Granata says.

on great performance, it's going to be a bit difficult to fight.

Lisa Granata, Cruise Planners: When a manager points fingers, takes credit

for the good stuff, [that's a problem]. If they are going to be a good leader, they need to make sure that everyone knows what their role is. They have to have accountability and promote the

kind of environment where everyone knows what their role is.

Bradley Kitchens, National Council on Compensation Insurance: Managers will either be too slow or too fast. They will either wait too long to address an issue, or they will jump too fast to address an issue. If they wait too long and bury it, or avoid or don't want to address it and have those conversations, they are moving too slow. Or they are jumping too fast, [meaning] they haven't gone through the documentation or aren't coaching the person. That is what we find.

Silvia Pereda, Fontainebleau Miami Beach: Managers need to be consistent with their team members across the board. When there are inequities, favoritism, that's when problems start to happen. When they say that they have documented things and we start looking into it and they haven't, then that's when the problems start. But it comes back to hiring, and hiring the right leader. ❌