



The people challenge

Helen Giles draws on her experience at St Mungo's to suggest how to attract and retain great staff.

IT IS OFTEN perceived as hard for charities to attract great staff to key managerial and professional roles, since all but the largest or best resourced not-for-profits can't hope to compete with other sectors on pay. Finance roles at all levels can be particularly challenging. However, the good news is that these difficulties can be mitigated to a very large extent by taking a fresh look at exactly who you are trying to attract and how you go about it.

Where do we find the right people?

There is no one answer to this, and it really depends on your size, geographical location, the number of highly specialist or hard-to-fill posts you have, and what works best for you after trial and error.

At St Mungo's, we advertise most of our roles on our own website and on the numerous cheap or free job-boards that exist, such as CharityJob, CV-Library, totaljobs and reed.co.uk. Where we have to recruit a high volume of quite specialist roles at the same time – as we recently did for our finance department – we use a combination of recruitment agencies and our own advertising. For senior and board roles, we use an executive search company procured through a competitive tendering process. Our general rule is not to spend any more than we have to, so we would not use third parties unless we had sound reason to believe we would be unlikely to get the right person through our own direct advertising.

Some charities – large and small – swear by their relationships with specialist recruitment consultancies,

which manage all their job advertising and run special campaigns for hard to fill posts. Where you do use third parties, it's obviously important to negotiate the best deals you can. In my experience, many are open to talking about lower rates and helping where they can.

“Many organisations remain stubbornly wedded to over-rigid ways of doing things”

How do we attract the best?

In order to attract the brightest and best, you need to be able to paint a vivid picture in your recruitment literature (whether that be an advert, your website, a briefing to recruitment agencies) of what sets the role and your organisation apart from the competition. Bear in mind the things which tend to motivate most people – usually this is not money and benefits, although people expect to see a fair salary and terms compared to similarly-sized organisations.

It is important to convey what you do as an organisation and how you do it. We know that many staff are motivated to work for us because they are concerned about our work, ending homelessness and helping people rebuild their lives.

It is also important to convey why it will be a satisfying and engaging place to work. Good people are looking to be part of well-managed, successful organisations. They want to be set clear and meaningful goals by supportive line managers who are there to support the development of the skills and careers of their staff

as much as to fulfil the technical abilities of their roles. They want some autonomy in the way they do their work, thanks and recognition for work done well, and timely and constructive feedback on where they can improve.

Good work-life balance is also important. Flexi-time schemes have fallen out of fashion for various reasons, which is strange given that this is the most popular benefit I've ever known. Also, advertise your willingness to consider flexible working arrangements such as part-time or condensed working, or some degree of home-working. Many organisations remain stubbornly wedded to over-rigid ways of doing things, when with a little imagination and good performance management, it's possible to arrive at a win-win situation. After all, would you rather have a top-notch finance director who wants to work three days each fortnight at home because they live 100 miles away, or a second-rate one who can walk to the office five days a week?

Selling what is different and special about your organisation is what's known as your “employer brand”. Like all successful brands, it's not based on what you say about yourself but what others – in this case your existing and ex-employees – say about you. Ask some current employees what's great about working for your organisation and sell that. Conversely, don't claim things that people won't actually experience when they arrive, or they won't stay.

Who are the right people?

Adrian Furnham, the professor of psychology at University College London and author of many books on talent in the workplace, once said that there are only three things you need in an excellent employee in any



role whatsoever: the right level of cognitive ability to do the job well; emotional intelligence and the ability to get on well with others; and conscientiousness. Having worked for three decades in HR, I can't argue with this. Whenever things go badly wrong with an employee, at the root of it almost without exception is the lack of one or more of these three things.

So many organisations, including charities, fixate on previous experience and – particularly in finance – on relevant qualifications. Almost without exception, the best appointments to any role in any field are well-motivated people previously operating at a level below the vacancy in question.

For example, if I were looking to recruit an HR manager, the last thing I would design my person specification to attract is an HR manager looking to make a sideways move. I would look for a talented HR adviser who will learn quickly and be enthusiastic about the opportunity for growth. Salary level is seldom a primary consideration for this kind of candidate.

The most successful organisations recruit for attitude and competencies and train for skills. But you have to be sure that your candidate has the capability to take responsibility for their own development and learn quickly.

Getting the right qualities?

At St Mungo's we have a competency-based approach to recruitment, which focuses very much on the innate qualities required to do a job well. For shortlisting purposes, we ask for the minimum amount of experience that would genuinely be needed to grow into the role, and we test on essential technical skills through work-based assessments.



A Putting Down Roots gardening project run by St Mungo's in Bristol

“The worst kind of questions to ask at interviews are the hypothetical”

For the cognitive skills – which also demonstrate capacity to learn quickly – we use psychometric verbal and numerical reasoning tests. And for core competencies and attitudes, we have in-depth competency-based interviews. Also known as “behavioural interviews”, these focus on exploring in depth how candidates have behaved in the past against the competencies we are looking for – for example, maintaining positive relationships and teamwork with others, ability to organise workload and meet deadlines, customer focus. The best predictor of how people will behave in future is how they have behaved in the past.

The worst kind of questions to ask at interviews are the hypothetical “how would you ...” questions. These remain stubbornly popular

with managers and trustees despite the fact that all they elicit is hypothetical or textbook answers, rather than giving any worthwhile indicator of whether the person is likely to perform well in the job.

And never forget references. Too often organisations ask people to cite two referees of their own choosing, but don't even wait to get the references before appointing. At St Mungo's we go for at least five years of references and at least two employers (including the current one) to be selected by us from their application form. We ask in-depth questions including indicators of performance against our competency requirements.

We don't accept people until references have been cleared and found to be excellent in every respect. This does take time and resource, and we do have to work with the fact that some employers have the policy of refusing to provide anything except dates of employment.

Nevertheless, it's a truism that the people who know best what



Lunch marking the third anniversary of St Mungo's Muslim Women's Project

somebody is going to be like to work with are those that have worked with them previously, so you cut corners around references at your own peril and that of your beneficiaries. At St Mungo's, despite the fact that we have a thorough assessment-centre based approach to recruitment, last year we withdrew 21 job offers (8 per cent of our total external intake) on the basis of unsatisfactory references.

How do I keep them?

The way people start with you is incredibly important. Make sure they are heartily welcomed on their first day with everything set up for them. Prepare a structured induction combining learning and orientation activities with things to do. Arrange for senior staff to meet them early on, and do inspirational things to engage them in the heart of what you do as a charity.

At St Mungo's each month we have a core induction day for new starts where the CEO and executive directors all run a slot. Some new members of our finance team recently told me that they found

this really powerful in helping them to connect with the organisation.

We also get all office-based staff to visit some of our services in order to meet our clients and the staff who work directly with them. This is crucial in ensuring they understand how the work in the centre of the organisation impacts on wider colleagues and those we support.

Make sure you are identifying people's skills gaps and potential on an ongoing basis and constantly finding on-the-job opportunities for them to learn, including delegating new challenges to them on a well-supervised basis.

“ Recruitment in finance tends to be driven by a belief in the need for formal qualifications ”

Often smaller charities are concerned that they won't retain people because they have a limited training budget and there are no career progression opportunities. This is by no means always true, provided that you are offering a

great place to work. As a larger charity, we have a fair number of career progression opportunities in our mainstream operations, but relatively few in some of our more specialist or central support functions.

It's great where we have someone who is brilliant at their current role, shows genuine management potential, and after testing their promotability through robust internal recruitment procedures we succeed in retaining them in a higher level role. On the other hand, however, if we have somebody who has that potential and they move on to take up promotion elsewhere because we don't have a suitable opportunity come up in time internally, this is fine too. It's far better to employ a shining star for two or three years than have somebody who hangs around forever doing a less than brilliant job. Retention as an end in itself can be wildly overrated – I have met quite a number of HR heads who said they pray for a higher staff turnover rate!

In my experience, more so than in many other functions, recruitment in finance tends to be driven by a belief in the need for formal qualifications. This is fine, but you are shooting yourself in the foot if the level of qualification being asked for is above and beyond what is genuinely required to do the job.

Time and time again I have seen finance teams excluding the brightest and best people for junior roles because they ask for part-qualified accountants. These jobs would much better be done by the type of outstanding people we often manage to recruit to non-qualified basic admin jobs because they see it as a great way in. If your charity meets the threshold for paying the apprenticeship levy, think about



drawing down some of your credit to offer an unqualified person the opportunity to train on the job.

Good line management

It is often said that people don't tend to leave their job but leave their line manager. Too many organisations promote people to management jobs because they have great technical skills, but find they can't manage people. Sometimes due to a lack of interest and innate capability, and sometimes because of lack of direction and training. The only people that these line managers retain for any length of time are the kind of staff who are more likely to find it difficult to move on.

Also, weak line managers tend to

be very poor at recruiting the right staff in the first place. In previous organisations I've worked for, I have seen finance managers struggle with poorly-performing or poorly-behaved staff because they were prepared to hire on the basis of paper qualifications and a 30-minute interview instead of designing a proper assessment and structured interview processes.

In fact, good line management is so intrinsically linked with good talent management that it really should be the starting point for any consideration of how to attract and retain good staff. Recruit to management roles only people who want to spend their time bringing out the best in others, and train them in how to recruit staff and manage

staff performance and development. Then you will build an internal talent pipeline that makes you far less dependent on the vagaries of the external market.

Any charity is only as good as the people who work for it. So make sure everyone involved in recruitment, from junior managers to trustees, learns the skills and practices to do this most essential of tasks properly. ■



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