

“If you think training is expensive, try ignorance”.

Peter Drucker

I've seen variations of this quote the last few years. The latest was on the back of a plumbing service truck. 'If you think hiring a professional is expensive, try hiring an amateur'. As a certified firm for the IICRC, we follow the thinking that having professional employees is the best way to go. Make no bones about it; certifications are expensive, and a significant investment for the firm. What are the downsides and up-sides of getting those certifications for your employees?

'If I get them certified, I will have to give them a raise'

I have this conversation with my employees regularly. They feel as though if they get the certification, there is an automatic raise involved—they are more educated and worth more to the company now. A fellow franchisee was telling me he asks the employee who is gaming for the raise based on successful passing of the test what exactly they have put up for the certification:

Did you pay for the class? 'Well, no.'

Did you pay for the registration? 'Uh, no.'

Did you get paid for all of the time while you were at school? 'Of course!'

Who provided travel and food for you while at the class? 'Uh, you did!'

So, who exactly has benefited from you taking the class then? Short answer, both parties have. So, how do we reconcile these two contrarian views? We do a fair amount of national account work. The national accounts require that we have certified employees on each job that is given to us by the TPA or the insurance company's mit department. It's a fair request—employees need to have a basic understanding the psychometrics and the service level that is expected of the mitigation company on behalf of the customer and on behalf of the insurance company. The mitigation company also wants to reduce risk and increase their chances for getting paid for the work that they work hard to get for the services they provide.

Who is the best qualified person to do that? Someone untrained and inexperienced at making initial calls and setting the course for a failed mitigation plan? Short answer is that we need those certified employees to do all of the above, and do it well. In our area outside of Baltimore, there is a shortage of certified employees. There are also employees who are certified, but struggle to understand basic concepts of psychometrics and could care less about being professional in their projects. I know many in our franchise group won't consider employees (certified or not) from other competing franchises, because even though the techs are certified, the franchises do not practice the important parts of understanding and applying the best practices of the S500 and S520.

Employees want to be professionals, especially when we raise the bar and hold them and ourselves accountable.

Getting certifications is a big deal for employees here- none of mine are college educated, but they understand the desire and importance of professionalism by seeing what we expect from them and how we run our operation. It is part of the full spectrum of booties to being polite, to explaining to clients why we are doing what we do in the process of mitigation. They practice what we preach, and I find the better employees want more of the same education. I don't deny them those opportunities, and we talk about next steps at annual employee reviews here at our firm. It sets the expectation for CE performance and for next steps in getting certifications.

To the point of escalating wages with certifications, there needs to be clarity in performance that parallels certification. Yes, I give a bump with the certification because they are worth more to me, especially on the WRT, ASD and AMRT levels. This means I can have my tech talk direct to the mitigation department and stand the line on his recommendations based on not only what he knows from the S500 / S520, but what he understands in applied theory. It is powerful stuff when they can stick to their guns and keep us out of liability and in compliance with carriers and TPA's

Side benefits: cold beer and conversations bring new ideas and opportunities. Some of the more valuable conversations I've had while at classes in the midst of some boring obvious conclusions are conversations with my table neighbor (never during class of course!) who is digging into something he said or I said. I can't tell you how many times brought that nugget home with me and turned it into money.

In Florida at one of Jeff Cross's seminars (jcross@grandviewmedia.com), I was talking to a guy about the virtues of making money on electric heaters during electric / heating outages. He said yes, and you can make as much on the feeder cords as you do on the equipment. Really? This added another 20% to every heater rental we did.

My Production Manager was at his ASD class and was sharing his frustration with some of the performance and maintenance issues of our LGR dehus (accused manufacturers not specifically noted here!). Turns out, this guy had the same thing, and shared his experience and contact with the manufacturer's rep. Within two months, we had 80% of our LGR's completely rebuilt at no cost to us. Even the shipping was covered. This was after 2 years of losing downtime on these units, dealing with my distributor on what was warranty and what was normal wear and tear. Cost of that class was about \$1500.00, the savings to my company was about \$8000.00. My stomach still gets knotted up thinking about the constant shipping costs, alleged repair costs and lost revenue on down equipment when you need it most. Arrg.

What can we do to retain the employee we have made the investment in? Ah the age-old question. If I train them, they will leave. They will take what I have given them and depart for twenty cents per hour. Yep, I've been down that road too. And some have left that I paid for those certifications for. I don't miss them a bit. As owners, it's up to us to pick the right employees for the right certifications, and we don't always do that well. It starts when we hire them—I remember a past business coach (Jim Kelly) taught me these important words—every hire is an upgrade. I hate hiring out of desperation or lack of good candidates, but we all continue to do this (at times). To combat this, I have revisited non-compete agreements with key employees to let them know we have an investment in them and we have a vested interest in being successful together.

Another tool in your box is doing regular reviews with employees where we can talk about what certification may lie ahead and what their level of commitment is to us. I try to get a commitment for a year from the date with any increase in salary. We also do a review with them, their supervisor and me that covers their performance in a quantified way with job specific performance about how they are doing, not based on the fact that the boss is still pissed about a piece of scratched furniture on a pack out that cost him \$500 dollars to settle. More on this in the near future.

Short answer, certification pays dividends. Not just for what we are required to have, but for the growth of our companies and the clients we serve with the best of employees who are the face of professionalism for our firms in our clients living rooms.

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