

The deal-breakers

Maximising performance: why recruiting expert staff from the private sector is only the beginning...

New strategies (and some intriguing vagaries) for recruiting the best staff have rarely been out of the news over the last 12 months.

Manchester's appointment of a Nobel Prize Winner (reportedly at c£250k) has made the headlines and the shift of 5* star sports engineering staff from Sheffield to Sheffield Hallam has gained press attention. New ways of tying academic staff into contracts have been tried and tested and increasingly imaginative deals are struck to lure them to new (and often lucrative) university bases, where they can, potentially, exercise their "research muscles" and, of course, enhance the reputation of their new employers.

The developments in the RAE and sector funding policy have, of course, made some of these trends inevitable.

A QUIET REVOLUTION...

The transfer of talented academic staff from one organisation to another has been well documented and is likely to continue. While this happens, however, a less noticeable, but equally significant revolution has been underway in the UK's institutions.

The increased recruitment of administrative specialists into higher education from the private sector has been identified as one of the most significant recruitment trends of the last five years.* The development has been inevitable as many universities and colleges have responded to an increasingly competitive and commercial agenda inherent in the sector. How do organisations, though, ensure that both they, and their new recruits, get the very best out of this new talent pool?

LOCATING AND LURING TALENT...

Marketing specialists, plus finance, business development and HR professionals have been increasingly targeted by universities seeking a competitive edge in a vigorous market. The 2005 HEI Management Survey reported that:

- 72% of higher education managers have worked with someone who joined their institutions from the private sector last year.
- 36% of senior and middle managers said they had recruited HR professionals from the private sector in the past year.
- 59% of institutions recruited marketing and PR staff from the private sector in 2005, with IT staff following closely behind.
- Nearly 1 in 10 managers had moved to their current position from the private sector.

Many organisations are seeking the cross fertilisation that a mix of private and public sector experience can bring plus the potential cultural catalyst of an enlightened and market-aware approach to "new" issues such as the increasing focus on the consumer in higher education.

MAXIMISING PERFORMANCE

Of course, it's one thing to recruit such staff, but how do you hang on to them and ensure that they work in a environment that will bring out the very best performance?

Often a great deal of resource is expended to secure senior level appointments: what does an organisation need to do to ensure that everyone benefits?

WHAT WORKS...AND WHAT DOESN'T...

While many of those joining higher education from outside the sector reported enjoyable and fulfilling experiences, there are some key "dealbreakers"

that can dictate whether appointments are successful or not in the longer term. The positives sound good but are sometimes critically difficult for a higher education organisation to achieve. **They include:**

THE DEAL-MAKERS AND BREAKERS...

- [1] REPORTING LINES:**
For the most senior appointments, a seat on the organisation's management board and a report directly into the VC or Principal is often a must.
- [2] BUDGET AND RESOURCES:**
Whether in terms of staff or finance, broken or unfulfilled promises regarding the number of the team or monies available have seen some senior recruits walk out after less than 12 months.
- [3] DECISION-MAKING:**
Even more critical than some resource issues, sluggish decision-making cycles (for example, slow or "committee-hindered" rather than dynamically-driven decision systems) have caused acute levels of frustration among some sector incomers used to more autonomous modes of management.
- [4] LENGTH AND STYLE OF PLANNING HORIZONS:**
While the length of time required to see some complex projects through to their conclusion has often been anticipated by new recruits, unsurprisingly, they may also wish to control the integration of elements such as evaluation methodologies and cost-benefits analysis into more traditional project planning processes.
- [5] TALENT MANAGEMENT ISSUES:**
While, in higher education, many senior staff may still need to fight for appropriate levels of professional coaching and support, some new recruits join up with a "shopping list" of their development needs. The first "wish-list" item is often the time, space and objective support to gain insight into the culture and politics of their newly adopted sector.

VALUE FOR MONEY?

Of course, this equation works two ways.

Higher education institutions also want to be sure that they, too, are able to reap the full benefit of new and possibly expensive appointments. The keys to success are managing a "contract" of evaluators that benefits both parties, and to which both parties agree. For example:

- Clear performance indicators, which are results driven and time bound.
- Performance-related pay initiatives.
- A costs-benefits analysis approach to appointments: i.e. mapping rewards gained by the organisation on a short, medium and long term matrix (which may include anything from enhanced organisational reputation through to fund raising achievements).
- Actively "managed" contracts: i.e. to allow organisations and recruits to evaluate mutual performance and recommit or reconsider, as appropriate.

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*The 2005 HEI Management Survey, the Strategic Consulting Group, Euro RSCG Riley, December 2005

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