

# BUSINESS★FORUM

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## Honor talent that makes your business productive

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Guest Columnist

We hear the word "talent" tossed about quite a bit these days. We know there is, and will continue to be, a shortage of it. We also know that finding and engaging the right talent will be the key to surviving in the service-driven new economy.

So, as we mark Labor Day, it seems fitting to ask the question: Why do so many companies fail to recognize and fully employ the talents of their workers?

According to some experts, only about one-fourth of American workers are truly engaged — that is, committed, productive and doing what they do best. If this is true, it means that a depressingly large number of Americans are being deprived of their right to meaningful work. It also means that companies are failing to capitalize on their greatest



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competitive asset.

In 20-plus years of helping people and companies identify their best talent, I have observed five things that keep getting in the way:

1. Losing sight of talent by overemphasizing knowledge, credentials and experience. Just look at most want ads and you'll see the job requirements listed tend to be mostly knowledge — or experienced-based — ones that make candidates eligible, as opposed to suitable, for the position.

Companies repeatedly screen out candidates with better native ability to do the job because they may lack a knowledge that could be acquired. Why not list the talent profile required in the want ads as well?

2. Hiring in a hurry. Many companies are asking the question "Can you start on Monday?" earlier and more frequently than questions designed to uncover talent. If it's important to hire the right person, why not do it right the first time, beginning with updating the job description, using behavioral interviewing or validated assessments,

and taking the time to check references?

3. Viewing workers as interchangeable parts. Sad to say, but many managers seem to believe that people can be bent, shaped, folded or mutilated to fit any job, especially lower-level ones. They often "micromanage," prescribing that jobs be done "the one best way," thereby squelching the opportunity for the individual to achieve results using his or her own unique gifts. These managers either need to be replaced or made to understand that a person's talent needs to be matched with the role.

4. Trying to correct weaknesses when they should be encouraging strengths. No matter how hard we try, as the saying goes, we will never be able to train a turkey to climb a tree (better to hire a squirrel). But that doesn't stop some managers from trying. After hiring or promoting a worker into the wrong position, they focus so intently on correcting the person's shortcomings that they overlook strengths and send a message ("you are inadequate") that undermines confidence and productivity.

5. Failing to honor talent at all lev-

els. The real heroes of American business are the customer service representatives, administrative assistants, nurses, teachers, engineers and truckdrivers who are engaged and productive. These are the people who interface directly with customers and create value. Why shouldn't the best workers be allowed to make a lot more money than the worst performers in those jobs, even if it means a top-performing waiter makes more than the restaurant manager?

While we're at it, how about creating ladders of excellence for all occupations to climb without having to be promoted to a level of incompetence — usually into a manager's job. Speaking of managers, let's honor the really good ones who understand the nature of human talent and work to nurture it.

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