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How to Reinvent your Mature Business with Tech-Savvy Professionals

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By: Bill Verhelle

In the following article, industry veteran Bill Verhelle offers eight suggestions for hiring and retaining young, technology-savvy workers into a mature business.

1. Interview differently. The standard interview process developed for hiring seasoned executives is not especially useful with young, entry-level employees. Instead of talking about past workplace accomplishments or hypothetical workplace scenarios, ask broad, open-ended questions. The purpose of the interview should be to determine the candidate's attitude and interests. Try to identify candidates that really want to make a difference. Hire bright candidates with the most optimistic outlook (best attitude). Put them in roles where they can build upon their personal interests.

2. Communicate big transformative goals. Incremental growth and profitability goals are not sufficiently motivational. Discuss challenges for which you don't have all the answers. Ask your staff to help you solve the big, strategic challenges. Your goals might include transforming your distribution model or becoming the best company in your marketplace through innovation and a commitment to excellence. If possible, ask your employees to help you set the specific goals. Then paint a clear picture of what your company will look like in five or ten years if the goals are achieved. Challenge your team to accomplish those big goals and agree upon ways to benchmark your progress.

3. Staff cross-functional teams of younger workers, and isolate them from the larger organization. If you run a large business in a mature industry, staffed with more mature workers, keep your newly hired, younger workers together in a cohesive (isolated) group. Ideally, hire them into a single team, business unit or subsidiary. Locate them where meaningful change can occur without the approval of the larger organization. Don't put the team in a position where every transformative idea they bring forward is judged or voted on by the middle managers in your existing organization before anyone can move forward. Instead, put them in a team where they have the authority to test their new ideas, on a small scale.

4. Assign the new team to one of your most inspired, respected managers. Pick someone who is patient with his or her reports; but, who calls it like he or she sees it.

Choose someone who isn't afraid to break a little glass when necessary in support of an innovative new idea that might improve the business. The leader you select should also have a sincere commitment to the professional development of the people for whom they are responsible. Young professionals can tell if a manager really cares about them and their long-term success. Loyalty is a two way street. The sooner your firm can demonstrate its loyalty and commitment to the young professionals entering your business, the better. Make sure the manager you select for the team is an authentic individual that will consistently project your values to your new staff.

5. Treat the new hires differently than you have treated new entrants to your organization in the past. Make sure the team leader knows the importance of this special team. You should personally commit to investing substantial, face-to-face time with the team (at least every month, if not weekly). After highlighting the big, strategic vision you want the organization to accomplish, spend most of your time in each meeting asking questions and listening. Nothing communicates respect like listening; and you may be surprised what insights you'll gain regarding your overall business strategy from their fresh, technology savvy, outside perspective.

6. Flatten your organization. Silos are good for cost-leadership. Everyone wants to control costs. But if you are bringing in young, technology-savvy workers to spur innovation and transformation, recognize that the silos are working against meaningful change. Flatten your organizational structure wherever possible to spur innovation and to increase employee engagement.

Build an entirely separate business unit for your new team. Make it an experiment in "flatness." Three layers (four at most) from CEO to team members is a perfect organizational structure to get you reconnected to your customers and competitive challenges in the marketplace, while fostering the agility and adaptability needed to accomplish meaningful innovation. This type of structure is used in most lean start-ups. It may be far different from the organizational structure that has evolved in your

current organization. If you want transformative change, don't be afraid to try something different.

7. Encourage non-credit mistakes. Successful businesses that extend credit tend to have a low tolerance for mistakes. But business transformation requires experimentation. Differentiate between credit mistakes (which must be avoided) and business or process innovation mistakes (which should be encouraged and celebrated). Catch people failing at worthwhile attempts to change your delivery model or your long-standing approach to technology, and hold them up as examples of the type of experimentation your business needs to accomplish its transformational goals. Unless you make it clear that you are willing to accept mistakes, innovation won't happen.

8. Make work fun. Everyone prefers to have fun at work. But, some of us have long ago resigned ourselves to something less than a fun work environment. We compartmentalize our lives into fun times away from work, and a needlessly serious workplace environment. The workplace doesn't have to be dull and tedious. Younger workers know it; they have friends in startups and large technology companies that enjoy themselves at work. Word has gotten out. And now that everyone knows there are enjoyable places to work, this is the kind of culture you need to foster in your company if you want to attract and retain the best and brightest young talent in your organization.

How do you create a fun culture? The good news is that you don't have to create it. Just lighten-up on the rules and allow the new employees to create it themselves. To be clear, this means you should give your isolated group of young professionals the freedom to control their own work environment, including things like: dress code, seating arrangements, reasonable input and guidance concerning IT systems and hardware (including workplace access to social media) and perhaps most importantly, after work social events involving family members and guests. The rest of your

organization will work hard to prevent this from happening, so recognize that it can only occur with clear, unambiguous top management support.

By the way, be sure to personally attend as many of these after hours work events with your new team as possible. It is a privilege to be invited. Attending a few happy hour events may be the fastest ways to build personal relationships with the talented new employees that are the key to helping you reinvent your entire company. This can be fun for you too!