

TALENT SCOUTS

With a staggering skills shortage plaguing the globe, keeping up with the demand for talent is no small task. In tackling this task, the people at PAG don't wait for talent to come to them – they scour every resource available. And if that doesn't work, they create it themselves.

IF YOU HAPPENED TO PICK UP *The Economist* a few weeks ago, you might have read about what's stressing out every CEO from Lagos to Los Angeles. The fierce battle for talent has companies searching the world for people with the most sought-after and specialised skills.

Here in South Africa we've been in the throes of the talent battle for years – most notably in the fields of IT, engineering, finance and management. We've spent the last 12 years scrambling to make up for lost time. Even with dramatic changes in much of society, the hurdles are proving enormous in some sectors, and the hard fact is that the education of most children in the country is still not on par to fill the glaring gap. Take this for a bit of evidence: last year only 3 000 black learners nationwide passed matric with higher grade mathematics.

Other statistics are equally telling. According to Econometrix, of South Africa's 23 493 qualified chartered accountants, only 543 are black; and out of 9 332 accounting trainees, only 1 491 are black. So while legislation demands higher levels of qualified blacks throughout the professions, the lack of skills among people of all colours in South Africa is staggering. Coupled with our legacy and the international dearth of talent is the fact that many homegrown skills have been headhunted by the highest bidder, leaving South Africa with the short end of the global stick.

So what is a company to do? Stop moaning, start sourcing and get creative, says PAG managing director Lawrence Wordon, who joined the country's premier professional placement company earlier this year.

Wordon and his team are on a mission to build the skill base in South Africa, and are doing whatever it takes – from sourcing talent nationwide, and stretching the recruiting base to bring skilled South Africans back home, to performing a little trick they call "creating talent".

CREATING TALENT

To create skills where they don't naturally exist, PAG has gone to great lengths, even going directly into communities to train and certify individuals.

Earlier this year, after finding a conspicuous shortage of a financial accreditation in the Western Cape, PAG sourced candidates and put them through the accreditation process – at company cost. Though PAG may have reached into the arena of "do-gooder" social responsibility, the move has also had a nice impact on its bottom line.

"We are transferring skills," says Carroll-Anne Pollock, director of operations at PAG. "But what we get in return are more marketable candidates and a contribution to local economy."

That's the sort of top-down philosophy and investment in skills creation that reaches into every department of the company. PAG works closely with groups like the IMM Graduate School of Marketing to find inexperienced candidates for a learnership programme – which has PAG acting as an employment incubator of sorts. Add to that the learnerships it has set up through Services SETA, including programmes for a medical administration company and a telecommunications group to help create a talent pool. "It's not a shotgun approach," says Pollock. "We are reaching into niche sub sectors and sourcing skills that are lacking."

Wordon believes mentoring on a contract basis is another viable value proposition that will help companies as well as their employment candidates. Wordon plans to implement talent creation through an on-the-job training programme that employs two people, in the short term, for one position.

His plan allows those with the experience to broaden their skills set and improve their employability by



CAPTION
Caption

gaining experience in a range of companies across a number of different industries on a short-term contract basis. For the person being mentored, it allows time to learn and adjust to the new position. He believes this will help ease the transition from skilled to non-skilled.

“With the same amount of money companies are prepared to pay for senior candidates these days, we can supply a qualified candidate on a contract basis as well as a promising candidate who will be mentored and gain a wealth of experience.” As Wordon sees it, it’s a win for the client, the candidates and the nation.

GOING TO THE SOURCE

PAG targets scarce skills shortage with every weapon in its arsenal – and creates some new ones while it is at it. The

Forum to the Institute of People Management and the HR Director’s Forum. “There is a war for talent among skilled professionals,” he says.

But the sourcing process doesn’t end with a CV and a phone conversation.

Once a candidate is identified, consultants use the Competency Based Interviewing Process, believing that a company’s ability to retain its human capital starts with the employee interview. PAG techniques are designed to identify whether candidates are suitably qualified to perform the inherent requirements of the vacant position. The process focuses on a candidate’s present function and past performance in order to determine suitability for the position. The focus is on soft skills like behaviour and attitude, which are increasingly important to ensure an organisational fit. It’s a process that helps

“stop moaning, start sourcing and get creative!”

company has 30 years of experience in the staffing industry, along with 12 branches nationwide that help it hone in on local industries and meet clients and candidates on a one-to-one basis. New and improved this year is the company’s focus on specialised skills, such as in IT, engineering, finance and management.

“It’s not a generalist industry anymore,” says Bonnie Currin, general manager of business innovation. “Gone are the days when you could hire a human resources manager, a financial manager and an IT developer through one consultant. You have to have subject matter experts.”

This year PAG has pumped up its sourcing of expert staff, ensuring each branch has specialists to service both client and candidate. Candidate manager Vuyani Ntanjana was brought in earlier this year from an international executive research firm to source candidates for the country’s top management positions. From the Johannesburg offices, he helps to move talent throughout the country, meeting weekly with the management specialists in all 12 branches.

Ntanjana spends a lot of time scanning the media to see who is on the move, in what sector, and attends regular seminars with heavy-hitting organisations – from the Black Management

PAG to ensure it places the right candidate with the right client.

The company goes to great lengths to ensure it makes the right placement – even taking trained teams as far afield as the UK to secure the right person for the job.

SCOURING THE GLOBE

“The country needs 60 000 engineers for 2010,” says candidate manager Ben Naidoo, who specialises in the IT and engineering arena. “A lot of our engineers are relocating and we want them back.”

Naidoo is well poised to deliver such re-imports. He came to PAG earlier this year from one of the top UK-based recruitment agencies. In October, PAG sent a team to London and Dublin to lure potential candidates back home. They – along with a slew of other South African companies on the hunt for talent – participated in Woza eKhaya, an expo arranged by the Homecoming Revolution, a non-profit group whose mission it is to bring South Africans back from overseas.

Naidoo is confident he’ll be able to lure a good number of engineers back to South Africa.

“A lot of people don’t realise the potential in their home country,” he says. Engineers are in such demand worldwide that

THE NEW RECRUIT



Don’t tell Lawrence Wordon there is no talent to be found in this country – you’ll just piss him off.

The new managing director of professional placement giant PAG talks from experience. When Wordon began his stint as head of Shell Namibia in 1998, the entire board was made up of expatriates – South African, British, German and French. But by the time he left, four years later, it was all

local, all Namibian.

“And Shell didn’t close down, did they? Their signs are still glowing,” he says. “And the shareholders are still very happy.”

So when Wordon, who joined PAG in July this year, hears it said skills don’t exist in South Africa, he doesn’t buy it. Instead, he plans to source skills wherever they may be and, if all else fails, manufacture them. “You can’t go around forever blaming legacy,” he says. “All you get from that is a bunch of lethargic attitudes.”

And lethargy is not what has taken the hometown Kensington boy this far. Wordon – who still calls his playschool friends his best mates and married his childhood sweetheart – worked his way up the Shell ladder without the support of a formal university degree after his name. During his 17 years with the company, he made his way from sales rep to managing director of Shell Namibia the old fashioned way, with hard work and good relationships with his clients and staff. He moved to Avis in 2001.

“It was time for chapter two,” says Wordon, who left the comfort of Shell to become marketing director of Avis Fleet Services. From 2001 to 2006 he saw Avis Fleet Services triple profits and double its fleet size. Those numbers had more to do with the people he recruited, he says, than anything else. And that’s exactly why he joined PAG earlier this year. “Your assets are your people, not your vehicles.”

An understanding of people power, and a natural inclination to nurture talent, has Wordon leading the top placement agency in a country where a lack of specialised skills makes daily headlines. For Wordon, it’s a “gimmie” that people are what make or break an organisation. “I expect people to have an opinion,” he says. “I pay people to have an opinion. It’s when they don’t have one that I begin to have my doubts.”

Going from oilman to people person might seem like a big stretch, but for Wordon stretching is what it’s been about from the start. He credits his success to relationships he’s built over the years. From the buddies who he grew up with, to the clients he meets on a daily basis, loyalty and authenticity have become part and parcel of his achievements. “It all comes down to relationships,” he says. “My clients become my friends. They stick with me and I stick with them.”

they are able to command international salaries no matter where they are based – and that includes South Africa.

But Naidoo is looking longer term than just 2010. Because of the international dearth in technical skills, like engineering, he wants to help to combat the problem on a more holistic level. Naidoo is proposing ideas like the Candidate Life Cycle programme, in which companies form partnerships to take information about engineering to school children as young as grade nine, then nurture that talent all the way through to university.

This type of approach consistently puts PAG at the top of the professional placement food chain. Earlier this year, Deloitte named the company one of the best to work for in South Africa. And it’s not the first time it has headed the list. PAG has been named one of the best companies to work for three years running by the Corporate Research Foundation, has a three-star rating from Services SETA, and has been dubbed by Professional Management Review as the best in recruitment of technical and engineering staff.

While the awards back up what PAG is selling, it is people power and skills-creation programmes that the company is backing all the way to the bank. “Empower yourself to stand out from the crowd,” says Wordon. “Because the crowd is getting bigger and bigger.”

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