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CPAs & Advisors

'COME IN AND STAY AWHILE'

Talent Recruitment and Retention Remain Top Priorities

By Matt Ottinger

Help wanted signs still matter. But for today's employers, that and pay alone rarely close the deal. Across Indiana, companies large and small are learning what attracts people – and keeps them – is increasingly rooted in predictability, autonomy, chances to grow and the quality of the manager extending the offer.

KSM (Katz, Sapper & Miller) not only helps its clients create winning cultures, but its internal focus is on helping employees thrive en route to an award-winning culture of its own.

From global firms scaling nationally to rural employers competing for a smaller labor pool, the challenge looks different – but the playbook is converging.

As workplaces continue to settle into post pandemic norms, flexible and hybrid models remain a durable draw for many roles, while clear expectations, strong leadership and meaningful development pathways are becoming the real differentiators in a tight talent market.

Real-world snapshot

ePackageSupply, for one, is paying attention and remains a company in transition – in a good way. It recently relocated from Evansville to a 150,000-square-foot warehouse in Elberfeld’s North Warrick Industrial Park and is seeking to add to its workforce.

As a smaller company that provides packaging solutions like food and industrial containers (buckets, cups, lids and more), it balances serving current customers well and working toward the future.

“We’re always looking for warehouse associates, so they’re doing fulfillment, fork truck work, order packing, things like that,” shares president Eric Reffett, whose LinkedIn profile picture features the “#Hiring” label. “Then the big focus right now is sales and customer service, so we’re always looking for good candidates that can come in and start as a customer service rep and grow into a sales rep – or even folks who are ready to jump right into the sales side.”

Safety Management Group (SMG) is a larger, nationally recognized professional service organization that provides workplace safety consulting, training, staffing, program planning and implementation. It’s now celebrating its 35th anniversary.

Both companies are putting an emphasis on maximizing talent recruitment and retention strategies. Despite disparities in their sizes, the goals remain the same in bringing in the best talent possible.

SMG’s director of creative content and marketing Daniel Scott reflects on his company’s long history but keeps his eyes forward on its goals for the near future, which will indeed require more staff.

“A lot of the companies that we still work with today are pillars for this community, and we have grown alongside some of these global companies in an effort to make job sites safer,” he points out. “And now we’re trying to just expand that across the country and all these other locations. And



Safety Management Group takes pride in helping its team keep job sites safe in many locales and uses a strong internal communications operation to maintain staff unity.



with the manufacturing boom and the tech boom and everything that’s taken place, we’re going to need a lot more people.”

Serving the whole person

So that presents the question: How do you attract – and keep – top talent?

While salary and compensation packages remain a key part of a new hire’s decision to join, other considerations are now becoming part of the equation.

KSM (Katz, Sapper & Miller) is a leading employee-owned accounting and advisory firm that not only helps clients with employee benefits but walks the talk themselves.

As evidenced by their job titles, director of employee experience Lauren Violi and chief people officer Erin Wagoner embody the company’s emphasis on “the whole person,” internally and externally.

“A good salary used to be enough to get someone in the door – and then it was a good salary and a good benefits package was enough to get someone in the door,” Violi imparts. “And now it feels like even that isn’t enough. They’re looking for something broader, and I see it more in our younger generations, and so for us, where we have focused the most is on career development and development of individuals as a whole, not just to be great technicians when it comes to accounting.”

Indianapolis-based LHD Benefit Advisors is the state’s largest independent benefits advisory firm – focusing on employee benefits – with customers ranging from a few “employee lives” all the way up to 38,000. It’s another example of a benefits company that shares its firsthand knowledge and best practices with other organizations so they can thrive.



Leadership is an emphasis at LHD Benefit Advisors, both internally and externally. Its annual leadership seminar is held at Newfields in Indianapolis and brings in around 200 clients and prospects.

“We help employers manage their cost and their risk,” shares partner Ben Fuelberth. “We support their HR departments and the administration of those benefits, and then we work really hard to help those employers engage their people in those benefits.”

Being flexible

A big factor is recognizing the modern workplace looks notably different than even five to 10 years ago for many.

“I think what we have continued to see is a little bit of a move back to the office and some sort of a hybrid schedule,” Fuelberth states. “Whether that’s a certain number of days per week in the office versus working at home or a certain amount of flexibility per month, I think that’s here to stay in those industries that can allow it.”

Jessica Bowden, director of human resources at SMG, notes the company enjoyed 90% positive responses on its latest workforce survey, and flexibility remains a component of its climate.

“Some of the top areas that employees hit on and what they like is manager support, stability and flexibility,” she points out. “A lot of people mentioned autonomy, and then those educational perks.”

Owning it

Autonomy is indeed a concept that’s cherished by many employees.

For instance, Scott joined SMG four years ago. He had worked with SMG through his own media business and says there are only a handful of companies he would have considered joining full-time. SMG stood out due to its leadership and “entrepreneurial spirit,” and he feels empowered in his current role.

“If it’s a good idea and you can prove a business function around it, you can develop a business plan and if it makes sense, there’s an opportunity there for that to happen for you to step in and own that kind of thing,” Scott shares. “And I just love that spirit of supporting great ideas and people who are hungry to go after something. And I think that very much exists in this place.”

Establishing what the workforce wants remains an ongoing challenge for employers. And autonomy is certainly something LHD sees employees finding as meaningful.

“I think that as you look at some of the newer generations coming

into the workforce, they want to be able to find a connection to the company and the company culture, and that is really important to them maybe in ways that are different than folks who are maybe in some of the older generations and been in the workforce a little bit longer,” Fuelberth states. “What we’re finding right now is that you can’t necessarily just have a blanket approach.”

Reffett contends there is an advantage in hiring for a smaller company like ePackageSupply and offering that ownership component is a key piece. This came to light recently when adding a staff member from a larger organization to his accounting and finance team.

“At our size of company, you’re going to have your hand in everything, so you’ll get exposure and experience in all aspects of business,” Reffett relays. “It’s going to happen quickly and you’re going to get to have a direct impact on that.”

‘How am I doing?’

Employee feedback is imperative for companies and individuals to thrive. While Reffett has been with his company since 2020, he’s been president for less than a year. He came into the role recently looking to increase internal communication with staff.

“Probably the quickest thing that we’ve tried to implement is just a more structured feedback program,” he recalls. “So, (that’s) having regular check-ins with each employee. One of my main tasks is that each employee – no matter the position or function – they understand the top two or three things that they should work on within a quarter.”

He stresses making sure employees’ goals line up with the company’s strategic plan.

“It’s hoping that people feel engaged because they know what the most important thing is that they can do today and how that impacts where we’re headed as a company,” Reffett explains.

Open lines of communication also are imperative at SMG.

“For anybody who has ideas, issues, concerns – it’s kind of a safe space,” Bowden asserts. “If I have an issue or a concern or an idea, I don’t have an issue going straight down to the corner office and sharing those.”

Internal communication can be especially challenging for companies with staff spanning many states, like SMG. This makes frequent convening remotely or in-person a must. The company also

recently put an emphasis on enhancing its employee newsletter, with the revamped presentation now going out monthly.

“It’s a much more in-depth look at successes and wins and celebrating our associates and the great things that they’re doing, highlighting stories and things of that nature, honoring those who have been here for five, 10, 15, 25 years and calling that out in that way,” Scott articulates. “And we’ve gotten a much better engagement rate on sending that out to where people, I think, look forward to seeing that. And it’s great for those that are in Arizona, California or Colorado that aren’t as connected to the corporate office to just give them a taste of what we’re all working on every day.”

Not just celebrating colleagues but relaying substantive changes within the company is an important component of internal communication as well.

“We’re private equity-backed, and we just went through a transition from one private equity company to another (this winter),” Scott adds. “So just trying to communicate those changes and be transparent so that they don’t hear it from somebody else and it doesn’t affect them on a day-to-day basis.”

Managing well

Much of that and tone-setting falls to the leadership team and direct supervisors. Various iterations of the quote, “People leave managers, not companies” can be found around the internet and in self-help books for executives. But it’s not just a cliché. Managers perhaps play the biggest role in an employee’s perception of a business.

“I think finding good managers is really pivotal to the experience that your employees have,” Fuelberth concurs. “And oftentimes what you’ll see is that you have a really strong individual contributor – somebody that is very proficient at their job – that sort of rises to management and maybe has little or no training in that.”

As an employer itself, LHD makes it a point to prepare managers, stressing proper training and mentoring to help them excel.

At KSM, leading people is a serious endeavor.

“(Our management training) is focused on developing the whole human piece and the technical aspects of leading people, but also how to lead well and what it means to be a leader of people,” Violi shares. “As the operations side of the firm, we are always trying to make sure that we’re equipping our leaders well with information, making sure that they feel empowered to lead because they are in the



ePackageSupply steers clear of a “gutterball culture” by encouraging team building and collaboration with events like a bowling outing.

know, because they’re part of decision making as much as they can be.

“(We want to make sure) they have the information in a timely manner, that they can answer questions confidently and that they feel like they can be a good face of the firm,” she adds.

Clear expectations is also a key component, according to Wagoner.

“We have leaders of self, leaders of others and then leaders of leaders,” she notes. “And we’ve developed capabilities under each of those pillars to make sure that it’s really clear at KSM what our expectations are. ... We’re going to give you the tools you need in order to succeed.”

Predictability is another factor stressed at KSM as it pertains to employees, enlisting a predictive index in the form of a personality behavioral assessment to help employees and their colleagues achieve goals and understand how they think.

The ‘bring-in’ bet

The centerpiece to everything discussed is people – and getting the right ones.

Talent attraction remains an ongoing focus for ePackageSupply as the number of potential workers ebbs and flows in the area.

“We’re seeing a slowdown in just the number of candidates applying to jobs,” notes Reffett. “I’ve noticed that trend over the last few months, which maybe seems counter to some of the more regional trends. We’re trying to work our way through that and

understand why that might be happening.”

He believes some of it may be based on potential commute times or childcare access, but the company continues to maximize partnerships.

“We’ve really tried to leverage relationships with the University of Southern Indiana, specifically, and try to get a direct candidate pool from that group,” he offers. “That’s been helpful over the last couple of years.”

SMG can relate to ePackageSupply’s plight as a dearth of safety professionals in central Indiana makes growing staff a quest that warrants attention.

“We’ve got two full-time recruiters, and we (just) hired another one just to keep in touch with people and keep that pipeline going,” Bowden updates, noting SMG has a significant population of rehires who’ve returned to the company. “We use LinkedIn and Indeed just to keep in touch with people that they’ve talked to over the years.”

And the hiring implications go beyond the actual needs for any one job.

Take “workplace culture-maxxing” – an axiom used by younger generations. It’s paramount among successful companies today, but it’s not something that can necessarily be forced onto employees, according to Fuelberth.

“I’m a big believer that company culture just kind of starts with the people. That if you hire good people within an organization, they will help to create that culture (you want).”

RESOURCES: Jessica Bowden and Daniel Scott, Safety Management Group, at www.safetymanagementgroup.com | Ben Fuelberth, LHD Benefit Advisors, at www.lhdbenefits.com | Eric Reffett, ePackageSupply, at www.epackagesupply.com | Lauren Violi and Erin Wagoner, KSM (Katz, Sapper & Miller), at www.ksmcpa.com