

Growing Staff in the Forest

By John J. Champlin

Of the numerous factors that impact employees' likelihood to leave their current place of employment, a lack of opportunities for advancement or internal promotion often ranks highly. In fact, in a recent survey of 7,350 LinkedIn members, the top reason employees sought employment elsewhere was the want for greater opportunities for advancement. Individuals are frequently looking toward the future and where their careers might lead them. This forward-thinking is not necessarily driven by dissatisfaction with a current role, but can be fostered by a sense of motivation — a drive to do more. Organizationally, the onus often falls on human resources to develop a culture that recognizes and appreciates the value of internal growth.

Of the many factors that impact employees' likelihood to leave their current place of employment, a lack of opportunities for advancement often ranks highly.

Facing low staffing levels and a looming outsourcing effort (and with resources scarce to address either), Wake Forest University human resources embraced the challenge of shifting staff perceptions about and instilling a new culture around growing internal talent. By employing a cross-functional team of organizational development specialists and a recruiter, HR was able to demonstrate the value of hiring internal talent, provide support for staff applying for internal positions, and showcase HR's role as a campus resource and strategic partner.

Challenges to Growth

In the summer of 2012, the fallout from the economic recession was still evident, as unemployment rates remained high and jobs remained scarce. When job openings became available at Wake Forest, current employees were routinely among the first to apply. The HR team knew the value that current employees, with their institutional knowledge and acumen, could bring to new positions. Unfortunately, hiring managers were less aware of these benefits, and internal applicants often failed to reach the interview process. Naturally, this left many employees discouraged and questioning the university's process of and policies for reviewing internal applicants. Perplexed as to why internal candidates were routinely being overlooked for open positions, the university's recruiters reached out to several hiring managers and were

surprised by what they found. The resumes and cover letters from internal applicants, many unchanged since their arrival at Wake Forest, simply could not compete with the polished documents presented by external applicants.

Also in the summer of 2012, the decision was made to transfer the services for Wake Forest's university stores function to an off-campus vendor. This outsourcing effort impacted approximately 15 current university employees in retail and merchandise warehouse positions. While efforts were being made to guarantee employment for up to a year with the new vendor, Wake Forest's chief HR officer stressed to the HR team that every attempt should be made to assist these employees with their transitions. This included preparing them to interview with the new vendor, assume other roles within the university or pursue employment elsewhere.

To address these challenges, it would take a combined effort from recruitment and organizational development. But the team faced challenges of its own, primarily that it was newly formed and immediately faced with confronting issues that could greatly impact the campus's view of human resources. Additionally, staffing changes had reduced the three-person recruitment team to a single individual. All parties recognized the campus's needs, but wondered how and where to best utilize the resources, talents and strengths of the group.

Planting the Seeds

It quickly became evident to the team that the best way to facilitate the growth of internal talent in the short-term was to help internal applicants better prepare for the application and interviewing process. To that end, the team worked to develop two classes — one on writing resumes and one on interviewing. Each team member brought specific knowledge and skills to the table.

Strengths of the recruitment specialist included:

- Knowledge of the application process
- Expertise with technical systems
- Expansive campus relationships
- Broad understanding of university operations

Strengths of the organizational development team included:

- Curriculum-building expertise
- Presentation experience
- Marketing
- Ability to measure and assess

All of these strengths and skill sets were critical to creating a value-added product.

After individual strengths were identified, the duties of both parties were specifically outlined to ensure clarity. From class development to post-class evaluation, the organizational development team and the recruiter knew their specific roles. The OD team was charged with developing class curriculum; marketing the classes campus-wide; conducting the classes; and administering post-class surveys. The recruiter worked with the OD team to identify learning outcomes and inform class content; marketed the class to key stakeholders (internal job applicants); sat in on classes to answer questions and add insight; and offered follow-up assistance to individual class participants. The OD team and the recruiter worked together to review and evaluate participant feedback and make revisions to the classes where necessary.

This kind of role definition ensured that resources were utilized in the most efficient way and that efforts weren't duplicated. Additionally, individual team members were able to work in the realms in which they excelled, which increased engagement in the project and ultimately produced a better product. Shared ownership ensured that there was no lack of commitment from either party.

Fruits of the Labor

In September 2012, the first of the career planning classes — “Developing an Effective Resume” — was launched, and campus response was positive. Due to the strong relationships that had been established during the planning phase, the recruiter was able to personally invite to the class individuals who frequently applied for internal positions. Individuals affected by the university stores transition were also in attendance, as were other curious staff. The one-hour class explored basic resume formatting,

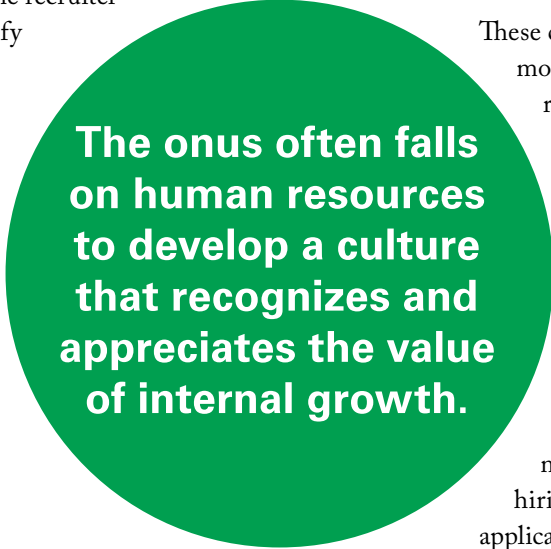
common mistakes and best practices. In a post-class survey, one attendee wrote, “I haven't updated my resume in years and received some good ideas and insights. It was especially helpful having people from human resources there too.” This feedback reflected that the marketing efforts had succeeded in attracting the type of people who would benefit most from this class.

The next class, “The Art of Interviewing,” covered behavioral-based interview questions, various interview formats, illegal questions and advice for handling interview anxiety. This class drew on the experiences of those in the room to support and educate one another. Again, survey responses reflected the positive value of having an organizational development team member as class facilitator, but also the added value of having a recruiter present to answer questions and supply “inside” information.

These classes left staff members wanting more. In particular, there were requests for a class on writing cover letters and a class for hiring managers to walk through the hiring process from their perspective. The third class developed was “Concise, Convincing and Captivating Cover Letters” followed by “Navigating Recruiting and Hiring,” in which hiring managers received insight into the hiring process and tips for screening applications, reviewing cover letters and conducting meaningful interviews.

One class attendee wrote in the post-class survey that he “appreciated the information about how managers can work in conjunction with human resources in order to successfully fill a position with a qualified applicant.” Through these classes, it came to light that knowledge gaps existed in many of the processes and procedures assumed to have been well-known by campus hiring managers.

Continued interest from the campus community led to the addition of a workshop called “Managing Your Career.” This class is meant to challenge individuals to think critically about what they want to accomplish in their careers and offers different approaches to help make these desires become a reality. In effect, this class operated as a catalyst for staff members to attend other classes in the career planning series by encouraging them to embrace



The onus often falls on human resources to develop a culture that recognizes and appreciates the value of internal growth.

the control that they held over their future. Also offered was a career coaching small group. The cohort met for one hour each week for six weeks. The group was formed in order to give people a confidential space to envision their careers, listen to and learn from each other, create next steps, and receive support and accountability — an individual development plan of sorts. This opportunity was so appreciated by Wake Forest staff members that it will be offered again this spring.

Outcomes and Lessons Learned

Three years after initial conversations began around better supporting internal staff, the expected (and unexpected) outcomes are evident:

- Five classes focused on career planning, all facilitated by internal trainers, are available for staff and faculty and have been attended by over 250 people.
- The recruitment and OD team operates coherently and with a strong understanding of each function's work and strengths and where the team members can collaborate.
- HR was able to respond quickly to staff members' needs (spoken and unspoken) and proactively provide services during a transitional period.
- The recruiter was able to build strong relationships with staff members interested in internal opportunities and assist them in presenting their best selves through the application process.


The lessons learned from this experience reflect consistent truths in many work environments and are often helpful to reflect upon:

- During high-stress times, when “busy” is a constant state, it is important to remember to ask for help. Collaboration and assistance can frequently be close by, lying in wait. Similarly, the best colleagues are those that can recognize when help is needed and will offer it willingly and freely. The efforts at Wake Forest would never have worked without the recognition that collaboration was necessary.
- Interactions between HR and the rest of the campus community outside of typical HR inquiries benefit all parties. The perception of HR as an isolated entity is diminished as informal interactions increase. Each of these casual moments can serve as a hyper-local climate survey which can generate ideas for future projects to

help the institution in meeting its strategic goals. It was through these conversations that Wake Forest's HR team learned of the perceived lack of opportunities for internal promotion.

- Opportunities for HR peers to interact and collaborate also carry much value. Just as campuses often operate in silos, so too can large departments. Look for opportunities to bring together individuals from different functional areas of human resources for structured projects and/or impromptu gatherings. The Wake Forest HR office uses teams like these for process improvement, creation of new programs and event planning.
- Work to anticipate the needs of staff and faculty members. By doing so, HR can shed the mantle of personnel emergency responder and gain the status of trusted partner. The staff members affected by the university stores transition greatly appreciated the outreach and support of the HR team.
- It is critical to prepare for the difficult conversations that can accompany job change discussions. Staff members who completed the career planning series and were not selected for the internal position for which they applied were oftentimes quite disappointed. However, because of the connection and trust formed through the classes, the opportunity often arises for HR to speak with those staff members and learn more about the positions they are attracted to and what positions might be a better fit. These conversations, while difficult, can create powerful relationships and are important for staff members' continued growth.

Helping Employees Help Themselves

Wake Forest's recruitment and organizational development team has worked to provide strong support for staff members interested in movement and advancement within the university. Through the class offerings and small group coaching sessions, as well as personal interactions, the team helps staff understand that they have an essential, active role in defining the direction of their careers. These opportunities help members of the campus community understand their role as advocate for themselves and reiterate the importance of being the creator of the opportunities they are seeking. 

John Champlin is manager of recruitment and organizational development at Wake Forest University. He can be reached at chamjj@wfu.edu.