

# EXPERIENCE ALONE DOESN'T DEFINE IDEAL EMPLOYEES

Companies use new tools to identify the brightest and best.

By Jim Ruen, contributing editor

A good football coach considers the strengths and weaknesses of his entire team before filling an empty position. He also looks at the organizational culture the new player must fit into. Full-service retailers need to take the same approach when looking at job applicants, suggested Cate Sprout, senior staffing specialist, CHS.

"If you don't bring in a person that fits the team, it will no longer be a well-operating machine," said Sprout.

"You need to know what is important to the organization and important to the job as you write the job description."

Describing a job and the requirements for it can be as simple as having experience driving an applicator or being raised

on a farm, noted Jeff Cleveland, agronomy manager, Farmers Alliance, a CHS retail location in southeastern South Dakota. However, that experience may be less important if the applicant has other skills and talents that round out the team or fit less tangible but even more important needs.

"Skills such as welding or equipment repair can be a plus if other team members don't have them," said Cleveland. "However, what we are really looking for is someone with a positive attitude, who can get along with fellow employees, is willing to work, able to move up and takes on responsibility. We can train the right person to do the work, but a poor attitude reflects on the whole operation in the eye of the customer."

## PROGRAM IDENTIFIES TALENTS

Talent Plus identifies such talents and helps clients appreciate them. Talent Plus works with clients worldwide to help identify organizational needs and then fill them with the right person. This entails identifying the raw talents of top performers and their opposites (contrast employees) within the organization and within the industry. Filling a position involves identifying the applicant's talents and then matching them to the range of talents within the team.

"We summarize a person's innate thoughts, feelings and behaviors into themes or talents," explained Cydney Koukol,

chair of global branding. "A person's talents give you a snapshot of what they can do if put in the right role with the right investment."

Talents do not equate to experience, she added. When Talent Plus was hired by Mercedes Benz USA to help dealers hire salespeople, dealerships tended to only hire experienced car salespeople. "We pointed out that just because you sold cars before didn't mean you would be a great Mercedes Benz car salesman or that you would fit their culture," recalled Koukol.

"We asked if it wasn't better to select someone with great sales talent, and even better, someone able to deliver on unexpressed wishes," she said. "We helped them select people who would give amazing service and think beyond what's being asked of them."

Koukol warned against trying to train people for things that can't be trained. "Training refines talent; it doesn't create talent," she explained. "Smiling is a natural talent that radiates from optimism, resourcefulness, etc., not because the person is taught how to smile."

## EXAMINING NEW HIRES, EXISTING EMPLOYEES

Identifying talents of existing employees, as well as new hires, can have added benefits to the business and the workforce. Talent Plus has a process that maps team member talents. This gives managers opportunities to not only identify talent gaps that can be filled with a new hire, but also can aid in "redeployment." Moving an employee to an assignment that is a better fit or where they can fill an identified space strengthens the team and the individual's likely satisfaction, suggested Koukol.

"If no one on a team is high in persuasion, then the next time a hire is made, persuasion becomes a desired talent," she said. "What we want to do is help a leader see what team member talents are and what is needed to set members up for success and moving to the next level."

Sprout seconded Koukol's emphasis on talent versus simple experience. As ag business recruiter for CHS, Sprout is responsible not only for bringing candidates to the attention of managers, but also helping managers evaluate the candidates. While that often starts with helping managers define the job description, it includes a host of tools, both objective and subjective, to help fill the position with the "ideal" employee. Sprout noted that while evaluations often start with tangible

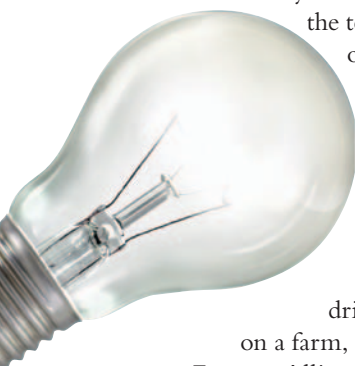




PHOTO COURTESY OF CHS

**CHS actively recruits future employees at 15 colleges and universities. University of Minnesota student Erin Daninger (left) learns about CHS career opportunities in the company's energy, grains and foods businesses from Cate Sprout (right), senior staffing specialist, CHS.**

skills, the process quickly goes to other less-tangible areas, areas Koukol would likely describe as talents.

"While what we look for can depend on the level of experience the manager feels is needed, even more important is a passion for the industry and the business sector the potential hire would be entering," said Sprout. "Communication and decision-making skills are important to all our divisions, as is the ability to develop relationships. We are a very relationship-driven industry."

## BEHAVIOR-BASED INTERVIEWS

At CHS, initial resume screenings are followed by behavior-based interviews that attempt to drill down through background and experiences. Open-ended questions around claimed competencies target related true-life experiences.

"Past behaviors tend to predict future behaviors," explained Sprout. "We then use online assessments to get a deeper understanding of their competencies that are important to CHS and our future. Depending on the position, we may also do cognitive or applied reasoning testing."

Although the process may cover CHS corporate positions or concerns, it may still not provide information needed by a location manager. Outlying locations have their own local culture, noted Sprout, who is available to coach managers through the selection process.

"We look for the intangibles that match the outlet," she explained. "The managers know the personalities and gaps within the teams, so they know what they need to round out and complete them."

Cleveland agreed with Sprout on the importance of gaining insights into intangibles, such as the previously identified "attitude," though he is quick to point out the difficulty of doing so. "You try to feel the applicant out, and of course in rural areas, you often know someone who knows them or has worked with them," he said.

## FIND MORE APPLICANTS

Unfortunately in rural areas, an ideal candidate in terms of skills, much less talents, can be a scarce commodity. Cleveland noted that long hours in-season can make it even tougher to find good applicants. However, a new process being put in place at CHS may help managers like Cleveland find more applicants and help CHS team members find greater job satisfaction and mobility within the organization.

"We just went live on our new Applicant Tracking System after working on it for two years," said Sprout. "Our job openings are posted online, and an applicant can review them and apply for the position. At the same time, they enter a CHS-housed database that lets them build a 'job agent' to work for them. Every time a keyword they have entered shows up in a new position, the job agent lets them know, and they can look at it, apply and attach a resume to the application."

Starting in January, Sprout and her team will begin introducing managers to the system. They will then be able to access the system, generate job openings and review candidates. She expects the system will be equally helpful to applicants, managers and current employees alike.

"We like to promote from within and develop existing talent," explained Sprout. "This tool will help us find out who is ready to move up or simply move. We may have an employee living in Montana interested in moving south. Under our old manual system, there was no way to manage that. Now our employees will be able to manage it for themselves."

After hearing a description of the new system, Cleveland quickly endorsed it as positive for CHS as a whole, as well as individual employees. "When employees aren't held back, it creates a better workplace overall...a better work environment," he said. "When you create a better environment within your group, people want to stay." **AG**