

## Why are good engineering candidates so hard to find?

# WHERE ARE THE ENGINEERS?

ENGINEERS WITH industrial experience are not hard to find, they are hard to recruit because they have so many options and opportunities. It is not too far from the truth to say that a good electrical engineer with three to five years of paper mill experience can get a job today. Additionally, he or she can name his job, geographic location, company, industry and salary. Many other non-engineering backgrounds including E&I technicians, maintenance supervisors, electrical planners and machine superintendents are also in high demand but this article is about recruiting experienced and non-experienced engineers.

### WHAT CAUSED THIS SUPPLY PROBLEM?

Every HR manager in America knows we are losing 10,000 people every day from the workforce and many of these boomers are engineers. If 10,000 baby boomers are hitting age 65 everyday for the next 18-20 years, we must be better prepared for the loss of knowledge and intellectual capital.

Engineering school is extremely difficult. Students are increasingly taking easier paths to graduation. According to the US Department of Education, the fastest growing college majors in America as of the 2007 survey were recreation, leisure and fitness studies. An Engineering Workforce Commission 2004 study shows four year engineering graduates peaking around 80,000 in the 1980s, declining to around 65,000 in 2000 and back to around 80,000 in 2011. However, the US population was 226 million in 1980 and 308 million in 2010, making this latest number a much smaller percentage. To provide some perspective, China currently has approximately 3.8 million engineering students in its schools. India produces approximately the same amount or one million engineers per year.

We are dealing with a completely different personal background from just 30 to 40 years ago. In 1930, farmers were 21% of the labor



force, 12% in 1950 down to approximately 1% today. If you go back to 1870, 75% of the population was employed in agriculture. There were 2.6 million farms but only 38 million people in the US (information courtesy of the USDA). This type of work required dedication and very hard work while it produced people with a strong work ethic who understood and accepted long hours in difficult conditions.

Managers interviewed for this article feel that many kids today grow up in front of the television and computer and do not have experience with hard work. Kids in an urban environment are never exposed to the type of hard work that their parents and grandparents accepted as everyday life.

Other industries are sexier. The paper industry loses a lot of engineers to oil and gas due to the compensation. Mills lose a lot of engineers to other industries for their sex appeal. Does building robots at Honda and self-driving cars at Google sound more appealing than studying

starch content in a paper mill? Sure it does and this is part of the new competition. Young engineers need to be able to see how the paper industry contributes to and improves everyday life just as much as the competition.

Kids today see companies lay off and fire employees due to local competition and competitive globalization. This produces a lack of employer dedication that only exacerbates the problem. Young engineers are part of the "no loser" generation. Everyone gets a trophy and expects to be praised and rewarded for mediocre performance. They have been told all of their lives that they are the best. Their parents have coddled them since birth. Hard work for them is a lifeguard job instead of milking dairy cows at 3:00 AM or picking tobacco all day. This carries into their careers for all job functions where they quickly learn and are actually surprised that only top performers are rewarded. If a young engineer is not used to physical work, he will have a hard time coping

around a paper machine during August in the US Deep South. This is why vetting in the hiring process is so important even if it is just for bench strength.

### **THE HIRING PROBLEM AND HOW TO IMPROVE**

Companies still move like they did 10 and 20 years ago and are too slow in the hiring process. When a company takes its time to respond to an interested candidate, the candidate assumes the position is not important or critical to the company. Companies think the pool of candidates is unlimited and that they can move slowly. It is a candidate's market today and employers need to embrace this fact. When a good candidate is available, a firm has to move fast as there is a small window of opportunity and hiring is all about timing. When a candidate says yes to an opportunity, yes means yes today just as no means not now. A great candidate who is available today may not be ready willing and available next month or next week. Also, a company can be guaranteed that competitors are talking to the same candidates.

There are no passive candidates. Once a recruiter has convinced a candidate to entertain an offer of potential employment and that better opportunities exist, he will start talking with everyone. A candidate may tell you he is happy in his current job and is not looking for a new opportunity but once he decides to listen he will listen to everyone. This is why it is important to realize that companies have a lot of competition for good candidates and that they need to move quickly when a great candidate is identified. Time kills all deals. If you don't move quickly, the candidate perceives it as a lack of interest and a job that is not that important to you, all while being pursued by your competitors.

Be sure you are ready to hire when you start the process. A recruiter can spend a tremendous amount of time looking for the right person and if you decide two months later to cancel the search and fill the position internally, this gives your company and the recruiter a bad name. More importantly, it wastes the recruiter's time and recruiters only get paid for their time.

### **BE AGGRESSIVE IN THE HIRING PROCESS**

A savvy candidate knows that special treatment during an interview is just window dressing but a lack of attention tells the candidate that he is not a special candidate, the job is not that important and there is no urgency to

fill it. When everything is the same with interviews at two different companies but one company took him to dinner, toured the community, and showed genuine interest, it can make all the difference over a company who just tells the candidate to show up at 8 a.m. for the interview and that you will be able to catch a 5 p.m. flight. You have to remember that you have a lot of competition because good engineers have a lot of options.

Don't mistake anxiety for lack of interest. Many candidates are nervous when it comes to changing companies and this is normal. Those who have never moved are even more anxious. You have to differentiate between their brain telling them it is not the right decision and the butterflies in their stomach telling them they are not sure about this. Help them through the process and stay in touch. It is an emotional decision and they have options. A good recruiter can help make the transition successful.

### **SELL THE AREA**

When you arrange for someone to show the candidate around the community and visit some specific neighborhoods and homes, be sure they are a great ambassador. This person has just become a true extension of your company. If you delegate this to a local realtor, make sure they understand the situation and are selling both you and the area. Be sure they are punctual and professional. You don't want to fly a candidate back to visit again because the realtor arrived after dark and the candidate never saw the area in the daylight. Yes, this does happen.

Companies must have the hiring manager or someone even more senior, make the offer. After buying a house and getting married, deciding to accept a new job is one of the most emotional decisions someone ever makes and you have to do it that way. It involves who they will spend every day with for the next 10-20 years. Make sure the hiring manager or his boss makes the offer. Show them the love. It makes sense that a candidate wants to hear his new manager tell him how much he is wanted, how well he will fit in, how valuable his contribution will be and how much his manager looks forward to working with him and getting to know him. Can a HR manager, who the candidate has never met and will never work with, make a meaningful presentation of a job offer? Should a marriage proposal be done by the minister?

Sometimes compensation is not competitive. Do

your homework and make sure you are offering within the industry's range. If you try to find a candidate based on a salary that is not competitive, it is very hard to go back to candidates and offer a higher salary and expect them to be interested. Relocation packages are an area where companies can differentiate. Signing bonuses are very attractive to young engineers who have limited resources and college loans even though smart candidates know that a higher salary is better in the long run. Don't lowball as it is insulting and candidates will walk away. Be prepared to negotiate in areas outside of salary. Total compensation can be an issue when they see friends in other industries making large bonuses while many paper mill bonuses are small or nonexistent at their level.

Hire more bench strength. In 2014 paper mills are doing a better job of college recruiting and building bench strength with engineers. During the depths of the recent recession, there was little or no bench building which contributed to the shrinking pool of experience. Companies need to continue to hire straight from college and take time to train engineers who are ready to step into roles of increasing responsibility. Companies are still reluctant to spend years training a new engineer, which is why it is important to be able to keep them once they are trained.

---

## **SELL YOURSELF**

When you have interviewed and identified a great candidate, go after them. Make an offer and show your interest. As soon as the offer is made, the tables have turned and you must sell yourself even more than during the interview process. The take it or leave it offer is not bringing in the best. Be prepared to find out what they need, what they want and what the competitor is offering. After they accept, be sure their new manager stays in close contact as they resign from their current job and begin the transition. You have to show your interest in them and continue to be aggressive as too many offers are declined, which is costly to the company.

Again, a good recruiter will help facilitate all of this and make the interviewing, offer/negotiation/acceptance and on-boarding very seamless.

---

## **HOW TO KEEP THEM**

Work variety, career track planning and career growth path, flexible hours, mentoring and training are just some of the things companies can do to keep their young millennial engineers engaged. Engineers often

complain of being treated like a commodity with no desire by the company to really nurture and see them flourish. This generation is used to being electronically dialed into their social network with instant communication, even if it is through a screen. They can get instant feedback, and instant results. Waiting a year for a performance review and bonus adds to the feeling of "working in left field" and being treated as a commodity. What worked in the past may not work with today's workforce.

Millennials are used to the latest social and communications technology and a casual world. They grew up with Smart phones and iPads. Support them with the platforms they use. Business dress is something their grandparents wore. Offer a casual atmosphere. They don't have to telecommute from Starbucks and nothing less than a strong contribution and value should be expected but don't forget that you are not just competing with other old paper companies.

Many companies delay significant training to see if a new hire will stay before investing. There is a current television commercial running where two business managers are talking about their employees when one says: "What if we train them and they leave?" and the other manager replies: "What if we don't train them and they stay?" Remember that if you don't take care of your customers, someone else will and this also applies to your best employees.

Engineers work long hours, often in tough conditions and have to produce in the face of a shrinking industry workforce. This can be a very stressful environment both physically and emotionally and it is certainly not for everyone. However, it is more than anecdotal to say that those who spend time in the paper industry and in paper mills develop a strong affinity for their work and often find themselves returning after leaving the industry.

*Wyck Newberry is Managing Director of Tidewater Recruiting Associates, a recruiting firm specializing in paper industry recruiting: wyck@tidewaterrecruit.com. PPI*