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Hiring Talent with Nontraditional Backgrounds

By Deanna Hartley

Could an employee in the manufacturing textile industry develop the proficiency to work in the insurance business? Does an IT professional have what it takes to work in the financial services industry? That depends on the individual, but the nature of business today makes it important for talent managers to be open to candidates with diverse educational backgrounds, occupational experiences and perspectives.

“When you’re sitting at the table — whether you’re at the board of directors table, senior management or middle management — [and] everybody came out of the same industry, they’re looking at things through [the same lens],” said Janice Reals Ellig, co-CEO of Chadick Ellig Executive Search Advisories. “If you bring people in who have an advertising background into a marketing department of a major financial services organization, they’re going to bring a different perspective of how to reach the ultimate buyer, the consumer.”

Ellig said hiring “outside the box” tends to foster more open, creative thinking.

“Oftentimes, financial services companies will want somebody out of a Google or an Amazon for their creative thinking [or will] take people out of the technology business where it was brick and mortar, but now [they] want to do it online — how do you reach that individual who wants to buy insurance, who wants to do their banking?” Ellig said. “[For instance,] those in wealth management want some technology-savvy professionals to come into the financial services organization.”

Hiring individuals with nontraditional backgrounds could be a boon to business.

“You get multiple perspectives for problems or challenges and fresh perspectives in your day-to-day operations,” said Michael Anderson, senior research scientist at CPP. Bringing in someone new, even from a different area within the organization, could help break down functional or departmental barriers.

But there are instances — including some IT and research-based positions — where hiring candidates with non-industry-specific backgrounds isn’t feasible because “outsiders” likely can’t perform basic functions, Anderson explained.

That, however, is less of an issue than many may think. At Sodexo, a food service and facilities management company, bringing on board individuals with experience in different industries has been advantageous for the corporate communications department.

“We monitor the external environment and bring that knowledge internally back to the executive team so that we can respond appropriately,” said Jaya Bohlmann, vice president of public relations at Sodexo. “It might mean that we respond from a communications standpoint; it might mean we change something we do operationally.

“Without that external perspective and constant monitoring, the company — any company — can easily become very internally focused, make decisions and communicate based on what we think is great about our company or what we think is important, and there [are] no checks and balances, so we wouldn’t be meeting the messaging needs of the audience.”

Dipping Into a Diversified Talent Pool

At Grand Circle Corp. — a U.S. direct market tour operator of international vacations for older Americans — detecting leadership qualities in and promoting individuals with nontraditional backgrounds is common.

Take, for instance, Martha Prybylo, executive vice president of people and culture at Grand Circle.

“My background was in public service, and then I ran a state organization council on aging, so it was all very parochial, nonprofit public service,” Prybylo said. “[Then] I was brought in to run an international foundation in a corporate environment, of which I had no experience and had traveled maybe once or twice out of the country.”

As the company grew, Prybylo moved up the ranks and currently oversees HR — even though her HR-deficient background would seemingly disqualify her. She said there are numerous individuals thriving in roles at Grand Circle — including on the executive team — with backgrounds that deviate from the norm.

“For instance, the woman who leads our entire international worldwide organization started as an executive assistant, and another one who heads up a good chunk of the worldwide organization was a sales associate,” she said.

Regardless of background, individuals who demonstrate they have the requisite skill sets for leadership roles can move up the corporate ladder, Prybylo explained.

At Aflac, candidates are screened for certain core values — such as integrity, trust and ethics — that are integral to success at the supplemental insurance company. Janet Baker, Aflac’s senior vice president of HR, said applicants also are tested for their ability to be adaptable, versatile and service-oriented, what she called “tickets to entry.”

“They may have the greatest technical skill in the world, but if they’re not able to relate to our customers, employees or field force, that technical skill doesn’t help us in the service business,” she said.

Candidates who meet the aforementioned criteria and are hired subsequently undergo intensive training to hone their skill sets.

“Each of our departments has some type of structured training platform that they use, so when they come in the door with the basics, I feel confident our training programs

throughout the organization [will] help them to be successful here at Aflac,” Baker said.

Several years ago, as jobs in the textile industry in parts of the Southeast began to dwindle, Aflac’s recruiting efforts brought in a significant number of people.

“They had the basics — they understood integrity and trust; these were individuals who had long careers in the textile industry, but the industry changed and the jobs went away. There was nothing wrong with them,” Baker said. “We were able to [bring on] some exceptional people with a great work ethic and wonderful communication skills. We partnered with local colleges and universities to help with the other set of skills, and they are some of our most successful employees.”

Quelling Qualms About ‘Outsiders’

It isn’t unreasonable for employers to harbor concerns over outsider candidates, such as: Do they have the requisite skills, knowledge and abilities to perform their jobs effectively?

“Whenever you bring somebody in from a different educational background or even a different industry, there’s a lot of ambiguity [and] uncertainty that comes with [it],” Anderson said. “With that comes increased complexity within the group — sometimes there can be a communication breakdown bringing somebody in.

“[Further,] with these different perspectives, there comes a lot more debate and discussion around problems and how people go about things, and this sometimes can delay the time it takes to solve a problem or decide on a certain action.”

It can take longer for an employee with a different background to ramp up and understand the jargon and nuances of a job, Bohlmann explained.

“It might take that person longer to understand the key issues, and, in my group, issues touching our industry are crucial because we deal with [them] every day,” she said. “For example, from a food perspective, some of the issues that we really care about are health and wellness, obesity, school lunches, the importance of breakfast to learning. [Understanding] these things can take a bit longer if you hire from outside.”

Contemplating Cultural Fit

In addition to certain tests Bohlmann requires to gauge candidates’ skill sets, the recruiting department at Sodexo has generated probing questions designed to draw out desirable skills and leadership qualities for each open position.

“We ask a lot of descriptive and experiential questions,” she said. “Tell me about a time when this happened and how you handled it. Tell me about your proudest moment as a professional. Tell me about the biggest challenge you’ve faced and how you’ve handled it. How people answer those questions helps us determine fit.”

There are other precautionary measures employers can take to determine whether an individual will assimilate well within a corporate culture.

“A good way to assess this is by looking at the individual’s values and the organization’s values to see if there’s some value congruence,” Anderson said. “This can be done with an extended job analysis, an organizational survey. If this individual values monetary

reward [or] achievement, is this an organization that offers higher pay or promotion opportunities? If this person really values creativity or creative expression, does this organization allow them to offer their ideas?"

Providing candidates with a realistic job preview is also integral to ensure a good fit.

"A lot of times when people look for a different job, candidates always put their best foot forward and organizations do that too, especially if they're really excited about a candidate," Anderson said. "They'll tend to glorify positions or embellish the job description — so the person thinks they're going to be doing [X], then they get to the job and they'll be misfit."

Further, setting leadership and development training programs in place can help ensure that outsiders assimilate well.

Employers don't have to resort to a shot-in-the-dark approach to hire outsider candidates. There are means by which employers can determine organizational fit and predict applicant performance.

"There are different types of selection devices that are designed for weeding out the people who may have a lower propensity of success in an organization," said Jeff Pon, principal at Booz Allen Hamilton. "Those instruments have to be non-racial or national-origin biased. Many organizations out there, such as our firm, do this type of work so the predicted validity of these instruments is neutral when it comes to that, but it's also predictive of performance in an organization based upon certain types of answers to questions, biodata, assessment center information and behavior witnessed at the different types of assessment centers."

At Deloitte, It's All About Attributes

At Deloitte, one of the keys to successfully tapping into a talent pool of candidates with nontraditional backgrounds is to seek out key competencies or attributes that make employees effective on the job.

"Various analytical skills, people interface skills, communication skills, some things you think of when you think of EQ — the ability to read and interact with others and influence others — those attributes can obviously [come from individuals] from a wide array of backgrounds and majors," said Diane Borhani, national campus recruiting director at Deloitte.

Deloitte eliminates the ambiguity around external hires' performance capabilities by ensuring they have base line competencies and abilities.

"[Outsider hires] go through a lot of training — classroom and otherwise — to be ready to work with clients, but we need people to be able to get in and [get up to speed] quickly," she said.

To that end, the company seeks candidates who have proven to be successful in a comparable environment. Deloitte has tapped sources such as former U.S. junior military officers to recruit individuals with nontraditional backgrounds.

"When you go back to those attributes, these are people [who] have learned how to work

effectively with large and very diverse teams; they've had to learn the discipline to really understand the task at hand and get it done," she said. "There are a lot of these leadership attributes, [and] we've found that even though they may not have a consulting background or technology risk background that is identical to what we do, they come in, assimilate and learn very quickly."

Deloitte also fosters a strategic partnership with Teach for America, a nonprofit organization that provides college graduates and professionals with opportunities to teach in low-income communities around the U.S.

"These are individuals who didn't necessarily have a background in accounting or business or anything of that nature," she said. "They may have wanted to pursue a degree in education or economics and ended up deciding to teach for a few years. Then, upon completing that two-year assignment, they thought they wanted to do something else."

Since individuals are expected to have certain qualifications going into Teach for America, alumni who have joined Deloitte's consulting business have proved to be a valuable resource for the firm, Borhani explained.

"They had to show a lot of interpersonal skills, [and] the program really teaches them a tremendous amount about influence, patience, [and] understanding people, [along with] working through and doing problem resolution, which is so much of what our business is about," she said.

The number of these outsider hires is small, but the ones who were hired have successfully integrated into the firm. This has reinforced Deloitte's stance on focusing on individuals' attributes and less on their majors despite debate about recruitment of nontraditional majors, Borhani said.

"[For instance, in] our consulting business, we have analyst programs where we hire people with music backgrounds; there are people who have economics [or] math majors — lots of things that are not pure technology or business majors, but they displayed the [necessary] competencies."

Further, she stressed the importance of ascertaining cultural fit at the accounting and consulting firm.

"When you think of the Deloitte culture, it's one where we believe in very open, honest, candid interactions, and we're extremely collaborative, so when we're interviewing people, we seek those attributes," she said.

Ethics and integrity also must be ingrained into candidates who aspire to work at the firm.

"We hold people to a standard of expectation around honesty and integrity," she said. "When you think about how we're providing services to clients, we can't afford to have unethical behavior of any sort. We would rule someone out for anything that shows they've not learned from their mistakes or done something appropriate."

In the future, Deloitte expects to recruit more individuals with nontraditional backgrounds whose attributes and values are in alignment with the firm's.