



Retaining Talent

In a previous article (May 2012 – “CAD Employee Hiring 101”) I talked about how to hire a new CADD technician, and in July 2012 Curt Moreno did another article titled “Employing the right Hiring Practices.” Both articles discussed hiring CADD technicians, but differed somewhat in approach. The first article discussed using a standard methodology to finding and hiring good people. The methodology covered creating a game plan to use for hiring before it is needed and then following that consistently when the need arises, adapting as necessary. By

planning ahead, like any business process, it keeps the actual hiring procedures from being painful and reactive when a position has to be filled. This article also focused more on finding a long-term employee rather than just filling a slot.

Curt’s article took a different approach and focused more on an immediate need to hire a CADD technician. This need was created by an existing position being vacated on short or no notice or a flood of projects with rapidly approaching deadlines. Due to this quick need, many steps in the “how it should be done”

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playbook were eliminated or shortened. The differences here could be summarized as proactive versus reactive hiring or as Curt summarized it as “Perfect World versus Real World.” Curt made some valid arguments on the need to quickly fill a position, but I believe that there may be some underlying reasons that the scenarios mentioned would require this approach. Some things to consider are the current planning, forecasting, and staff retention practices. As Curt mentioned, projects have deadlines, which mean they should have schedules and an understanding of staff resources.

Both articles had numerous things in common that ultimately would lead to a final decision on who to hire such as multiple interviews, testing, and staff/peer reviews. No matter which methodology you follow, the ultimate goal is to hire a good person and keep that person around. The steps and procedures indicated in both articles can be applied to most any type of position. It is not just for CADD technicians.

The key ‘take-aways’ from the May article were:

- Determine your need
- Create a clear and accurate job description
- Promote your position
- Screen your candidates (checklist, reasonable time, multiple interviews by various individuals)
- Make sure your final candidate is the right fit

So let’s assume you found and hired your new tech and he/she has turned out to be a rock star. The person shows up on time, if not early, and stays until all tasks are done. The employee is enthusiastic about helping others and learning new things, up to speed on new commands and tools, and gets along with everyone from the CEO to the receptionist at the front door. Wow—your extra work has paid off and you hired a real keeper. Hopefully, you have a few and perhaps many of these types on your staff, and the purpose of the first article was to help you achieve just that. So, the next question is: How do you keep them around?

People leave companies for various reasons, but the two most common are money and culture. Surprisingly, of the two, money is not number one. No matter how much employees make, at some point, the frustration, unhappiness, and/or lack of advancement will cause them to leave. The culture or day-to-day happenings at your company have a huge affect on keeping people both productive and happy. Just the act of hiring good people has an impact by showing that you care about the quality of your team. When employees see that you are selective in who you hire, it shows them that they were ‘selected’, not just hired to fill a slot, which will give them a sense of value right from the start. There are various things you can do to keep the good ones around and what follows are some descriptions of each. Not everyone would consider all the following to be “culture” items, so to put them in perspective, I offer the following definition from the Human Resources section of About.com:

“Culture is the work environment that you supply for employees. Employees are motivated and most satisfied when their needs and values are consistent with those manifested in your workplace culture.”

The following are some items that affect how employees are treated, rewarded, and how they interact in their work environment. These items are meant to address an employee’s needs and values. If the employee’s values do not match or are not relatively close to those of the company, then maybe the person is not a good fit. Hopefully, you got some sense of this during the interview process.

COMMUNICATION

From day one, make sure your team members (your employees or direct reports) know what’s going on with the company, division, or branch. Some tough topics may require a brief period to think about and form a game plan, but don’t keep news or events (good or bad) quiet too long. Maybe you feel that it isn’t as if you’re hiding anything, you’re just not sharing. For most, it makes no difference. People can be pretty intuitive and will know when something is up. If they do not sense it on their own, in this instantly connected world, they may hear it from an outside social connection or from other peers that overheard something. This is not how you want company information to be discovered or disseminated. Without all the details, people will piece together their own ideas about what is happening, just from the things they see and hear. In many cases, it won’t be anywhere close to the real situation. For an employee, knowing something is in the wind but not knowing what it is can create anxiety, fear, and eventually a lack of trust in their employers. Be open and address the good and bad as soon as possible.

If you have an “open door” policy, make sure that it is just that. If employees think that speaking up will carry repercussions, they won’t—and you may be missing out on some great ideas or useful feedback when it is needed. Remember that the key to communication is that it is a two-way process that involves talking and listening. If you are doing all the talking, then you are just telling or broadcasting, not communicating.

MAINTENANCE

Keeping the right people often means removing the wrong ones. Some individuals are just bad for your culture. These people are the whiners, slackers, and disengaged folks who bring down the positive atmosphere of your company.

• Whiners

Sometimes people whine because they don’t know how to voice their concerns or complaints or don’t think they can. When you see this or hear about it going on, address it quickly—don’t put it off and hope it will go away. The whining will just get worse and spread. Sometimes you will not be able to fix the issues or concerns the whiners have, but if you can’t, you can at least explain why something cannot change. This lets them know you care what they have to say and are willing to address their concerns when you can.

♦ **Slackers**

These people don't pull their weight or have become unreliable when it comes to meeting expectations. They seem to spend more time tweeting, facebooking, or chatting with friends online instead of actually doing work. Even though many have mastered how to look busy for the boss that occasionally comes through, their co-workers know the truth. Seeing this happen regularly causes frustration and disenchantment among the "doers" about putting out extra effort to make up for these production speed bumps—their slacker coworkers. When you see or hear about this, pull the offenders aside and chat with them or give them a warning. If they don't change, remove them as you would a tumor—before it spreads.

♦ **The Disengaged**

These folks have lost their drive or interest in what they do, either from boredom or lack of motivation. These are the folks who throw out the zingers such as "Not my job," "Not my problem," "Not my department," or "I'm off the clock" when asked for assistance. When you get a few of these folks in the mix you have the potential, as with the slackers, to frustrate and demotivate your star players. It's true that star players can perform anywhere, but they prefer to do it in a positive environment. When one of your employees needs information or help to get something done or, even more critical, when a customer is looking for answers, the last thing they need is a "It's not my job" or "I'm off the clock" kind of answer. You need team members who are willing to do what it takes to get it done, or at a minimum, point others in a direction that keeps them moving forward.

If you have employees who fit into any of these classifications, find them and see if something can be done to motivate and change their current attitude toward their job. If not, set them free to pursue their interests elsewhere!

REVIEWS

Reviews are important and there are a variety of types. While all are good and serve a purpose, some are clearly better than others, depending on an individual's position and industry. For example, in the AEC industry, the most common is the annual review. One bad aspect of this type of review, which I have seen at almost every company, is that the promised annual review is rarely an annual event. Some people go for years without a review; employees may even get a raise or bonus, but no review. This sets a bad precedent. The expectation will become that employees get a raise each year, and there is nothing tied to why they got it. Some may be fine with that—these are often the disengaged or the slackers (no chance of having to face the music). Those who don't get a raise or bonus or feel that what they do get is too small become your whiners.

I do not like annual reviews for various reasons, some of which I'll discuss in Rewards later in this article. The once-a-year summary is inadequate for keeping a real-time connection with the people who keep your company moving. Personally, I prefer bi-weekly one-on-ones. I've used these in the past and they have

worked very well to increase motivation and keep me connected with members of my team. If you not familiar with one-on-ones, the following is a brief description.

A One-on-One is basically a weekly, 30-minute scheduled meeting between a manager and a team member. The meeting is typically done at a consistent time every week. If every week is hard to do, try every two weeks—but don't go over one month apart.

The meeting needs to be structured to include time for both the team member and the manager to speak. A typical meeting allows 10 minutes for the team member, 10 minutes for the manager, and 10 minutes to discuss the future (expectations for the next get together).

In many organizations managers know very little about their team members. One-on-ones are a great opportunity for managers to establish a relationship with their team members and address issues and concerns on both sides on a frequent basis. You can use this opportunity to sense how engaged the employee is, how the work is progressing, and any wish list items or suggestions the employee may have. For the manager, it's an opportunity to offer suggestions, give feedback, and express short- and long-term expectations. Each meeting helps both sides track the progress in their projects, their training and long- and short-term goals.

When employees see that a manager is showing an interest in them, they feel more appreciated. Those who think they don't have the time to do this are wrong, as the time invested will increase the team's productivity and communication. There have been many individuals that have had this belief, but once they gave it a serious effort and saw the results, their beliefs changed. If you are looking for more than just a one-on-one review and would like a more global picture of how the employee is doing, consider adding an annual 360 review.

There is a ton of additional information online about one-on-ones; just Google "one on ones."

If you don't have a policy for reviews, create one, and if you have one—follow it! In my personal experience and in discussions with others in the AEC industry as well as many others, this one topic is a huge source of frustration for employees.

PRAISE

Although some people go on for years doing their job and are happy in their own knowledge or beliefs about how they are doing, most people like, and many need, to actually hear it. I am one of these. Although I strive to do the best I can and can beat myself pretty good when I make mistakes or don't meet my own high expectations, nothing feels as good as seeing that others recognize the efforts and results of what I have done. In this I am not alone. Celebrate and share in the victories, both big and small, be open and positive, but don't be generic. I have seen on multiple occasions where an owner or manager has thanked everyone in the office for the hard work they did on a successful project, knowing full well that there

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were a handful of people who actually made it happen or did the bulk of the work. Thanking everyone that plays a part is good, but making sure you take some extra time to recognize your stars is critical, particularly if you want to see the efforts continue.

Those who do not feel appreciated for the extra effort they put forth will likely find somewhere else to work where it *is* appreciated. Recognizing people for going above and beyond in front of their peers is not bad for the peers—it is good and shows that you recognize when extra effort is put forth, and you appreciate and encourage it. Positive recognition also serves to motivate others. Even if there are some “haters,” when they do something that garners them positive recognition, they too will bask in it. Keep in mind, while showing appreciation in front of peers is good, offering criticism is not.

Those bosses/managers who like to throw out the statement that “people should just be glad to have a job in this economy,” should know that’s the last thing anyone wants to hear. Unless employees are living under a rock, they know that they are fortunate and appreciate the fact that they have a job. But with all the layoffs and cutbacks, the employees who remain are typically there for a reason and maybe managers should be thankful that they still have good people that work long hours, often at reduced pay, to get out the work that keeps the company producing and in business in this tough economy.

REWARD

Although some folks may thrive on recognition or praise, many want to see more, such as a reward. Rewards do not always have to be monetary, but they should have real value. Bonuses are great, but raises are even better (raises feed you every week, not just once a year). For many, value can be expressed in a variety of ways. How about “employee of the month” parking, badges on a central board, printed certificates of appreciation, or lunch with the boss? All of these are low- or no-cost items that can provide some value to the employee, mainly in recognition.

Everyone likes money and if you plan to make a monetary reward, don’t forgo the low-cost options mentioned above—include them as well. I have never been a huge fan of yearly bonuses because they often do not align with the tasks or effort that is being rewarded. In sales-driven organizations, most salary-with-commission folks get bonuses paid out quarterly or monthly for their efforts, so why can’t the performance bonuses be treated the same? Cash flow and billing cycles are always a reality, so quarterly would seem like a good timeframe.

If cash is not available and you have no reserves, but you know money is coming, make sure you have recognized the top performers at the time of performance and let them know they will see something extra when bonuses do get paid out. After all, even you might forget what some of your folks did in January when March or, worst case, December comes around. Profit-sharing bonuses are typically done annually, but performance-based bonuses should be given at the time of or very near the performance that is being rewarded.

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Training benefits companies from all industries, but the more technical the work, the more critical and beneficial it becomes. Training is useful at all levels; the more knowledgeable a company is about its industry and products used, the more successful it will be with employee and customer retention. Keeping your managers up to speed on management skills and keeping your CADD techs up to speed on new software features not only makes them more productive, but it also keeps them feeling secure about their future.

If you cannot afford professional training, there are other options available to help team members improve themselves. Examples are in-house “lunch and learn” classes and inexpensive online seminars and training videos. Develop a mentorship program, where team members can improve their skills by working with veteran leaders.

When things go wrong, treat the failures as opportunities for improvement. Nobody likes to fail, but when given another chance, most will learn and improve. When an employee fails, he or she is typically at a low level of self confidence and is likely to be more open to feedback and coaching. This is an opportunity to try and get employees to open up to new ideas or ways of doing things. Keep a positive attitude and coach—don’t criticize. You can turn these failures into positive learning experiences.

EVOLVE

Regularly look back at the successes and failures you have had with your team. Take away from this your key successes and failures, processes and procedures, and make sure you keep doing the stuff that works and change the stuff that doesn’t. Keep looking forward—don’t get stagnant and “comfortable” with the old ways.

Remember that people are investments, not just acquisitions. To keep the good ones you will need to continue to invest in what you have. In almost all cases, it is far less costly to maintain than replace. Do these things and do them consistently; communicate, perform maintenance, recognize, review, reward, develop, and evolve. You will keep the returns coming in on your investment!



Walt Sparling has worked in the building design industry for 25+ years, starting as a hand drafter. He moved on to CADD in the mid 1980s and then into CADD and networking training and consulting. Walt has served as project manager and designer in the mechanical and architectural realms and currently works with an electrical engineering firm in Tampa, Florida. In his spare time, Walt maintains a couple of blogs and a personal website: FunctionSense.com and waltsparling.com