



Top: Eason Horticultural Resources' all-female office staff assembled at the Kentucky office for three days of training. PHOTO COURTESY OF EASON HORTICULTURAL RESOURCES

Bottom: Everde Growers was awarded a County Alliance for Responsible Environmental Stewardship (CARES) award by the Florida Farm Bureau Federation for their environmental stewardship efforts. PHOTO COURTESY OF EVERDE GROWERS



✓ The HR Issue: □ □ □

Competing for key personnel

Nurseries dangle remote work, added benefits and work-life flexibility to attract top talent

BY TRACY ILENE MILLER

THE NURSERY INDUSTRY has struggled with labor shortages for years. It started with field, farm, and greenhouse workers, and more recently has grown to include the key roles of propagators, growers, sales representatives, and managers.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, horticulture and agriculture job openings have been harder to fill. Interest in technology and high-profile cannabis growing, urbanization, shifts in labor out of agriculture into higher-paying jobs.

All of these factors and more have impacted availability. Of course, there is no overlooking the pandemic, and how it has provided an additional layer of difficulty.

Even so, through these challenges, companies are making shifts in how they recruit and attract talent for key roles — managers, growers, sales and office staff — that are necessary to a company's success. In part two, we will look at retention practices — ways that companies hold onto talent once they've signed on.

Develop a multi-location strategy

In all the ways that COVID-19 has upended the work world for better or worse since early 2020, the shift to distributed office work is distinct. Every business is different, but on a mass scale, the trend is clear. By April 2020, 62% of employed Americans worked at home, according to research firm McKinsey & Company.

Through video conferencing and other technologies, teamwork has been empowered to thrive across multiple locations, including home offices. By all examinations, that shift to remote work is settling in permanently in large industries across the economy.

"Before March 2020, no one would think we could work in this sector and work from home," said Terri Cook, senior vice president of human resources, **Everde Growers**, a Texas-based nursery company with additional farms in Oregon, California and Florida. "Most of the nursery positions are back, but we have learned in the last two years how to operate not in an office. For everyone, for office >>>

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Steve Maddox, Melanie Byrne, David Toohey, Don Gamsjager and Walter Bissex pose in front of one of the daylily beds at Pioneer Gardens near Deerfield, Massachusetts. PHOTO COURTESY OF EASON HORTICULTURAL RESOURCES



staff, where we can do it, we have gone almost completely work-at-home.”

Although sales may seem the logical area to work remotely, not all sales managers are in agreement. Some say it’s imperative their sales team work together, in an office culture. There are no one-size-fits-all solutions. Nevertheless, for sales and other key positions, organizations of all stripes are reimagining mentorship, productivity, and other processes to identify which positions still require in-person, hybrid, or fully remote personnel. For positions or activities that can operate semi-remotely or fully remote, organizations are finding ways to bring those people to the office on a schedule, but otherwise allowing them to work from home, thus expanding the geographical range of potential candidates.

“Because of COVID, we have loosened our requirement of being in the office, and it has opened the talent pool,” said Mike Pezzillo, CEO and vice president at **Eason Horticultural Resources** (Covington, Kentucky), a consultant and sales agent to retail garden center growers, wholesale greenhouse growers, nurserymen, and landscapers. “We have developed the mindset that we can work from anywhere. A lot of our new hires are remote.”

Reach beyond horticulture

Labor shortages and COVID-19 have had the effect of pushing the industry to increasingly reach outside nursery and horticulture career streams. Engaging people, by offering learning opportunities and experiential work experiences, is the direction companies are moving in to fulfill open slots.

“We like to hire people with industry experience, but we have had success with people who don’t (have it),” Pezzillo said.

“It’s not a deal breaker anymore.”

Organizations are opening up their hiring practices to attract individuals who might not be the “perfect fit,” instead opting to establish training programs, many times with individuals who have transferable skills.

Evaluate benefits packages

In a tight labor market, a generous employee benefits package is one way talent measures interest in a position.

“We have to be as competitive as we can in a fairly competitive environment” said Jonathan Pedersen, CEO and president of **Monrovia Nursery Co.**, a California-based grower with additional locations in Oregon, Georgia and Connecticut. Competitive with benefits such as 401(k), health insurance (supported at 70% by Monrovia), life insurance, paid time off, and extended sick pay due to COVID.

Reviewing benefits packages at least annually, and using market data to evaluate those packages, can help companies stay competitive. “We look at that every year,” said Pamela Evans, human resources manager at the **J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co.** nursery, a tree grower with 3,000 acres of growing space at three Oregon locations. “We are trying to embellish benefits, to see what that means, not only for recruitment, but to make them look good for employees who have been here for a long time.”

Offer flexibility

According to Everde’s Cook, employees are interested in compensation that goes beyond a simple paycheck. “Make sure your benefits are in line, and the job has flexibility,” she said. “It’s the whole work-life balance situation.”

Multiple national surveys of representa-

tive samples of workers echo each other: Workers are willing to take fewer benefits for greater flexible work arrangements, and want it spelled out in the offer letter.

“Anymore, it isn’t always about money,” Pedersen said. “We see people come in with college degrees making sure the job hours are conducive to weekends off; that they are not working weekends year-round.”

Horticulture has a season when the expectation, and the necessity, is “all hands on deck.” However, especially for younger people on a career path, employees want to be compensated well, have good benefits and work in a place that acknowledges the importance of work-life balance.

Make job descriptions stand out

“We are always addressing that in HR, looking at how a job description is written, where it is posted, who the audience is,” Pedersen said. “That is critical today, especially if you are posting on a recruitment website and you are trying to attract people for the first time in horticulture.”

Job descriptions are the first-level introduction to a company. They need to include the essentials of benefits, responsibilities and duties. But what else? A compelling job description in today’s market has points of distinctions that help your company stand out. For instance, does the job description answer these questions:

- What’s attractive about the company culture?
- What are the opportunities for remote working?
- Where is there flexibility in the job?
- What is the potential for upward movement, or even lateral movement?
- Where are there opportunities for growth, collaboration or leadership?

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• Outside of the skills required of them, what skills will the candidate gain in this position?

• Where is technology employed?

That last question might seem unusual, but the use of and access to technology in the workplace is highly valued by the next generation of workers.

When J. Frank Schmidt was recruiting for an inventory position, it was a selling point that they used a particular program that candidates had some experience with in college. "That excited them," Evans said.

Technology is a big part of staying current, for meeting an organization's business goals. It is also a key attractant to millennials and members of Generation Z (aka Zoomers), who view technology not only as a perk but necessary to maximizing their personal ambitions, according to a Gallup poll.

Diversify recruiting strategies

Even the best and experienced HR professionals are having difficulty recruiting talent, forcing them to get creative and broaden their recruitment process to attract and find new hires.

Eason has been doing more posting in trade magazines and on social media. "We've gotten good results, as opposed to using job-listing services like Indeed and Monster, where we haven't had much success," Pezzillo said.

LinkedIn is one of the most prominent social media platforms for job searching. Increasingly, students and recent graduates are being coached to develop their profiles. The trend puts 51% of college graduates on the platform, according to LinkedIn. Add to that Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and even Snapchat, and social media is the necessary recruitment tool of the 2020s. Studies showing approximately 70–80% of millennials use social media to find jobs. Implementing a social media strategy might help you attract talent.

For the talent you've already attracted, your existing employee base, see how they can help. Everde has been using more headhunters to fill horticultural positions, as well as turning to its employees. "When jobs are posted nationally, we post internally, and try to hire from within," she said. As well, >>>

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existing employees can be great contributors to finding new employees, especially when they feel valued.

Strategies for using employees may include an employee referral bonus, such as a gift card or extra time off, and creating employee outreach committees for brainstorming recruitment activities.

As COVID wanes, another strategy is to begin to re-partner with schools, but not only those with a horticulture program. Attending college fairs, reaching out to career counselors in parallel fields and targeting key academic departments, business schools, and management training programs for presentations can broaden your networks of outreach.

Tapping the Great Resignation

The nursery industry certainly has had its challenges with labor shortages, and the

pandemic has been a further disruption. The interference may also be an opportunity. The Great Resignation, as it is being called, is the record-breaking instance of 4.3 million Americans — 2.9% of the entire workforce — quitting their jobs in August, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

On a national level, pundits and economists keep their daily analyses fresh and rolling trying to pinpoint the reasons these workers are no-shows. The causes range from worker revolt to massive early retirements, lack of child care and health safety concerns. Added to that is the savings low- to middle-income Americans managed from receiving pandemic stimulus money: Cash balances are up 70% for low-income households and 50% for middle-income households, according to a JP Morgan Chase Institute report.

Predictions are that once those cash

stores are depleted, Americans will be pushed back to work. This may take up to 12 months for that to happen, the exact timeframe at least 55% of people surveyed said they will be looking for new employment, according to Bankrate's annual job-seeker survey.

Another 12 months may offer the nursery industry an opportunity to refine and expand recruitment strategies of key personnel keeping in mind what job seekers continually repeat, in survey after survey, as the primary motivators for picking their next job: "remote work, career advancement and flexibility," as well as a commitment to health and work-life balance. ☺

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