

Capitalizing on expertise; Seasoned execs help fill void for businesses

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Jay Park spent about two years looking for someone with human resources experience to help his small, 15-person real estate services firm cope with the ongoing labour shortage and to help fill a void as senior leaders began to think about retirement.

While he didn't need, nor have the resources, to bring on a high-powered, seasoned HR expert full time, he did need an experienced person to help guide the company's people strategy amid the labour crunch. Like a growing number of struggling small businesses, he outsourced.

"We don't have a lot of time to spend on recruitment and making sure you're recruiting the right kind of people," says Park, vice-president of operations for Six Real Estate in Calgary.

"We were trying to find out if we'd been hiring the right kind of people, identify the gaps from a skill set point and find out how to fix these things," he says.

It's a common scenario: small businesses in growth mode lack the expertise to help fuel their expansion and lack the skills to deal with the unique challenges of such a heated labour market.

"There's a lack of experience in that five to 10 years of work experience," Park says. "That's the area we're really trying to focus on first."

After exhausting the traditional recruitment routes, he joined a growing trend among small companies that are outsourcing key functions of their business strategy and hired Janet Salopek, a 25-year HR veteran, to guide the firm's people strategy.

Park wanted to know where to find people, how to attract them, how to retain them and how to ensure they have the support necessary to be effective in their positions as the company grows.

"You want to make sure you're doing the right things to communicate where the business is going, how they're performing and giving them good feedback," he says.

Salopek, who left the corporate world to exploit this niche market by launching her consulting firm, Salopek Consulting Ltd., brings in a team of specialists as needed.

"I really saw the need for strong HR support in a small organization which isn't always there for companies," says Salopek.

Seeing an opportunity, she surrounded herself with expertise in all facets of the HR side of business and offers companies whatever strategic services that are needed.

"The HR specialist on call is for an organization that's small, but growing," she says.

While Salopek is targeting small firms, the trend is clearly not limited to this segment of the market alone. The

IMAGES



Ted Rhodes, Calgary Herald
Janet Salopek, centre, who runs Salopek Consulting, a home-based firm offering human resources advice, has been in the business for 25 years. In her home office are consultants, from left, Sonja Gabel, Roselynn Wickerson and Shawna McGovern-Burke.

Osbourne Group provides clients with a kind of rent-an-executive service, where they draw on senior executive expertise to deliver management solutions to corporations for interim periods of rapid growth, transition or decline.

Many seasoned executives nearing retirement are realizing they can turn their wealth of knowledge and experience into short-term contractual stints to help companies with specific challenges, while maintaining the freedom they desire as they begin their gradual, personal exit strategies from the workforce.

Harris Interim Executives is a Winnipeg-based division of Harris Consulting Corp. that offers similar professional management consulting services in HR management, such as recruitment, career transition, leadership development, strategy and organizational development.

Companies that have used these interim specialists on-call cite the trend as a cost-effective way of injecting their organizations with a great deal of experience, instead of committing to a long and often costly, more permanent solution.

For smaller players like Park, what sounds like a fairly straightforward task of hiring and retaining people is anything but in this type of labour market.

"All these things seem pretty easy, but they can get quite complicated quickly," he says.

As the founding principal of Six Real Estate withdraws from his full-time role as a strategic leader in the firm, Salopek is helping to fill the void of mid-level experience to help deal with the transition.

In a small company, when even one employee decides to leave, it can throw a wrench into everything.

"You lose somebody that's been here for some time and it hurts," says Park.

Salopek, meanwhile, doesn't expect her clients to know the ins and outs of the HR game -- that's her business.

"We can give them some quick tools to turn it around and present a better look to their organization as they go out to source candidates because people have choices these days," she says.

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Illustration:

• Colour Photo: Ted Rhodes, Calgary Herald / Janet Salopek, centre, who runs Salopek Consulting, a home-based firm offering human resources advice, has been in the business for 25 years. In her home office are consultants, from left, Sonja Gabel, Rosellyn Wickerson and Shawna McGovern-Burke.

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