

TALENT 2021 SPECIAL REPORT

# WORK SHIFT

Engaging an evolving workforce amid radical disruption isn't easy—but it can be done. A discussion. **BY JENNIFER PELLET**

TALENT WAS A TOP CONCERN FOR CEOs long before Covid-19, and the pandemic only exacerbated the myriad workforce challenges that companies face. Operating under heightened restrictions and safety measures, millions of U.S. businesses had to rethink their people processes. For many, proven strategies for finding, hiring and retaining employees were—and, in some cases, remain—upended by the sudden shifts brought about by the pandemic.



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What's more, despite rising unemployment numbers and a brief turnover hiatus as employees hunkered down during Covid-19, skilled workers remain in short supply, agreed CEOs gathered for a roundtable discussion sponsored by the Indiana Economic Development Corporation. “We're trying to fill seats, and it's nearly impossible,” said Grenee Celuch, CEO of Mesa, Arizona-based Concord General Contracting. “The good talent out there already have jobs and they're not moving, right now especially. It's a huge pain point for us.”

Finding and retaining trade workers also looms large for Merritt Trailers, a manufacturer of agricultural trailers based in Denver, Colorado. “They're in short supply and everybody's fighting for them,” said CEO Jim McMaster, who sees talent as the company's biggest growth hurdle. “We have a huge amount of turnover because of it, and Covid certainly didn't help.”

“I hear that concern from a lot of companies coming into our state,” said J. Brock Herr, vice president of the IEDC. “We try to facilitate getting those folks plugged in to where those candidates are, and we're also

working from a state standpoint on building that talent pipeline that will service these technical trades.”

## Recruiting Review

The talent gap led some businesses to embrace changes geared toward making them more attractive to potential employees. “We're constantly reevaluating what we offer our employees,” said Saluch, who sees compensation, health benefits and promoting from within as the three top concerns for most employees. “Our health insurance benefits were crap a year ago, so we went out and revised them.”

Talent strategies that worked well for decades are also falling flat with younger workers whose priorities are different from those of previous generations. When choosing employers, Millennial and Gen Z workers look beyond compensation and benefits at things like an organization's mission, the opportunities for growth it offers to employees and how well its culture aligns with their values. “The usual stuff—compensation and benefits—are just table stakes; they want to work for a company where they share the values of the organization,” says Jim Scarfone, CHRO of private equity firm MidOcean Partners. “And when they find out that isn't the case, they vote with their feet.”

But value alignment can also work to a company's advantage, with employees who identify strongly with their employer's mission and values being less likely to jump ship. Merritt Aluminum Products, for example, successfully boosted retention by hiring for cultural fit. The company created a list of core work values against which it would assess job candidates, opting to walk away

from those who didn't fit the profile. "We've been pretty selective with our hiring, which has created some challenges, but we find that's better than just bringing on warm bodies," said Chris Barton, VP of operations.

Technology is also playing a bigger role in identifying and vetting job candidates. Algorithm-based recruitment tools comb through resumes and match companies with potential hires whose backgrounds meet their criteria. Some look even further, delving into social media usage, helping determine which prospects are most likely to be receptive to outreach.

It's also key to widen your net, said Eva Majercsik, chief people officer at telecommunications software company Genesys, who suggests taking a hard look at whether people who might not at first glance seem like a perfect fit have the potential to grow into a role. "It's not about what it is today that you can do for me, but what I see that you can bring to the company that will help us to grow and at the same time develop yourself," she said. "Think about who can come into your organization and bring different thinking—because if you're trying to find someone who is exactly like you, chances are you're limiting your scope quite a bit."

The shift to remote work has helped some businesses, like B2B specialty company Buckman International, open up whole new pools of potential talent. "After 19 years, we've changed mindsets on being able to make remote working work," said CEO Junai Maharaj. "Now we have access to a significant amount of great talent from around the world."

Companies still constrained to competing for scarce local workers should consider seeking help from economic development organizations, suggested Herr. "A lot of state resources go untapped when it comes to talent attraction and retention," he said. "Your local and state economic developers can be a great resource as you navigate pipeline issues."

### Enhancing Engagement

In addition to difficulty recruiting, some companies are now also suffering spikes in turnover as workers who felt tethered to their employers during the height of the pandemic begin moving on en masse. Biotech company Ajinomoto Althea is experiencing churn again following a brief respite from employee departures. "The biggest problem I have right now is an astonishing exodus over the past three weeks or so as we catch up all at once with the normal attrition that we would

have had during all those months," said CEO David Enloe, adding that the wave of departures is having an unwelcome impact on morale. "It's making the existing employees wonder what's wrong."

Automation consulting, engineering and training company Horizon Controls Group has only had one employee depart recently, but aggressive recruitment is a growing concern. "Every time the phone rings, there's the fear that it will be another resignation," said COO Gemma Doyle, who noted that the management team has ramped up efforts to connect and engage with employees during the pandemic. "We try to have different engagements at least three times a week, not just email and phone calls but things like face-to-face

water cooler chats," she said. "I'm a big proponent of video calls because it stops everyone from multitasking, which nobody is any good at. You are very present and focused when someone is looking at you."

The need to ward off talent poaching has many companies doubling down on employee

engagement efforts, no easy feat at a time when many workers are working remotely. "What they say about the importance of communication—that no amount is too much—is true," said Vincent Mattera, CEO of the engineered materials company II-VI. "Fortunately, just before the virus came, we put an ICARE [company values program] in place—integrity, collaboration, accountability, respect, enthusiasm—and that bound us together during this otherwise difficult time."

"When people are isolated physically they feel the need to connect, so communications and just being there for your employees goes a long way," agreed Majercsik. "We do surveys, have dialogues, hold roundtables—and anyone can pick up the phone and call me because we have to communicate about what it is we're doing and really be there for our employees. When people feel like they're doing meaningful work and that you're there for them, they're much less likely to pick up the phone when that recruiter comes with a new job. It goes a long way."

That's why, participants agreed, the ability to disseminate messages that resonate with employees may well become the most powerful tool in a company's talent arsenal. "We have to be cognizant as leaders of the way we—and our managers as well, because you can't do it all—represent our companies," said Scarfone, "because the biggest magnet for retention is how people feel about coming in to work for your company." **CE**

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