

## **Navigating through the Talent Management jungle**

**By Richard Bucher and Cat Hackman, Cenera**

Talent management is a topic much talked about among HR practitioners and leaders of organizations. For some, talent management is simply about training current employees, for others it's succession planning for older staff in key positions. But talent management should not be one isolated project for a firm. Effective talent management is strategic and integrated with a few or many traditional HR elements, which support departmental and organizational goals.

Talent management is about bottom line performance and it encompasses everything from what your organization does to attract talent, to how you manage and keep them. For example, attracting talent starts with how you market your organization. How your firm is perceived externally and internally. If you are trying to attract innovative and young talent, ask yourself, is your firm known for its innovative products and services, caring for employees and families? Or are you known for being a company with high turnover only caring about the bottom line? Are your current and former employees spreading a good word about your firm? What is your brand promise?"

### **The Talent Management Survey**

In 2004 Cenera conducted a talent management survey with close to 40 diverse Calgary organizations. The results revealed that indeed, talent management is top of mind, or at least some components of it. However, what leading Calgary firms are thinking and doing in the talent management area varies greatly. Richard Bucher and Mike Kelly, both senior consultants at Cenera, were intimately involved in creating the survey, analyzing it and meeting with participants to discuss the results and compare how their organization stacked up against others firms in Calgary. "We found that many talent management initiatives are not integrated with each other," says Richard. "This can result in wasted resources and dollars. And many key initiatives were focused on a small segment of the organization's population. This was especially true of succession planning where it was found to be centered largely on senior management, ignoring high potential at-risk talent."

Following are some more highlights of the survey findings, information obtained during debriefings and some key recommendations.

### **Coaching - a perk or performance gauge**

Most organizations surveyed use coaches and half use external coaches. Of those that do, very little seems to exist in the way of formal processes to engage in or manage a coaching relationship. "We found there appears to be a general sense of malaise around external coaching stemming from the open-ended and seemingly directionless nature of long-term coaching relationships," says Mike, who specializes in leadership coaching. Some respondents suggested they have found that situational coaching optimizes the results they see. Explains Mike, "here, the company can secure a coach; focusing their attention on one issue within a context. The assignment has a definitive beginning and end, with clear and objective measures to test progress towards the desired outcome."

Coaching in general is used by firms in leadership development and career development – situations where an individual is seen to have high potential but may benefit from external support to achieve the next level. "An unfortunate finding was that some employees, who had been offered coaching, saw it as an indication of his/her poor performance rather than a positive experience or a perk," says Mike. "As an example, coaching can be provided to assist leaders with the "tough" conversations as well as helping them find their way through the competing priorities of life, career, and role related issues."

### **Inverting the performance review process**

The majority of respondents reported that the performance review process was a top down model driven and owned by managers and supervisors. "In many cases, managers lack the skill to have the tough career conversations with their direct reports. In some instances, managers would prefer to terminate an individual and

replace them rather than confront issues. "I don't think organizations are aware of the impact this has on the remaining staff, the company's reputation and ultimately the bottom line," says Richard.

## **Employee Orientation – make a first impression**

New employees make the decision if they want to stay at a job within the first 30 days of employment. "So make this time count," says Mike who has worked with clients on integration coaching for managers in new roles. "We have had great success in assisting teams and new leaders become productive faster."

Even though employee orientation did not rank the highest in importance among talent management components, its importance should not be forgotten.

## **Succession Planning – not only for the old**

One alarming finding within succession planning is that organizations that do succession planning only focus this activity on management and/or senior staff. Succession planning needs to include other key roles as well (technical, leaders, sales). "It's important to actively engage and develop successors and integrate the engagement with other talent management elements such as training and development, coaching, and performance management," says Mike.

The average age within responding companies was 40 to 45. On the surface, this appears to be of little concern. Further breakdown of demographics within particular skill areas revealed a potentially alarming story. For example, the average age in certain technical areas was well over 50. In some specific disciplines more than half the population was over 51 and has retirement within their grasp, begging the question: is the company prepared with a succession planning strategy? "In addition to having a plan for the retiring baby boomers, companies also need to have a plan for the younger generation of employees who tend to move around more in their careers," says Richard.

## **Performance Management – the time hog**

Over 90 per cent of surveyed organizations ranked performance management as important or higher. However, a dire finding was how much time is spent on this task. "Over half of respondents stated that managers spend ten plus hours per employee per year preparing and managing performance," says Richard, "that adds up to a lot of hours and dollars if you are managing many employees."

## **On-line resources – ease of access**

The majority of respondents stated their staff would like access to on-line resources to better assist them with their career planning. Elements of such a resource attractive to staff included: career pathing, job and/or competency descriptions and assessment tools.

## **Steps to better talent management**

In recent years, talent management articles and seminars have been very popular. HR practitioners are looking for ways of starting or improving talent management programs; seeking answers to what to focus on and how to do it right. But as with most business initiatives, there isn't one right way to do talent management. Here are three recommendations to improve or start implementing effective talent management: 1) choose and focus your organization's efforts on a few key talent management initiatives vs. trying to do too many, 2) make sure the efforts support the company's existing or desired emerging culture; and 3) integrate the various talent management components and link them to operational performance measures.

*If you would like to discuss your challenges in the area of Talent Management or participate in the spring 2005 Talent Management Survey, please contact Richard Bucher or Mike Kelly at 403.290.0466.*