

Into the Mix - Managing Contract Professionals

Have you managed technical project teams that included contract employees? If you haven't yet, there's a good chance you will soon. Some areas of the contract technical services sector is experiencing yearly growth rates that top 10%. And forward-thinking companies are integrating these contract employees with direct staff to maximize resources and meet project objectives.

To get the best results when adding contract employees to your personnel mix, careful management is the key. You must understand their motivations and develop a culture in which they can succeed. The following suggestions can help you get the most out of the contract professionals you use.

Determine When to Use Contract Staff

Contract employees can be great resources, provided they're used in the proper circumstances. Before you even begin the recruiting process, make sure the position is right for a contractor. To find out, ask yourself the following questions:

- Does the assignment have a tight deadline?
- Does it require specialized expertise?
- Are immediate results expected?
- Is the assignment well-defined with a measurable end point?
- Is it a "one time only" assignment (opposed to repeatable work)?
- Do time or money considerations prevent you from hiring a full time person?

If you answer "yes" to the questions appropriate to your circumstance, you probably have a task well-suited for a contract employee.

Prepare Direct Employees

Direct staff may not know what to expect from contractors, or they may have misperceptions about them. Clear communication is the best way to ensure that the two groups work well together.

- Define the roles of contractors and direct staff, and show the value that each brings to the table. Contract employees have specific skills needed for the short term. Direct employees possess broader management skills and knowledge about company operations necessary for the long haul.
- Assure direct employees that contractors do not pose a threat. Rather, let direct employees know that contract employee skills complement their own and improve the chances of project success (which leads to increased job security).
- Cultivate working relationships between contract and direct employees. By doing

so, you encourage your team to share ideas and develop personal rapport.

Make Contract Assignments Appealing

Your direct staff's idea of satisfying work includes a number of factors: security, responsibility, salary, benefits. The same holds true for contract employees—it's just that their definition consists of different components. The closer you can align contract assignments with the following factors, the easier it becomes to motivate and manage contract employees:

Flexible - Contract employees find flexibility by working on different types of projects that advance their professional development.

Task-oriented - They enjoy well-defined assignments consisting of specific technical tasks. They don't want to get involved in company politics.

Technically challenging - Contract employees typically possess up-to-date and valuable technical skills. The jobs they undertake often involve leading edge technology.

Competitive pay - Because they are technical specialists who can complete critical assignments quickly, they expect to be compensated fairly.

Communicate Regularly

The greatest obstacle to successful working relationships with contract employees is lack of communication. By keeping the lines of communication open, contractors won't feel isolated, and you won't be uninformed. The advice below can facilitate communication throughout a contract employee's tenure.

Beginning of the Assignment

A carefully developed orientation that covers the following areas is an excellent way to align contract employees with the rest of your team:

- Explain the parameters of the job. It's critical that contract employees understand exactly what is expected of them, including all tasks to perform and deadlines to meet.
- Outline "big picture" implications of the project. By showing how their job fits into the overall goal, you underscore the importance of their assignment. You also make them feel valued and part of the team.
- Formally introduce contractors to the rest of the project team. Contract employees who feel welcome are more likely to fit in quickly and make meaningful contributions.

During the Assignment

The fastest way to ruin a potentially great team is to treat some of its members differently. Avoid this pitfall by treating contract employees as equals:

- Involve them in all relevant meetings and process improvement activities.
- Include them on team memo and e-mail lists.
- Meet with them regularly to review productivity and work quality.
- Ask for their opinions and ideas. Contract workers have been part of many project teams, so they can bring different perspectives to problems or issues.
- Remember contract employees when you celebrate project milestones.

End of the Assignment

When a contract employee's assignment is finished, make sure you hold a debriefing session to:

- Ensure all objectives were met.
- Gather all functional specification and product methodology documentation.
- Discuss any issues that may arise or future enhancements that may be necessary.

Such information is critical to provide a smooth transfer of knowledge from contract to direct employees.

Innovative Strategy, Familiar Principles

Using contract employees to help with critical projects can be an innovative way to get good work done quickly (while reducing both expenses and hiring risks). But making sure your contract staffing solution is successful requires time tested management skills. With necessary preparation and communication, you can realize great benefits by using contract personnel. And with the technological, economic, and internal staffing constraints you face today, it's a strategy that can go far to ensure your future success.

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