

On the Hunt

Putting together a winning team employing hourly workers and part-timers as a solid foundation.

BY GABRIEL NGO



“Culture is defined and created from the top down, but it comes to life from the bottom up.” – Mike Smith, former Atlanta Falcons head coach and 2008 NFL coach of the year

You’re probably already thinking that this quote is all well and good, but who has time for culture when your business is short a licensed staffer or two (if you operate a larger business) and the other licensed staff is on vacation this week?

I get it. Businesses across all professions and industries have been battling staffing shortages and talent retention challenges. To that extent, funeral home businesses are no exception. They are not only part of the rule but also have licensing requirement issues (in some states, dual licensing) to contend with when attracting, hiring and retaining talent.

I hope that by the end of this article, I can help you see how this quotation not only applies to you but how you can strategically focus on developing hourly and/or part-time staff to fulfill your staffing challenges and bring your culture “to life from the bottom up.”

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What has led us to where we are today in 2023, where finding and keeping qualified licensed staff is such a challenge? Was it COVID? Is it that these younger generations just don’t want to work as hard or as long? Was it because the pandemic forced companies in general to allow work-from-home arrangements and now none of us can put the proverbial genie back in the bottle? Perhaps it was all the above and then some.

The funeral profession has always had to contend with finding and keeping good licensed folks for adequate staffing requirements – it’s just worse now with the influence of the above. What we do is truly noble work intrinsically rooted in serving others. But it certainly is not glamorous in any way, and the rest of the world sees it as such a niche trade that most people do not think about it (unless called upon in some way) when contemplating a career or career change.

Two main areas that have always been real issues for the funeral profession are:

- Sourcing quality candidates leading to hiring challenges
- Increasing skill gaps driving hiring challenges.

Let’s face it. Sourcing and hiring qualified, licensed candidates in the funeral profession is a zero-sum game almost on par with competing for calls – the licensed funeral director you hire is one less licensed director that I (or another competitor) can hire in any particular market or community. And with the limited head count of qualified candidates, this zero-sum hiring game acts as a double whammy for businesses missing out on the hiring of that one candidate.

The increasing skills gap/shortage in the profession further compounds the challenge. For example, the high-value licensing requirements in the state of Ohio (where in addition to funeral service school and licensing requirements, there is also the required four-year college degree) have had the unintended consequence of stringently excluding possible service talent from other service-based work from entering the profession, thus making the sourcing and hiring of qualified candidates with the necessary licensing and skills extremely difficult. In states like Arkansas, there has been a reduction in apprenticeship time requirements (from 24 months to 18 months) in an attempt to help alleviate licensed staffing challenges for funeral businesses.

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So, what are some ways in which you can think differently, approach things differently and then act differ-

ently in order to overcome these two main challenges to sourcing and hiring qualified candidates? After all, you cannot expect a different outcome if you continue doing the same things. Here are three keys we'll explore in a little more depth:

- Focusing more on soft skills and attention to service ethos.
- Employing employee development and long-term strategies.
- Streamlining your hiring process.

FOCUS ON SOFT SKILLS

While this is not necessarily a new idea, it's a good one. Potential candidates locally and outside the profession with whom you may have interacted on more than one occasion and who demonstrated thoughtful, caring and service-oriented characteristics aligned with your service ethos could truly be a great external pool for sourcing and recruiting candidates. It could be someone at the car dealership, automotive store, hospital/doctor's office or restaurant.

Coming from that idea rooted in the mantra of hiring for attitude and training for skill, the biggest investment here for funeral home owners is shifting one's paradigm to not just actively but proactively recruit for your business' needs and wants.

Despite the growing sentiment that folks nowadays just do not want to work as hard, there are quality people and talent across all lines of work that may very well align with your excellence in service and care beliefs – you just have to hunt to find them these days, now more than ever. This takes disciplining your own thoughts, beliefs and actions to make it happen successfully.

The current model for finding qualified, licensed candidates is not widely or successfully working, so what do you have to lose in changing your approach or changing how you do things? Furthermore, being consistent with your own behaviors of proactively recruiting and making constant sourcing efforts is also very key to how successful you will be at sourcing and hiring based on a candidate's soft skills.

EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT, LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

While deliberately and consistently being on the hunt for candidates with soft skills fit for your business opens up the talent pool for you and may address a wider source of candidates, what about licensing requirements? This is where the "brave new world" we live in requires you to be more strategic in how you properly incorporate your human resources.

Hiring qualified, non-licensed hourly or part-time staff offers greater flexibility for you to cover hours and manpower, but you should now also have a plan

for developing the staff (at least particular members) by encouraging them to obtain the requisite licensing. Budget and build room into your expenses for necessary employee development costs, such as offering to pay for funeral service school (or partially pay) with some exchange in terms of employment commitment to your business.

For example (because I am in and out of automotive parts stores on multiple occasions), if I identify an Auto Zone representative who has, on a number of occasions, helped me and impressed me with their customer service, level of care/attention to detail or background (former military, for example), I would casually educate this person on what I or my funeral business does and the functions of service we provide to the community.

Let's say I succeed in persuading this John Doe from Auto Zone to join my staff as a full-time, hourly funeral assistant/ambassador. The next step in my strategic plan is to develop and encourage John to further his education and skills toward becoming licensed. If he accepts, he signs a contract with me (you can have your attorney draft a simple agreement) where I offer to pay his funeral service school-related expenses in exchange for a mutually acceptable employment commitment (two or three years). From a contractual standpoint, there would be "clawback" provisions stating that John would have to pay me back a prorated amount for every year that he might not fulfill as a licensed funeral director with my business (i.e., 33% of the total funeral service school-related expenses for each year he does not fulfill of a three-year commitment).

Sure, you'll have to involve an attorney to draft such an agreement and potentially enforce its breach if an employee leaves before their commitment time is satisfied. But there are a few huge advantages as well.

First, you are providing development for your staff and that very possibly makes you stand out from the competition, not to mention that many people still value and appreciate your willingness to continue investing in them. Next, you will have a strong influence on how this employee learns and develops under your tutelage and in your methodology and culture. And last, you are directly addressing a huge area of need related to staffing shortages in a two-pronged approach – first by opening widening the source of qualified candidates and then by developing them over a mid-to-longer term when building your licensed staff needs.

I have seen a few funeral home operations in Texas be wildly successful at executing this, and they do not experience the same work shortage issues once they have committed to and invested in strategically sourcing, hiring and developing staff in this manner.

STREAMLINE YOUR HIRING PROCESS

This last section may not be connected to the strate-

gies above in that you can execute this one independent of whether you employ the others. Still, it's important on its own because it may help you not miss out on a qualified candidate simply by having time on your side. But streamlining your hiring process still takes deliberate purpose and focus, just as hunting for candidates with soft skills and strategically developing your staff both require. How many times has this happened to you over the past two or three years? By the time you are ready to make an offer to a licensed candidate you liked, the candidate informs you that they have already accepted a similar role at one of your competitors.

The purpose of streamlining your hiring process, therefore, is to remove bottlenecks in your current process, speed up the process and decrease the time period between when you interview a candidate and when you make an employment offer. There is a saying when working on buy/sell transactions that "time kills all deals." Well, the focus here, in what is essentially a transaction to hire a new employee, is to shorten the time by streamlining your process so that time does not kill your deal. In today's environment, you truly do risk losing out on a qualified candidate if your hir-

ing process is too long. Here are a few things you can deliberately do to streamline:

- *Reduce the hurdles for interviewing candidates.* This involves streamlining potential multiple one-on-one interviews into panel interviews for your main stakeholders, so the candidate does not have to come back a second or third time. Fewer hurdles for the candidate also reduces time for you in having to schedule rounds of interviews.

- *Remove/reduce bottlenecks on your end.* If you have one or two other partners or stakeholders, actively ensure that everyone is committing to what is now a must in recruiting differently and hiring quickly. Families come first in what we do, but even if you have to reschedule, ensure that your other stakeholders/interviewers can commit to the rescheduled time so that you have removed any bottlenecks on time for you and any hurdles for the candidate.

- *Standardize background and reference checks.* If you have historically done this yourself in-house, perhaps it's time to outsource to a third-party that specializes in this function. It might be an added expense, sure, but if it reduces your process timeline and improves hiring because you no longer lose out on qualified candidates due to the time it takes, consider this expense well-spent.

While these things may sound simple to do, it takes focus and purpose to deliberately change behavior, and we all know how our schedules can sometimes feel like we're herding cats. Thus, even the three aforementioned bulleted items take commitment and dedication in adherence.

Focusing on soft skills in recruiting, employing strategic employee development and training to bridge gaps between non-licensed and licensed staff, and streamlining your hiring process will help you put in place a new and solid foundation to build on for the future. It is this foundation that will allow you to nurture your culture driven from the bottom up so that your team and your business thrive for many years to come. ☰

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