

Finding – And Keeping – Talent



By Cindy Seel, Executive Director, PMA Education Foundation

A retail chain's rapid expansion means it needs to find enough experienced associates to fill new positions created in every department. Filling them in the produce division is particularly difficult — the special combination of product knowledge and understanding of the retail environment is difficult to find and crucial to profitability.

A distributor, in an ongoing effort to hire enough people to handle its growing operations, discovers many other companies are clamoring for the same small talent pool. The company realizes traditional approaches no longer work — and it will have to find other ways to entice the best people into considering careers in produce distribution.

A grower/shipper's management team strategically envisions its growth and the people needed to make it happen. The resulting new organization chart has a lot of empty slots, and team members realize no matter how great their growth potential, they can't do it without the right people.

Companies up and down the supply chain can identify with these scenarios. Ask almost any produce executive the biggest challenges he or she is facing, and chief among them are finding the right people. The best college and university graduates are drawn to higher-profile industries with bigger recruiting and compensation budgets. Companies recycle top talent as they compete in a dwindling labor pool.

So how are industry companies finding new employees? For the most part, they are using their own limited combinations of career fairs, campus recruiting, internships, word-of-mouth within produce and other perishables industries, hiring people away from other produce companies, employment Web sites and existing relationships.

The efforts to go it alone are not enough; the employee crunch is getting worse. Two years ago, industry leaders realized the need for a comprehensive initiative to address recruitment and retention challenges throughout the supply chain. The solution: the PMA Education Foundation (PMAEF), a not-for-profit organization mobilized in 2006 to focus on the future of the industry through investment in people.

PMAEF's founders realized there was no single, organized effort promoting the rewards and opportunities of careers in produce. In establishing the foundation, we've set out to change that. Our mission is to create partnerships with produce businesses and educational institutions to ensure a strong talent pool and continued leadership for our future.

Steve Barnard, president and CEO of Mission Produce, passionately believes in a unified effort. That's why his company contributes to PMAEF and why he agreed this year to chair the board of directors. "This is an industry-wide issue affecting every company in the industry," he said recently. "We need to take care of our own. As companies grow and change, we need a way to recruit and retain people for the entire industry even if they don't go to work for our respective companies."

It's a daunting task. However, demographic changes are

happening so rapidly, and the fight for talent is so fierce, the industry must take a proactive stance or it loses in the long run.

Bill Schuler, PMAEF's vice chair and president of Castellini Company, agrees there is strength in numbers, whether across the supply chain or within its segments. "We can't make much impact acting alone as individual companies," said Schuler recently. "However, just imagine if many companies in our industry combined resources. The organized approach to tackling recruitment and retention issues would enable us to accomplish things none of us could do alone."

What will PMAEF do to help sustain the viability of the industry? You often hear the phrase "from field to fork" but another supply chain demands our attention — student to leader. PMAEF is creating programs focused on the entire produce career cycle. Our goal is to recruit top talent to the industry and then keep them by developing their leadership potential. Initial foundation programs include the Nucci Scholarship for Culinary Innovation and the Pack Family/PMA Career Pathways program. These two event scholarships have been successful at raising awareness of our industry and recruiting quality employees, but they are not enough.

A more fundamental strategy is being put in place. Over the next few months we will develop a strong network of educators who can serve as a conduit between the industry and students. From that connection will grow programs such as produce industry guest lecture opportunities and a series of sample case studies professors can use to teach real-world industry issues. For students, we're planning a career resource Web site, job-shadowing programs and a job bank of full- and part-time positions. We'll help establish internships throughout the supply chain and develop an internship "effective practices" guide to enhance the value to students of existing programs.

And these are just the programs to attract new talent. We still need to address the challenges of career development for those in the industry. The possibilities are endless and exciting! Can we do all this and more? Yes, we can — if we have the support of the produce industry. "The foundation will grow in phases; what we're doing now is just the first phase," says Barnard. "We're looking for industry-wide support. As we grow the foundation, the potential for new programs will grow and we all will benefit in the long run."

To learn more about the PMA Education Foundation and its activities, visit www.pmaef.com. Want to contribute? We welcome your support in whatever way makes sense for you. Contact me at cseel@pmaef.com to find out the opportunities available.

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