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## Frontline Reversal Of Fortune

The recession has presented retailers with unprecedented opportunities to attract and retain top employees. Despite the widening pool of candidates, retailers are urged to proceed with caution.

By Mel Kleiman

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** CSD AND HR CONSULTANT MEL KLEIMAN WILL PRESENT THE SECOND ANNUAL HR STUDY, FEATURING EMPLOYEE TRENDING DATA AND A STORE EMPLOYEE SALARY OVERVIEW, IN THE JANUARY 2010 ISSUE OF CONVENIENCE STORE DECISIONS.

Just a short 18 months ago, most convenience retailers were desperate for frontline workers and, on most days, priority one was to hire a body—any body.

As we all know, that situation turned on a dime when the economy had a meltdown and the unemployment rate reached its highest level in 26 years this past June. Now it's a buyer's market in which applicants are desperate to find work and will take most any job offered.

While convenience retailing has held steady, this dramatic reversal of fortune in other sectors of the economy presents our industry with a unique opportunity, but only if several challenges can be met.

**The Opportunity:** If you're looking for new blood, from the frontline to the boardroom, there's more talent available now than at any time in the last 20 years.

**The Obstacles:** The challenges this opportunity presents are threefold:

1. You have to make the tough people decisions. To hone in on the problem, ask yourself: "Do we have the right people in the right jobs doing the right things?" If the answer is yes, then ask yourself if they have all the tools they need to do the best job and what you're doing to ensure you'll be able to keep them on board when the turnaround comes.

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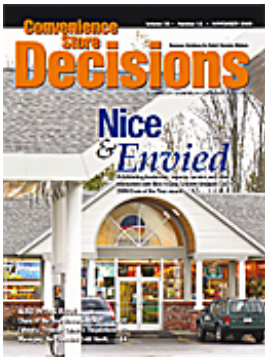
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Adecco Group reports that 54% of all employees are planning to leave their present job as soon as the economy improves. When it comes to younger workers—those under the age of 29—the number goes to 71%. Even if you cut that number in half, are you either prepared for a mass exodus or are you doing things to continually re-recruit those key employees you now have on board?

If you find you have a wrong person in the wrong job (be they under- or overperforming), ask yourself if you can move that person to the right job or if it is time to change players altogether because, while it may have been manageable 18 months ago, no organization can afford to carry even 5 pounds of deadweight today. I see too many cases where tenured, but underperforming people are kept on just because of a longstanding relationship. This is not good business.

Some interesting research concerning the workings of the mind shows we are wired to be more concerned with current comfort levels than with long-term consequences. Thus, when

we make decisions, we often act as if the future does not exist. It is so much easier to put up with the wrong person in the job than it is to make the best long-term decision and let the person go.

2. You have to know what you're looking for and how to attract it. This window of opportunity won't be open long, so you've got to ensure you can efficiently select the best.

First, specifically identify what you're looking for. Ask yourself what traits and characteristics your present and former great employees have in common and make a list. Then you have to identify where you're most likely to find these people, but don't make the mistake of limiting your search to only those with prior experience. Experience is not the same as success. Besides, whatever anyone did somewhere else three years ago is done differently today and will be done differently again three years from now.

What you want to look for are values, the ability to adapt and learn, and the common sense it takes to do the right thing. It's highly likely you'll find some of the best talent comes from failed or failing traditional retailers (KayBee Toys, Circuit City) and fast-food establishments.

Next, develop a recruiting message that makes these candidates at least interested in, if not positively enthusiastic about, going to work for your team. Play up the tremendous opportunity for growth, the industry's stability, and the trend away from convenience stores toward convenience retailing. Some other perks you may have to offer over larger employers include: faster hiring, flexibility and each employee's ability to make a real difference.

3. Hire tough and hire for tomorrow. Today, many job applicants are desperate and desperate applicants do desperate things. So, it's not surprising we have seen a new twist on an old ruse. Applicants for jobs no longer inflate their past salary, job title, education and responsibilities, they deflate them because many managers do not want to hire people who are overqualified. The upshot is that applicants report lower salaries, diminished job titles and leave degrees off of their application blanks or résumés. The problem is that a lie is still a lie.

One efficient way to screen for top employees is to contact applicants by phone to make sure they meet your minimum hiring requirements before inviting them in to interview. Questions you might ask for a frontline position include:

1. How many hours would you like to work a week?
2. What is your preferred shift? (mornings, afternoons, evenings, weekends, etc.)
3. Are there any regular, ongoing outside obligations you need to work around?
4. Can you work overtime or flexible hours on short notice, if needed?
5. Do you have reliable access to transportation?

Now you have to determine which ones are the best fit for your organization. The best way to do this is to have a

standardized hiring system or process because average managers with great hiring systems can produce great results while average managers without great systems produce average or poor results.

Also, it's best to allow only your very best people to conduct interviews because A-players hire other A-players while everyone else has a tendency to hire people who pose no threat to them.

While it is the norm that most hiring decisions hinge largely on the interview, you may be surprised to learn that, in order of effectiveness, the most successful predictors of success on a job are:

- Testing for IQ, personality, attitudes, skills, etc. (53%)
- Temporary job assignment (44%)
- Reference check (26%)
- Experience (18%)
- Interview (14%)
- Academic achievement (11%)

Notice that age is not on the above list. It was, in fact, measured and it came in with a negative correlation of minus-1%. If you have an age bias, you might want to rethink your reasoning. And don't automatically rule out those overqualified people who tell the truth on their résumés either. See if they'll come on board with the understanding that, while they may begin in a position with fewer duties and responsibilities than their last job, you recognize their strengths and will fast track their career growth as soon as the opportunities arise. Do not, however, hire and invest time and money in someone overqualified for even the jobs you'll have available tomorrow. They'll walk as soon as they find something better suited to their abilities.

Once you have all the right people, in the right jobs, doing the right things, it's your job to routinely re-recruit them so they stay on-board and engaged for as long as possible. Ask what they like and don't like about their jobs and the organization. Solicit their ideas. Involve them in decision-making and brainstorming sessions.

Job seekers everywhere have suffered a dramatic reversal of fortune, but employers now have a unique opportunity to raise the bar and strengthen their organizations at every level if they can successfully meet the inherent challenges. CSD