By Linda Francis

Four Strategies for Defeating the Labor Shortage

“I can’t find qualified workers!” I hear this lament all over the country in every corner of the building industry. Many experts think this labor shortage will be with us for years to come. Some estimate the growing demand for skilled workers will exceed new people coming into the trades by two to one. What can you do?

Here are a few strategies for getting the workers you need. The core element in each strategy is excellent personnel practices—clear and accurate job descriptions, competitive wages tied to skill levels, performance reviews and an honest appreciation of and acknowledgment for an employee’s contribution to company success.

Keep Who You Have.

Run a company that values its people—and they know it. This company meets more than the financial needs of its employees. It’s a company that shares its mission and goals, and shares the success and profitability of the business with the people who helped make it happen.
I work with a remodeler who is not the highest paying employer in the area. However, he treats his people right and values their contributions. He shares the company plan and its profits. Although his people regularly get job offers from other remodelers, they don’t respond to these offers because of how their company treats them.

If you are using only money to keep people, there will always be a higher bidder. Go beyond the dollar and meet the other needs of your employees.

**Grow Your Own.**

The Nordstrom department store has a saying: “Hire nice and train cash register.” You can teach someone to use a cash register, but you can’t teach them to be nice. What attributes do you need in an employee? Intelligence? Good people skills? Mechanically inclined? Good work habits? Hire green with these characteristics in mind. You can teach people to swing a hammer, frame a room or hang drywall. You also have to offer people a career path within your organization, both in terms of new skills and increased wages.

A plumbing, heating and cooling service company I work with uses the “grow your own” strategy. The owner is on the board of directors of a local apprenticeship training school and gets a shot at the cream of the crop. She has clear job descriptions tied to a salary schedule so that employees can see a future within her company. She carefully places the apprentices with journeymen who use specific training criteria that lead to in-house certification. She has opened her books. Everyone in her company knows how much it costs to run the business, what the profits are, and each shares in the company’s success. Lots of work? You bet! But, she has excellent employees and a very healthy business.

**Attract People from Other Companies.**

I am not talking about unethically “stealing” employees. I’m talking about attracting reliable employees with your
reputation as an employer. Good employees pick and choose where they want to work. If your company is known for being a great place to work, the word spreads. The building industry is small, and workers talk. They know who’s worthwhile to work for and who’s not. Good workers want to work for good companies. So when you advertise for employees, make sure the word on the street about you encourages people to apply.

I work with a remodeler who just hired two leadmen. Both are excellent employees, and both were working elsewhere when he hired them. They wanted to work for him because of the company’s reputation for quality and his reputation as a person and employer.

Find nontraditional workers.

Hire women. Women are entering the trades in larger numbers. I know a painting contractor who employed a woman who became his best detailer. A plumbing service company finds that women customers will request his female plumber because they are more comfortable with her in their home.

Hire non-English speaking immigrants. Make an investment in English as a second language training, and you will create a good and loyal employee. In addition, word travels fast, and your employees will be great recruiters for you.

Make skills training, whether English or technical, a requirement of ongoing employment.

Finally, for truly long-term solutions, you, your trade associations, local schools and politicians need to put time, money and effort into training programs, and spread the word that the building trades are a great career and profession. 

About the Author
Based in Redwood Valley, Calif, Linda Francis is an independent consultant who consults and trains small and large companies. She will be speaking at AWCI’s Annual Convention, April 29-May 3, in Las Vegas, on the topics of finding and keeping great employees, and understanding and using financial information.