

Responding to Labor Deficits With Recruitment Techniques

December 13, 2005 - Cari McLean, Associate Editor

As the U.S. economy rebounds and aging baby boomers begin to leave the workforce, organizations will need to attract and build more top talent than ever. In fact, labor shortages and talent and skill gaps are spread across a wide range of occupations today. Among the top industries suffering from the lack of available professionals is the accounting industry. Even though the accounting industry has historically struggled to lure people into careers of crunching numbers, performing audits, analyzing and verifying fiscal records and reports, the industry started to lose droves of potential college students and graduates seeking accountancy careers after the fall of companies like Enron and Arthur Andersen.

“In an instant, a tremendous population of campus students shifted their majors out of accounting, which affected us four or five years later because those students would have been graduating as qualified accountants, but after the Enron debacle they were not graduating anymore,” said Debbi Ballard, director of recruiting of the east region for CBIZ Accounting and Tax Advisory, a leading nationwide accounting services provider. “And after the economy slowly started to improve in private industry—meaning companies that are not public accounting firms—our private firms started getting raided by public industry, and we were losing people in droves from the ‘Big Four.’ And this left us in an almost crippling situation.”

According to Ballard, the Big Four are not only reaping qualified professionals from private accounting firms and mom-and-pop shops, they are over-inflating salaries and offering incredible sign-on bonuses to lure in candidates—tactics that most private-industry firms cannot compete with. “This hits our operations right in our pocketbook,” she said. “Our scheduling capacity is limited because our staff is limited. Many firms have had to give up work or have overworked their employees literally to the bone.”

Early on, CBIZ decided that overworking employees and delivering shoddy service were not tolerable practices. “We have unfortunately had to go to our clients in some cities and say, ‘We can’t service your business 100 percent the way we want to,’” she said. “We would rather see a client happy and pass them on than make them miserable and not meet their expectations. And we feel that it is a priority for us to offer candidates and our employees a strong quality of life and a good balance between their personal and professional lives.”

The fact is that today’s employees and recent graduates want not only a healthy work-life balance, but also on-the-job training, career mobility and excellent incentives. With 5,000 employees in more than 140 offices nationwide, each CBIZ regional office has its own process for recruitment. During the past two years, Ballard has been actively revving up her recruitment and job marketing strategies in the east region. Her primary line of attack is campus recruiting.

“It has been a time of really just getting the word out, I just wanted to go out and build relationships with students who were maybe coming up at the sophomore level,” Ballard said. “We are actively hiring interns and staff accountants now and offering great incentives. We are attractive to that student population because the students that are graduating today want quality of life and an exciting career. They want as much knowledge as they can get in a short period. They want a fast track, and they want to be able to come on board and get as much training as they can and be able to move around based on their strengths. And we give

them that vehicle.”

In a sense, CBIZ is feeding the demand of today’s new employees, which is rapidly becoming the decisive standard for companies to possess. However, a company cannot just hold such standards—it must actively advertise them as well. According to Ballard, recruiting college graduates has been significantly easier than reaching the professional-level candidates. “It is a challenge to get the word out in the experienced realms,” she said. “Getting the word out in the campus market has gotten much easier. And we have actually implemented an ambassador program for former CBIZ interns. Once they go back to their campus, we pay them to continue to generate information within their campus and within their peer group about CBIZ—and most college students would love some extra money each month.”

For the experienced realm, CBIZ has totally revamped its approach to advertising. It stopped posting job openings on job boards and classified ads, and now targets business-to-business publications. The company also has developed relationships with headhunters, but according to Ballard, this is not always the most economical approach. “It is difficult for us because one employee could conceivably carry an \$18,000 to \$20,000 bounty. So we are spending a lot of money with recruiters, but we would like to be able to eventually do more on our own through more publication advertising and other initiatives.”

Even so, money management has not been too much of a concern for CBIZ. The company’s leaders fully support the increased recruitment efforts because they realize that it is vital that the company expand its workforce in order to improve and support its current situation, and ensure future growth. According to Ballard, the amplified efforts have been worthwhile. “Our hands are far less tied today than they were a year ago. We have attracted some great candidates from the Big Four that are very happy to be working for CBIZ and today, only two of our national offices have critical shortages, whereas a year ago 10 offices had multiple shortages,” Ballard explained. “But we still have needs, and in order to grow we will need to hire even more people.”

According to Ballard, each regional office expects to hire at least one to two interns and two staff accountants in the coming year. However, as many as five staff accountants may be hired. In addition, not only does CBIZ employ and recruit full-time professionals, it also offers part-time and short-term positions, and is currently recruiting and sponsoring international professionals from South Africa. “We actively market to the stay-at-home-mom population. The other thing that we are trying to utilize and tap into is the retiree market,” she said. “We don’t offer benefits, but we do offer hourly compensation.”

Because the need for accountants is vast, CBIZ plans to continue its recruitment efforts and explore every possible route to fulfill its headcount demand. “We will continue this recruitment effort, and we are taking anyone that we can attract that we feel is a good fit with CBIZ—even if we don’t have a lot of work for them to do today,” Ballard said. “We would take them on because we feel confident with our position in the marketplace and know that we can go out and get the work. We would not turn our back on any qualified candidate.”