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Hiring Report: Professional Development Key for RTTS

By Judy Mottl | 02/08/2007 - 3:09 PM EST -

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Companies typically spend time and money on professional development programs and training to boost internal skill sets, and as a way to retain valued employees. And some, like Real-Time Technology Solutions, Inc. (RTTS), use an intensive training program to build out a special-skilled workforce as well as a strong senior-level management team.

The 11-year-old, New York-based professional services organization, which specializes in the testing, monitoring, diagnosing and tuning of critical business applications, requires that every new hire undergo a 325-hour internal training program held in a six-week timeframe. The training covers everything from all-important business soft skills to technical and technology training.

The focus, says Bill Hayduk, RTTS' director of professional services, is to develop a workforce that can meet all the needs of RTTS' clients—not just the technical expertise, but staff that have the requisite communication and personal interaction skills necessary for the consulting environment.

"We tried hiring highly experienced people but we kept having bad experiences as many didn't have all the needed skills. So we realized the best hiring approach was to hire on newly graduated IT students and teach them what was needed," says Hayduk.

Today RTTS is deeply involved in on campus recruiting programs, job fairs and college job programs when it comes to hiring staff. That's because hitting the college and campus arena has proven much more valuable than using the traditional job advertisement approach.

According to Hayduk, RTTS has tracked the actual hiring result metric using various approaches. For example, the company makes one hire per 274 resumes received through job listings online. That number drops dramatically; to one hire per 96 and 70 respectively, when it comes to campus fair and campus recruiting efforts. The most rewarding hiring approach is still employee referrals—with one hire per every eight referrals.

"We're in a very competitive industry and talent is hard to come by. While some candidates have technology expertise, they don't have the business skills we need so we've found that the training program provides us with exactly the skilled professionals we need on the client site," explains Hayduk, who says RTTS aims to keep its hiring flow at about three to five new hires per month this year. In fact the company has already "locked in" a few new staffers who will be graduating this June.

"We keep fueling our engine with staff as we're growing and given the increasing shortage of IT professionals on the market," he adds, noting the decreasing enrollment numbers in the computer science and technology college programs.

Yet that certainly doesn't mean that any IT graduate can get a job at RTTS. Candidates need to be "smart, pleasant professionals who can communicate well and think on their feet," says Hayduk. And they can't be shy and quiet.

"In our industry our staff is at the client site, often on their own, and so they have to be able to build relationships, instill trust and represent our values."

Job applicants hoping to work at RTTS have to start on the right foot at the very start of the job search effort by submitting a "good" cover letter that not only shows they're knowledgeable about the company and its business but have the interest and some experience

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that can prove valuable to RTTS. From the moment a candidate submits their letter and resume they are graded by RTTS as the company is a firm believer in using metrics to gauge and evaluate staff and staff achievements.

"If we get a cover letter with spelling or grammar mistakes we don't even finish reading it. What we want to see in a cover letter is a well-worded cover letter that makes it clear you've done your research on both us and the industry," says Hayduk.

A good cover letter will earn a candidate a phone interview in which they're asked to relate insight about themselves, their career interests and also their awareness of what is needed on the job.

"You won't believe what people will say in that first interview step, and a majority don't make it past that point because they tell us things we don't want to know or they have nothing to say about themselves," say Hayduk.

The third step in the hiring process is a face-to face interview with two senior team leaders. The candidate is asked 30 questions ranging from numeric logic questions to teamwork questions.

"We want to see how the person performs under pressure as interviewing with two people at one time can be an intimidating environment. We care about their personal grooming and they're actually graded on all these aspects by the interviewees," explains Hayduk.

It's at this stage where a candidate's personality also comes under examination.

And don't think that new nose piercing or your latest tattoo is a good indication of expressing your personality. Neither is showing up for the interview in anything less than a suit and business attire.

"We work in a very professional and business environment with Fortune 500 firms. Our consultants have to be able to meld into that environment and while suits aren't mandatory, clean business casual dress is a requirement," says Hayduk.

And the training for the newly hired doesn't end with the six-week program. RTTS is a huge fan of training and continual professional development, offering e-learning courses through RTTS University. To ensure a good return on the course investment staffers take tests. Staffers are also graded on client work, with clients providing feedback as well.

RTTS requires all new hires to sign a two year employment contract. In return it promises strong professional development program, a mentoring environment and at least a minimum salary increase after six months. There are also compensation increases at the one year and two year mark—with some salary bumps hitting 30K in those two years.

At the end of the two year agreement staffers are encouraged to take the company's senior engineer exam which also provides a salary boost, and the training then focuses on management-level courses.

All the professional development and retention efforts past the contract period are clearly paying off for RTTS as the company boasts a low 13 percent churn rate.

"Our goal is for new hires to become team leads in a few years and help us build on our senior level management team," says Hayduk.

Yet employee retention is still a huge hurdle given the competitive hiring environment, he admits. That's why RTTS invests a lot of resources into employee activities and internal communication efforts, such as an internal newsletter that spotlights employee achievements and activities geared to keeping staff in touch with each other.

As consultants typically work offsite and don't interact much with colleagues, RTTS hosts several employee "fun" nights to build camaraderie and the valued team environment. There is a monthly 'rewards' program spotlighting staff achievements, as well as a program called 'Attaboy,' in which client feedback about staffers is shared through email announcements.

"Staff retention is very important to us given all the investment we make in professional development and we want to build a strong team atmosphere that's rewarding for our employees," says Hayduk.

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