

STAFFING STRATEGIES

A DIFFERENT TAKE ON THE STAFFING CRISIS

Staffing is a universal concern throughout the profession, one that has led the PCPS Top 5 MAP Issues list since its inception. Firms are scrambling to improve their recruitment opportunities and to become the kinds of places that can hold on to talented people. One sole practitioner, however, has stopped focusing on trying to reel in more staff and instead has found ways to work smarter with the ones she has.

Creating Plan B

Roughly a year ago, Christine Lauber, who runs an eight-person solo practice in South Bend, Indiana, came to the conclusion that it was time to change her approach to staffing. “There are going to be more Baby Boomers leaving the profession than there will be members of the new generation to fill their jobs,” she notes. She found herself fighting for the same candidates, but unable to pay them as much as many larger rivals. At the same time, workload compression remains a challenge. Whenever she tried to attract an experienced staffer from a larger firm, “they inevitably chose an industry job.”

“We can’t bill for the time we spend inputting information, so we educate the client about what we expect. What the client really wants from us is knowledge, not labor. You have to find a way to shift the labor to the client, and technology allows you to do that.”

Use paraprofessionals. Lauber actively recruits at community colleges, seeking people with two-year accounting degrees. “There are many very bright people at these schools who can be very valuable for lower-end tasks,” she says. “I can give them the simpler engagements, or a piece of a larger job. They can take my numbers and put them in five different forms. They can do a fixed asset schedule or a tax return as long as it’s reviewed by a more senior person.” She now has four paraprofessionals on staff. She finds little competition in recruiting for these workers, and great success in retention. “They usually stay on about 8 to 10 years,” she says. To improve her recruitment efforts, she is on the community college advisory board. “You want smart kids who are at the top of their class and who like variety.” She also invests in further developing these staff members, offering them training and CPE.

Given those discouraging realities, Lauber decided that she had to accept the fact that recruiting and attempting to retain CPAs or prospective CPAs were not necessarily going to be the answers to her problems. Instead, she developed several other solutions:

Enhance technology and shift the labor burden to clients. Lauber has invested in integrated technology so that programs — rather than people — can transfer data from one use to another. “There’s usually a large one-time start-up cost, as opposed to labor, which is an annual cost,” she says. She’s also raised her standards for what she will accept from clients. “We don’t accept shoeboxes full of receipts,” she says.

Find ways to increase productivity. Lauber ties all salary increases to new proficiencies. “I tell them that when they’ve mastered, say, fixed assets or sub S returns, they’ll get paid more.” This inspires greater productivity and takes the confusion out of salary structures and what it takes to get a raise. Lauber also believes that small firms have to assign different staff members to be responsible for various areas of expertise. “As a firm, we have to be generalists for our clients,” she says, “but the breadth of knowledge is too big for each of us to be an expert in everything.” Parceling out responsibility makes it possible for the firm as a whole to offer greater breadth of knowledge to clients.

A New Approach

“There is a shrinking pool of talent,” Lauber notes, “and the situations that have caused that fact aren’t going away.” As a result, “we have to change how we do business.” By making the most of technology, recruiting from a different pool of candidates and maximizing efficiency, small practitioners can exert greater control over their firms’ current and future success. ■