



A Lookingglass Lens

9 Steps To Attracting and Retaining Creative Talent

Research recently conducted by the Association of American Advertising Agencies (AAAA), suggests that one third of the industry's talent will either have left their job or left the industry by this time next year.

And according to Sir Martin Sorrell of WPP, the advertising industry is also guilty of 'criminal neglect' in its approach to recruiting talent.

For an industry that sells original thinking, this is unassisted suicide.

The good news is that no matter the size of the company, attracting and retaining talent has more to do with your commitment to building a sustainable business, than how much you pay.

The species to which we belong being compelled at a cellular level towards achievement and progress.

Which means that we only accept the substitute of more money as compensation not for our labor, but for what we sacrifice. Namely, the opportunity to make a difference.

Financial rewards come to those who make a difference. Which, ironically tends to be those companies who put the difference part ahead of the money part when it comes to attracting talent.

And who know that to retain that talent, money is but one part of a nine part equation.

1. **Pay Fairly.** Beating the market is not a sustainable practice when it comes to compensation. Many companies ignore this truth and apply a famine and feast mentality to paying talent. Under-paying early when the company has the leverage. Then over-paying later, in order to attract or keep talent from the competition. This builds suspicion and destroys loyalty. Instead be relentlessly pro-active in maintaining market parity at every position, with bonuses for extraordinary results. This creates an environment in which financial resentment is not a motivation for your talent to look for new opportunities. Desperate competitors may still over-pay. But when talent feels valued, the premium required to convince them to leave gives you an immediate competitive advantage.
2. **Understand The Deflationary Value of Money.** In [Dan Pink's excellent book, Drive](#), the author describes research that shows that many original thinkers are not only unmotivated by incentive based rewards, they actually perform worse. In part this is because when a task becomes 'work', talented people tend to feel more constrained. Organizations that tie creativity to money usually have less financial success than those that focus first on defining the intrinsic benefits of solving a client's problem and frame the challenge in more valuable ways. When you are doing it just for the money - an economic reality in virtually every business - be clear about the impact that has on your most talented people's satisfaction, and balance how often that is their only reward.



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3. **Build An Evangelical Business.** As a species we are united by our instinct to create. We want to make things. Especially a difference. Google's success is driven by a simple premise. They want to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful. A goal that has attracted, informed and unified some of the most original thinking of the last ten years. Define the change your company wants to make in the world. No matter how local. Nothing attracts like a clearly defined vision of a better future. And the opportunity to be part of making it come true.
4. **Measure Progress.** Measuring progress is one of the keys to harnessing creativity. A study in the Harvard Business Review showed that a sense of progress is the attribute which people value most in their day. Progress can only be measured on a continuum that has a beginning and an end. Defining the difference you want your business to make provides the latter. The former comes from individual reviews - a subject worthy of its own post. And annual reminders of how far the organization has come. Celebrating the company's anniversary with a retrospective comparison of where you were a year ago is simple and powerful. And offers the chance to re-present the vision as a reminder of where the future lies.
5. **Engineer Engagement.** Gallup Organization research has shown that most people become less engaged with an organization over time. Maintaining initial levels of enthusiasm is a two part process. The first is staying engaged with your best thinkers. Easier said than done given the temptation to focus energy on solving problems rather than building on successes. The second is being willing to clear the dead wood from the organization. Nothing de-motivates people more than an organization's willingness to support under-performers. Be relentless about raising standards and expectations. It attracts and provokes greatness.
6. **Invest in Individuality.** Google's success is driven by the fact that the discipline required to create some of the most sophisticated software code ever written, has been balanced by a commitment to allow those same engineers to express themselves individually. Organizationally this means that eighty percent of their time is devoted to meeting the demands of keeping Google running. The other twenty percent must be used for solving problems of the engineers own choosing. An investment in individuality that Google attributes for all of their major innovations. Creative companies that charge by the hour have a systemic inability to match this level of investment. But deciding to invest not at all in your talent's ability to create new forms of value suggests you think either they are not capable of that kind of original thinking, or your organization is not capable of taking advantage of it.



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7. **Be Open. Be Honest.** Transparency is the most over-worked word in the English language at the moment. Which does not make it less essential to attracting and retaining great people. Usually, it's more effective to think of transparency as a commitment to open honesty, which we have had success applying as: telling what you can, and explaining what you can't. You can draw the line between them wherever you are comfortable - with the caveat being that comfort is usually a poor measurement of what is in your best interest. Sharing more encourages others to do the same. And to give you the benefit of the doubt. Valuable assets in building loyalty.
8. **Provide Boundaries.** Original thinking requires room to explore new possibilities. It also requires boundaries that focus its capacity to solve relevant problems. In the 1990s, Whirlpool's CEO, Jeff Fettig, took the company's 25 most revered thinkers and assigned them to a dedicated innovation think-tank in Switzerland. 12 months later they came back with a single idea. A web-based game that linked stationary exercise bikes around the world in virtual races. Exactly. Since then, Whirlpool has invested significantly in training key talent to build and manage a defined and measurable innovation pipeline. Over the last ten years, the revenue generated by products the company defines as innovative has risen from \$10 million to over \$3 billion, funding further its investment in training, teaching and mentoring its employees. And Whirlpool's ability to turn original thinking into practical differences has earned it Fast Company's ranking as the 5th most innovative consumer goods company in the world. And put it on BusinessWeek's list of, "Best places to start a career."
9. **Say Thank You.** The artist in all of us needs to be recognized. So does the human being. And yet most companies are slow to praise. Or even to thank. Which is strange since each of us make a choice where we work every day. It need not, after all, be here. Saying thank you at the end of every day has always seemed to me to be a small acknowledgement that you take neither their talent nor their choice for granted.

These steps require investment. Of time. And a little money. The ROI on which will exceed any scale you care to choose today.

Each will make an organization more compelling.

Collectively they will make your company irresistible. And invaluable.