

LOW UNEMPLOYMENT: CATALYST FOR EXCELLENCE OR EXCUSE FOR FAILURE?

By Mason Duchatschek

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"Wise is the man who fixes his roof while the sun is shining." - Ben Franklin

During low unemployment, companies that plan to grow by simply adding employees will find that shallow labor pools won't readily support them. Companies that plan to select, develop, and retain employees the way they've always done it could create a competitive disadvantage they might never overcome.

Low unemployment in a booming economy means increased competition for a diminishing number of available applicants. Whether employers like it or not, they will be forced to change their approach to staffing their businesses if they want to keep up, much less move ahead, in these competitive times.

Whenever I find myself struggling to figure out a problem, I begin to look for models of success established by others who have been involved in situations similar to mine. For those of you wondering what the heck you're going to do to meet the staffing challenges of the near future, I suspect that you might get a few good ideas from a somewhat unlikely source . . . a professional sports team. For example, let's take a look at pro baseball teams and how they operate. They:

- Get rid of people who can't do the job.
- Train and develop those who can do the job.
- Support those who are doing the job.
- Look externally for other people when they don't have the resources internally to do the job.

For example, let's take a look at a starting second baseman on a major league team. Suppose he gets sidelined because of an injury. His organization would have substitute players trained, developed, and ready to play. His organization would also have a whole system of minor league players, at different skill levels, preparing for the opportunity to do his job.

As the starting second baseman, he would also have to rely on those teammates around him and his organization's ability to replace those who leave or are injured with other players who are as

good as or better than the previous players.

In contrast, a few guys where my brother worked went around the office recruiting players for their new softball team and they joined a league. They signed up anybody who said they would play. They didn't get a coach and never practiced. During games, they asked people where they wanted to play, not what their abilities were. As a result, outfielders couldn't catch fly balls, infielders couldn't catch ground balls, and they lost almost every game.

My message is simple. Pro sports teams take the time to analyze the demands of each position. They use the best tools they have available to compare players to the demands of those jobs. They have tools in place to monitor a player's progress. They realize sooner rather than later if a person lacks the raw ability to perform at a specific position. They also realize when that same person has the raw ability to succeed at a different position. They have programs in place to train, coach, develop, and promote upcoming players before they need them.

Why don't more companies learn to do the same thing? There are plenty of good skill, attitude, and personality assessment tools that an employer can use to build models of jobs and measure individuals against those jobs. Generally speaking, mistakes in hiring could be brought to a halt. Poor performers could be promoted or moved laterally into different positions that played to their strengths. Training efforts could actually pay off and benefit the company and its employees, particularly when tailored to the individuals' deficiencies and the company's needs.

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