

# Talent Search

Finding top talent can be tough, but innovative approaches can help.

By Stephanie Fehr

**S** EED INDUSTRY JOB OPENINGS are staying open longer. There are a couple of reasons for this: other industries want to capitalize on the strong farm work ethic and are poaching people with an agriculture background, and the biofuels industry is in need of manpower and is paying premium salaries to attract people from all sectors of agriculture.

The labor pool outlook isn't promising. According to TJ Hummer, Senior Account Manager with Management Recruiters of Iowa City, a search firm that spends 90% of its efforts in the seed industry, the baby boomers are getting set to retire, meaning 78 million people leaving the job force over the next 18 to 20 years. "We do a lot of searching for research positions, including plant breeders, who are really tough to find right now," says Hummer, "and from what we understand from the universities, it's not just research. There are a lot fewer people going into agriculture and agribusiness, so in the future there will also be a problem finding marketing and sales people."

Strategies and tools to attract talent are keys to business success.

## Young Talent

"Quite frankly, talent at Monsanto is as important as our product and pipeline development," says Andy Armbruster, Field Sales Trainee Lead with Monsanto. The company is attracting impact players through its new trainee program which will bring



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on 20 college graduates, beginning in June, and pair them with a trainer – a full-time sales representative – who oversees the day-to-day progress of the trainee.

Candidates for this program are scouted at least nine months in advance of the start date, and sometimes as early as when the students are still sophomores and juniors. "If you are hiring for a June start date and you wait until December or January to hire, you've missed the ball," says Armbruster.

Monsanto recruits talent from agriculture, business, and engineering colleges, partners with professional agriculture fraternities, and relies on the efforts of sales reps who staff booths at county fairs, career days at colleges, and have relationships with local growers and their families and can see first-hand the young people's work ethic and ability to lead.

While the immediate goal of this program is to build great sales reps, Armbruster says there is also a strategic component. "We want to know if they have leadership potential."

## The Voice of Experience

Entry level candidates are not always the answer though. "Usually the people we want are already in a position, and probably with a good company, so it's a matter of making them aware of the current opening and then enticing them to make a switch," says Brian Bowman, Talent Acquisition Manager with Pioneer. Along with traditional channels such as using web sites

## Recruiting Tips

- Top talent can be hard to find when you are looking for it. Sometimes you have to hire somebody who would be a good fit for your company even if you don't have an opening and then create a position for them based on their strengths.
- Get employee feedback. Go to your successful hires and ask them what attracted them to your company and where they heard about you. If a significant number of the answers are the same, focus your efforts on those areas to recruit others.
- Find the 10 benefits that employees cite about why they like working for you. List this on your recruitment literature to attract new people.
- Learn from your competitors' successes and mistakes.

to post jobs, Pioneer is also using new programs like its employee referral and retiree recruiting programs to help land potential candidates.

"Retirees really know the company and its culture, plus they have contacts out there," says Bowman. "They are really able to sell the company to a potential hire." Current employees can also offer that first-hand experience, and Pioneer rewards them for doing so. "If a current employee refers someone who is hired, we'll reward them from anywhere between \$100 and \$2,500, depending on the level of the position," Bowman explains.

## Offering Opportunity

While these are some specific strategies for recruiting, the main thing that will attract people is opportunity. "People are attracted to the combination of challenge to do something no one else has done before and the opportunity to really make a difference," says Greg Duerksen, Vice-President of recruiting firm Kincannon & Reed.

He stresses that offering more money or better benefits is not necessarily going to have people flocking to your company. "If somebody is already happy, dangling more money in front of them won't make a difference. Rather it's dangling opportunity and challenge in front of them," he says.

When it comes to actually making an offer, be flexible. Jim Groepper, Vice-President of Sales and Marketing at AgVenture, a network of 32 independent seed companies, suggests varying the ratio of the different compensation package components. "One company that I know of laid out the compensation and benefit program in three distinct manners." This could mean more or less of an incentive option or more or less company involvement in a benefits package, but it could include anything you would put in an offer. It's about giving the prospect more control in designing a compensation package that fits his or her needs. "If I came to you and said, 'we don't have unlimited cash or resources but here are three options', that's more appealing than saying 'here's our deal'."

In today's competitive environment, with companies growing and fewer employees available, it's critical to find players who can take you to the top. Use these strategies as a guide on your talent search. SW

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