



BEST PRACTICES

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Build now for future growth

“**G**rowth? Wouldn't that be nice” is what some companies are saying these days. Still, others have been able to grow through the current downturn in the economy. It might be a mistake to take an overly conservative approach and not plan for growth. When the time comes, you want to be able to take advantage of opportunity, not miss it.

One major challenge for small companies is trying to balance making a profit with building a deep, solid stable of employees who can handle new growth. Most owners try to make these decisions on the fly or on gut instinct. A more systematic way is through the budget process. If, in your budget planning process, you create a budget item for interns or hires for future growth, you can quantify and manage the cost.

Many companies have been able to train employees doing productive work — or you might have them in a non-productive training program, but only for weeks at a time, not all year. Either way, the cost is not as great as you might fear without running the numbers.

Today's hires, tomorrow's leaders

We recommend hiring interns and/or college graduates into your organization along the way, so you have future managerial talent. Many in the industry believe the role of account managers and other middle managers, moving forward, will require a better understanding of technology for communication. College-trained people generally possess these skills, and can be promoted faster.

Too often, owners try to hire experienced people from other companies when they need managers. The success rate on these types of hires is lower. One simple explanation is that there is a reason this type of employee is available. The fact is, when a company has a good employee, it rarely lets him or her get away.

Strange, isn't it, the same companies hesitant

to invest in training and developing a deep bench, are willing to pay big dollars to headhunters to find people when they're needed? The same investment redirected to training and development of key employees is a much better use of those funds.

We subscribe to the build-from-within strategy. This works well if you have the right mindset and system for mining talent. For example, within your ranks of gardeners, identify the higher-potential employees for promotion to crew leader. Most companies wait until they need a new crew leader, then either try to go outside to hire an experienced one or promote the best gardener. The flaws in these approaches are that the best gardener is not *prepared* to be a crew leader — and, again, hiring from the outside has a lower success rate.

The better approach is to identify a high-potential employee and team him or her with a good crew leader. This ensures the employee is trained and ready when needed. There is no real increased cost for this; it just takes organization and planning.

Education vs. experience

Most companies that hire college grads find they move up the ranks more quickly because of a higher level of interest in horticulture and a better education base. True, these grads often initially do not work physically as hard as their peers, which can be a problem, but remember you are hiring them for their potential. As an owner, you must be their advocate and help them become successful.

This is not to say that you should *only* hire from within for experienced people. If you do hire experienced people and bring them into your company, you bring differing viewpoints and experience sets, which is good for all organizations.

It is a good policy to always be looking for good people. When a good one comes along, bring them on to help build the bench. It is when you have to go outside in a time of need that you often end up settling just to get “someone.” That's when mistakes are made.