





The New Age of RECRUITING

IN TODAY'S CHALLENGING HIRING
LANDSCAPE, CREATIVITY AND
RESOURCEFULNESS WIN THE DAY.

by Susan Bloom

ASK RECRUITING STRATEGIST AND LEARNING Café co-founder Diane Thielholdt for her opinion on the challenges distributors face in hiring new employees and she'll be the first to say that recruiting has never been easy for the electrical products industry.

“With national unemployment rates currently posting at around 4.4%, we’re seeing some of the lowest unemployment levels in years, which means that there are fewer candidates out there in general,” said Thielholdt. “In addition, today’s older workers are increasingly willing to take lower-level jobs to stay in the industry and individuals of all ages are competing for the same jobs, which is a new phenomenon.”

The fallout of this double-whammy dynamic? “The war for talent is back on—and it’s back on hard,” she said.

As a specialist in today’s multigenerational workforce, Thielholdt said that it’s helpful for HR professionals to understand the characteristics of the different demographics that make up the current job market, adding, “Millennials can be as old as their mid- to late 30s today, currently make up about 34% of the U.S. workforce, and are in more than just entry-level positions. In fact, 29% of the Millennials in the workforce are in leadership roles of some kind.”

By number, Thielholdt confirmed that there are 76 million Baby Boomers, 43 million GenXers, and 81 million Millennials. “While still a strong presence in the field, Baby

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Eight Top Tips for Recruiting and Retaining Employees

Diane Thielfoldt, co-founder of the Learning Café, offers eight ways to help companies compete in today's dynamic labor pool and boost recruiting and retention success:

1. Go back to school.

"Forge partnerships with local colleges and universities and those that offer degrees in industrial distribution," Thielfoldt said. "It's even good to start bridging connections with schools as early as middle school to get this industry on the radar for students and parents."

2. Get bold with branding.

Because Millennials are brand conscious, Thielfoldt encourages distributors to consider how they're promoting their brand in their local area. "You're the ambassador for your brand, so wear logoed items at public events, talk to your kids' friends about your company, sponsor activities or causes in the community, promote that you're LEED certified or green, etc.," she said.

3. Pump up your presence.

"Millennials pay attention to what's going

on in their communities and what a company might be doing that's unique," she said, adding that a recent study revealed that some two-thirds of Millennials surveyed reported that they'd prefer to work for \$40,000 if they loved what they were doing vs. \$100,000 at a job at which they were bored.

"As evidenced by job search websites today such as Glassdoor, employees are evaluating employers just as much as employers are evaluating candidates. Prospective employees will review a website to see how well it represents the firm and assess whether it has brand recognition in its industry," she said. "In addition, another important facet of an organization's presence is whether current employees are positive representatives or ambassadors of the company. They can be a firm's best recruiters and brand differentiators."

4. Update your interviewing skills.

As opposed to focusing on more old-school questions like "Where did you go to school?" and "Where do you see yourself in three to five years?," Thielfoldt said that it's best to ask more behavioral-based questions that will help employers learn about a candidate's attitudes, skills, leadership style, and competencies. "Ask candidates questions that reveal how they think about things and how they'd handle certain

Boomers are increasingly retiring. GenXers are making their mark, but there are half as many of them," she said, stressing the need for companies to target Millennials to ensure their future success while acknowledging that every generation brings different ideas to the table.

Bryan May, vice president of business development for BirdDogHR, a firm that helps companies attract and hire top talent, align employee goals with company goals, and create solid succession plans, agreed.

"There's something each generation can learn from the others," he said, adding that solid recruiting and leadership strategies will lead to greater employee satisfaction and retention. "According to the Hay Group, companies that employ sound engagement strategies like employee development, transparency, goal planning, career/succession planning, and constant coaching/feedback can enjoy at least a 14% reduction in turnover while positioning their companies as employers of choice."

"This industry can find good people and has been successful at it," Thielfoldt concurred. "At the end of the day, having a mix of skilled employees representing all different demographics is very strengthening for the whole team."

Crescent Electric: Developing Young Talent

Brian Rooney, branch manager at Crescent Electric's 16-employee location in McHenry, Ill., understands the importance of a robust hiring process. "Some of the biggest decisions a manager will ever make are his or her hiring decisions," he said. "One or two bad hires can sink a small to medium-size business like ours, just as one or two good ones can launch it into the next stratosphere."

Rooney—a Millennial himself—is particularly attuned to the interests and needs of the Millennial generation. "Businesses need to realize that they most likely already have Millennials making critical decisions—or they will soon," he said. While employees are working longer than ever and it can be difficult to find qualified people with the right experience to fill those roles once older employees ultimately retire, "Hiring well helps companies ensure that they're proactively addressing their succession," he said.

To achieve that, "I hire for people who have the potential to grow. I'm not just hiring for a particular job, but for a job two positions above it," Rooney explained. "Millennials want to make a difference, so it's important to create programs to help them grow and develop, such as through mentorship relationships forged with more seasoned employees," a connection that he said is beneficial for both parties and helps build teamwork.

Rooney also helped create an industry association that he felt was lacking as he was first coming up. "Nearly four years ago, when I was an outside salesperson for another Crescent branch, I went to an industry event and was the youngest one there," he recalled. "I knew I was in an older,

male-dominated industry, but there was only one other guy my age there and no women at all. It really hit home for me at that moment.”

Working with the male peer Rooney met there, “we sent out an invitation to 20 to 25 other young people we knew to meet for drinks; these were all entry-level folks who would otherwise never get an opportunity to compare notes or bond with other entry-level people,” he said of his Young Electrical Professionals of Chicago group, which ultimately expanded into quarterly social events.

After learning of Rooney’s success in targeting area young people, the larger Electric Association of Chicago (EAC) contacted him and requested that his group merge with theirs; he now sits on the EAC’s board of directors and helps to be a voice for his generation regarding industry decisions. “We get 40 to 50 people to attend each of our events, which have recently involved activities like training and a tour of local union offices, and we’ve all met some good friends and colleagues through the group,” he said.

“The field of electrical supplies isn’t the sexiest industry in the world, so the challenge involves getting young people in the door and then keeping them in the building,” Rooney

added. “But groups like ours help Millennials build relationships and feel a more personal connection so that they’ll be less likely to leave.

“Companies are often unwilling to make investments in people with little or no experience, but companies that are open to making an investment in candidates of all backgrounds who have the right aptitude might be surprised at the results,” Rooney concluded.

WinSupply: Mining the Military

“For the first 40 years we were in business, it was common for employees to work their way to the top, from the proverbial job of ‘sweeping the floors’ to roles at the counter, outside sales, and higher opportunities, but that’s not the case anymore—we don’t find as many people willing to train this way today,” said Steve Coen, director of opportunities for Dayton, Ohio-based WinSupply. “If we find candidates with industry experience who are good, they’re often happy and highly compensated where they are, which makes it difficult and expensive to find a person with the right skills and experience.” As a result, said Coen, who’s based in Fort Worth, Texas, “the job is to build people”—



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situations," she said. "Their answers will help assess whether they can do the job and if they'll be happy and embraced by their colleagues at your company."

5. Get real. "There's a natural tendency to talk about the great things a job has to offer when recruiting, but often what isn't said may be more important," she shared. "Paint a realistic picture and don't misrepresent the job being offered. Get to know the candidates and have them interview with others, including others in their peer group, even letting them shadow current employees if you can so that there's as much transparency as possible."

6. Keep doors open. "If you interview five applicants for a role and hire one, stay in touch with the other four and continue to recruit them," she advised. "Prepare for people to come back and build bridges to all people who have come for interviews or been recruited so that they can speak well of the company. It's critical to keep doors open because an employer never knows when someone with a recruit's skills will be needed in the future. At the same time it's also important to keep the door open for employees who leave to boomerang back. Stay connected with alumni and continue to recruit them as well."

7. Engage in engagement. According to Thiel-

foldt, they leave their boss. "Retention is a measure of satisfaction and engagement, so educate yourself on what engages employees and assess whether an energizing, empowering climate that makes people want to come to work has been created," she said. "Are you communicating well, developing your managers/leaders, and positioning them for success?" She also recommends that bosses get to know their employees. "If a boss fails to make human connections, it quickly becomes 'us vs. them,'" she said. "Even simple acts like bringing in pizza lets employees know that you recognize them and that they're appreciated."

8. Reposition the industry. "The electrical products industry has talked itself into an 'Our business isn't sexy' mindset, but it's got to get out of its own way," Thiel-foldt advised. "It's less important what the product or service is if you can find passion in the work. There are many career and growth opportunities available in this industry, especially for women and young people; in addition, many of the products on the market today are fascinating, such as all of the recent developments in LED lighting and other energy-efficient technologies. As long as candidates bring the right attitude, they can be taught the skills that they will need and they can really build a strong résumé in this industry." —S.B.

which WinSupply does through such initiatives as its Management Training Development program or Junior Military Officer (JMO) program.

"Through our JMO program, which we launched in 2007/2008, we work with a company named Alliance, which transitions military officers under the rank of Major back into the private sector workplace, and strive to place such individuals in need of employment into roles at WinSupply," Coen said. These individuals typically fall between the ages of 25 and 30 with an average of about six years of military experience. "The one thing these people know is how to deal with other people because from a young age they've had to be in charge of platoons often made up of more experienced people. The military has done a good job of teaching them leadership," he explained. "We teach them distribution."

WinSupply's JMO program trains these "recruits" in the basics of wholesaling, offering a structured curriculum in everything from products and sales to warehouse and inventory management. Following completion of the six- to 12-month Manager-in-Training program, which requires a candidate's willingness to relocate, "graduates" are typically assigned to manage one of WinSupply's more underperforming companies, where they inherit a team and an inventory.

"If successful, that manager will eventually become president and have an up to 30% ownership stake in that company, which is a very rewarding model for entrepreneurial individuals," Coen said.

Starting out with just four to five people and now training some seven to 10 former military officers annually for leadership roles, "We currently have 22 locations being run by someone who's come through our JMO program since we started the initiative a decade ago," Coen explained. "We typically measure them based on their performance in their third full year because by then they've made it on their own. We find that most have outperformed our goals by that time."

While Coen acknowledged that it can be hard for military professionals to transition back to corporate America, "Ex-military are often top-notch business leaders and may be some of the best hires you'll make as long as you're patient and take the time to train them in your business." Coen hopes to expand the program to accommodate as many as 20 new JMO recruits per year. "As we see it, we're helping men and women who have served our country and getting some great leaders out of it in return," he said.

Graybar: Investing in Innovation

Like her industry colleagues, Graybar Senior Vice President of HR Beverly Propst has witnessed a changing industry landscape when it comes to recruiting. Along with low unemployment rates that are leaving employers

struggling to fill positions, “The pace of recruiting continues to increase,” she said. “In the past, hiring managers could take their time in selecting candidates and making job offers. Today, we have to recruit with a sense of urgency; otherwise, strong candidates may accept offers from other employers.

“We’re also challenged with skill gaps, as more of our jobs require specific knowledge or experience,” Propst continued. “However, this doesn’t always translate into fewer applications; it often means that recruiters must sift through many applicants to find the few that meet the key criteria. Additionally, while modern recruiting systems help match candidates to open jobs, selecting the best candidate still requires extensive involvement from both the recruiter and the hiring manager.”

Propst said that Graybar’s HR team carefully screens candidates, which saves hiring managers’ time and helps ensure that each candidate receives a consistent message about Graybar’s value proposition.

“We anchor our interviews with an overview of the company, our values, and a realistic preview of the job,” she explained. “Once employees choose to join the company, we host national conference calls to welcome them to Graybar, review benefits, and share information about the larger corporation. Their local branches also conduct onboarding activities to help employees feel connected and confident as they start their new jobs.”

In addition to a structured training program that helps prepare each employee for success at his or her job, the team is also proud to have recently launched the Graybar Innovation Lab at the University of Illinois’s Research Park, a collaborative effort between Graybar and University of Illinois students and faculty to develop industry-leading digital capabilities that will strengthen Graybar’s position in the supply chain.

“We’re always looking for bright, energetic individuals to join our company,” said Graybar Chairman, President, and CEO Kathleen Mazzarella. “Graybar’s new Innovation Lab will give students a way to explore potential career paths within wholesale distribution.”

“The lab will be staffed with students from a variety of disciplines, all working on projects commissioned by our executive team,” said Propst. “While this venture has just



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launched, we’re looking forward to its development as part of our overall innovation strategy and also as a potential new talent pipeline for our company.”

Rexel: A Focus on the Future

Denver-based Julie Landis, who’s responsible for recruiting activities in Colorado and Wyoming as the regional project house manager for Rexel’s Mountain Plains region, is well aware of the statistics on the changing labor pool.

“We’ve recognized that by 2020, Millennials will represent half of the workforce and that the number of women in our industry will continue to increase. These are important statistics to us and we feel that we have a responsibility to support these groups,” she said.

On the first front, “Millennials are the people who will carry the future of our business, and there’s also a lot we can learn from them in terms of technology, as they’re very tech-savvy as a demographic group and very connected through forums like social media,” Landis said. In considering how Rexel could help Millennials build a strong professional (not just social) network, the business realized that the answer would be found by giving Millennials increased access to company leaders while helping them make new friends, acquire new skills, and work toward a purpose along the way.

Through the company’s new Leadership & Development Training Program, all of that is coming to fruition. “We tap and mentor young ‘A’ players on our team and involve

them in monthly meetings, presentations, and project management activities as well as providing coaching in softer areas such as communication skills and confidence building to help them become future leaders and strong individual contributors,” Landis explained.

The year-old program, which started in 2016 with a group of 40 employees and is expected to maintain the same participation level this year, has been met positively by participants. “These individuals feel empowered, are happy to be recognized, and are excited about the opportunity to have access to project ‘sponsors’ and company leaders across the business,” she said. “We’re helping them connect to a larger purpose in the business so that they know they matter and aren’t just another face. We now promote the availability of this program to our candidates during our recruiting activities.”

Landis is equally excited about the strides being made to attract more female candidates through Rexel’s doors. “In 2016, I attended the Women’s Multi-Cultural Conference to learn how other companies outside of our industry are using mentorship and sponsorship programs to support and attract more women,” said Landis, who confirmed that Rexel has a strong network of women eager to connect with one another.

“In 2015,” she continued, “we piloted our women’s mentorship program, through which we offered regular coaching sessions to help female employees create a foundation for long-term success. As I work to continue building a strong mentoring circle, I’m tapping into my network of both Rexel and electrical industry colleagues to serve as mentors in the creation of a place where women can discuss key business topics in a safe and confidential environment.

“At Rexel, we’re working very hard to maintain a low turnover, a culture of accountability, and a focus on work-life balance, and we’re also very committed to building our bench and future strength,” Landis added. “Through our young leaders’ and women’s mentorship programs, we’re hoping to create an even more collaborative environment that helps others be successful. It all starts by shining a light on something, saying that it’s important, and then taking action.”

Buckles-Smith Electric: Branding for Business

Based in Santa Clara, Calif., the team at Buckles-Smith has long engaged in a unique and hard-fought battle for

qualified employees. Located in the San Francisco Bay and Silicon Valley area, where unemployment is currently at a low of 3%, “there’s a lot of competition with the tech industry to recruit talent,” noted Michele Sauvadon, director of HR. “Companies like Google, Facebook, and LinkedIn are all headquartered in our backyard and prospective employees all know those brands, particularly Millennials.”

To help level the playing field, the company has forged positive relationships with two local universities, San Jose State and Santa Clara University. “Since electrical distribution doesn’t necessarily have the household brand names to open doors, we’re working hard to create a brand on these campuses and let students know that we offer opportunities in sales, marketing, HR, operations, finance, IT, and other fields and that there’s an exciting career path here,” said Thea Copeland, director of marketing.

Thanks to a new 10-week program launched this June, Buckles-Smith will welcome 10 part-time students and interns from diverse backgrounds—including those majoring in everything from psychology, business, and computer science to individuals from San Jose State’s Veteran’s Group, Latino Business Association, and Society of Women Engineers

—and engage them in individual and group projects, professional and social networking activities, mentoring relationships, a community service initiative, and industry exposure in general. “We’re hiring against some of the top employers in the world, so this program was built with engagement in mind—engagement with customers, vendors, and other employees,” Sauvadon said.

At the same time, the Buckles-Smith team also understands the value of having a top-notch external, brick-and-mortar face to the employee pool. “We recently moved our headquarters to a beautiful new building space that features a lot of modern amenities, such as collaborative and private meeting spaces, casual seating areas, an employee workout room, and stand-up desks,” said Copeland, adding that in a market where companies are competing for employees just as hard as employees are vying for the right opportunity, “a daily working environment that’s inviting makes your company look like a place where a prospective employee would want to work.” ■

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—Michele Sauvadon,
director of HR,
Buckles-Smith Electric

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