

The answer is under your nose



Employers love to fondly imagine that the perfect staff member is just around the corner, but instead of daydreaming, says Deiric McCann, you should examine the talent you already have. Illustration: Tom Mathews

Ever going through the pockets of a jacket you hadn't worn in a while (or an offshore account you'd forgotten about!) and found a few euro you didn't realise you had? Finding something of value where you least expect it feels pretty good? Everyone agrees that "people are our greatest asset," recognising that those organisations who stand head and shoulders above us all tend to have superior people policies and, on the face of it at least, superior people. So we spend a lot of time chasing the rainbow, at the end of which we know we'll find a pot full of those perfect people that our industry leaders seem to have – instead of focusing on identifying the best in those we already have. Therein lies the secret of organisations that have a people-based com-

petitive advantage – it's not just that they identify and recruit great people, but that they work with the people they have to make them great. They find just what attributes they uniquely possess that can be developed and employed effectively to build the sort of serious competitive advantage that only good people can confer.

To uncover genuine hidden potential requires a shift in the way you look at your people. Here's how to get started:

Uncover your team's career goals, aspirations, likes/dislikes, strengths/weaknesses

You can't begin this process without knowing a hell of a lot about each member of your team. Start by talking with them regularly. Find out what it is they like to do. Research published recently in the *Harvard Business Review* demonstrated that people excel at jobs that interest them more than at jobs that their education, skills or experience might suggest are perfect fits for them. Find out what your people enjoy doing, what career plans each of them have, and where they aspire to go in your business or in life in general. But don't confine yourself to informal chats. Use more formal means like 360 Degree Feedback and psychometric assessments to determine the particular strengths of your key assets.

Make better use of strengths

When you have a good appreciation of the particular strengths of your team, then start to look for new ways in which to apply them. Brainstorm on how you can apply these strengths in new or imaginative ways to enhance the roles of each of your people and to eliminate problems you haven't previously been able to handle. Don't be hemmed in by "this is the way we usually do things," by rigid job descriptions or demarcations. In one successful example I observed a talented project manager was put into the role of sales manager – not because she knew an awful lot about sales – but because she was particularly good at organising campaigns, marshalling resources, motivating her team and seeing initiatives through to the end. Take off the blinkers when it comes to applying strengths in new ways.

Turn weaknesses into strengths

In the hit film *Enemy of The State*, Gene Hackman tells Will Smith "...in guerrilla warfare you gotta turn your strengths into weaknesses...if they're big and you're small, then you're fast and they're slow...you've got to work with what you've got."

You've got to do the same with your people. Look at what you currently perceive as shortcomings, then look at situations where those attributes could be positive. After all, most weaknesses are just overused strengths. For example, a Customer Service Representative who's just too assertive to "put up and shut up" with angry clients may actually make a very successful salesperson. Or consider the marketing executive who comes up with killer campaigns but just can't seem to follow them through. Focus him solely on developing the creative aspects of your campaigns, and assign project management and completion to someone better suited. Look at every shortcoming you currently perceive in your team members, figure out where that weakness might become a strength, and figure out how you can capitalise on it.

Feedback, feedback, feedback

A recent study of the reasons why people leave their jobs found that of the several hundred individuals surveyed more than 25 percent cited one of the main motivations for changing jobs as lack of feedback on their performance from management. Make it a formal objective to provide positive feedback on a job well done to every one of your people at least weekly. This means adopting a mindset whereby you and your management team actively seek opportunities to provide feedback. Not only does this increase the interest level in the job being done (we all like to be recognised), but it also really helps to positively reinforce positive behaviours and performance at the expense of more negative alternatives. Also, experience shows that when you feedback to your team, they'll feedback to you – on all of the ways in which you can work with them more effectively.

If you've been searching for an unassailable competitive advantage then the answer may be just under your nose. Before you start exploring more exotic sources, look at the people who are driving your company right now. You'll find that there's untold treasure buried behind every one of those familiar faces.

Deiric McCann is author of Winning Business Proposals & The Customer Continuum, and CEO of Profiles Ireland. This article appeared in the April 2003 issue of Cara, the magazine of Aer Lingus.