

16 Tips for Recruiting and Retaining the Best Workers in Your Market

At our June Subcontractor Meetup, we gathered experienced subcontractors from across the US and asked them what advice they have for other subs on recruiting and retaining top talent. Here's what they said:

Recruiting

- 1 Ask for Work Photos in the Interview** - If it makes sense for your trade, ask to see photos of the work they've done in the past, even on personal projects. As they run through photos, read the excitement in their face; probe how much they know about their craft. It can tell you a lot about the person you're thinking about hiring.
- 2 Emphasize Long Term Employee Growth** - Everyone loves a story of the guy who started out on the factory floor and wound up running the company after 10 years. Don't just post and fill a job. Create and outline a career path. Show them how they could go from this role all the way up to the C-suite, or the highest they could go in their field if they work hard. Make good on the promise of tomorrow.
- 3 Create Skill Tests** - Whether it's a bookkeeper, assistant, or journeyman electrician, work internally to devise a practical test that will allow you to gauge your candidate's skill level. They may have to show up and mix mortar or stack bricks, but it shows you what kind of work they do, if they dress appropriately, and how they interact with their prospective manager. For practical field tests, Matt DiBara, a leading recruiting consultant for subcontractors, even suggests having a piece of work that you think epitomizes quality workmanship sitting under a tarp, and when the candidate is done with the skill test, you can compare their work with your own quality baseline. They may do so well that you decide to offer them a higher hourly wage. Or, you may see that they need more experience, but are willing to work with them and train them.
- 4 Referral Bonuses** - This isn't a novel idea, but every sub approaches it a little differently. The subs at the Meetup talked about offering a \$500 referral bonus immediately upon hire, then another \$500 if they work out for 90 days, then another at 6 months, and another at a year. This staggered approach could help with retention.
- 5 Be Open to Less Experience** - While skilled labor is the dream, many subs advocate for hiring "green" talent, who you can train and shape into the workers you want them to be. Don't discount an inexperienced candidate if they seem eager, willing and ready. In this case, you're hiring for soft skills like coachability and grit over hard skills.

Retaining

- 6 Extend Perks to Their Family** - Don't just make your employee love where they work. Make their family love it too. Company perks that extend all the way to the family build a kind of affinity that firmly roots this job in their lives. A great example is one company who provided a free Thanksgiving turkey to all their workers, which was enjoyed – and counted on – by the whole family. Something so small gives your business a more meaningful presence in the lives of those who work there.

- 7 Have Standing Perks** - Allow your employees to *expect* certain perks. Put thought into what regular perks you can manage, and ones that will be hard for them to part with. For one of Matt DiBara's clients, a concrete sub, that means offering one massage credit per month to field workers. Not only does it make employees feel appreciated, the perk has decreased injuries and increased productivity. What perks do you think your workers would kill for, that wouldn't kill you to provide?
- 8 Give Safety and Quality Bonuses** - Never let good work go unnoticed. Quality workmanship makes you look good to the GC, so make it your priority to find, recognize and further incentivize people who do quality work. Safety is another huge issue that the subs at the Meetup thought deserved bonuses. When there are long periods with no OSHA violations, demonstrate to your team that you appreciate and value their focus on safety.
- 9 Recognize Standout Ideas and Actions** - It doesn't have to stop at safety and good workmanship. When someone hits you with that *really* good idea, or makes a perfect call in a high-stakes moment, recognize it. That *could* mean bonuses, but it could also mean shouting them out to the rest of the company, giving them a day off, or even just pulling them aside to give a specific compliment about what you appreciate about their work. Remember, bonuses can't replace culture, or the way employees *feel* when they step foot through the door every morning. Cultivate an environment where they'll be happy, heard, and meaningfully rewarded.
- 10 Surprise Them with Paid Time Off** - We get it, this one is tricky. Team size and scheduling are delicate, and you can't exactly pluck the foreman off his crew for the day. But hear us out, if you're in a position to, think about giving someone their birthday off. If they mention a loved one being in town, give them the Friday off they were too shy to ask for. Employees pocket moments like that. Applied correctly, thoughtfulness can be a bit like resignation repellent. Gestures like these will cost you a little bit of money, and we get that, but you're making a long term investment in your own employee retention.
- 11 Spend Time with Each Other as People** - Teambuilding events aren't exactly uncommon, but when you let the stuffy, corporate air out of them, you end up with something different – something better. It could be a fishing trip with all the laborers, or grabbing a drink with the admin team after work. Use that time to find out more about them, and maybe what you have in common beyond the job.
- 12 Set Time to Talk About Non-work Topics** - One sub suggested a lunchtime activity where everyone's invited to talk about whatever's on their mind – work-related or not. Building a new deck at your house? Kids just kicked off the summer camp circuit? Can't stop talking about the movie you saw last Thursday? Ask your employees what's on their minds. Innovation or connection don't have to be the goal, but they're not half bad side effects.
- 13 Have a Dedicated Person for Employee Success** - It's not groundbreaking, but it never hurts to be reminded of it. Don't haphazardly grasp at ways to make your employees happier. The best way to be methodical about it is to hire someone to be methodical about it.
- 14 Rank Your Workers Skill and Importance** - One sub explained their system of ranking laborers on a level from 1-4. Ranking depends on their skill level and how much the company depended on them. This tiered approach can guide your efforts in how hard you work to keep key players. Poachers will usually offer more money, so if you have to offer them as much, you want to decide in advance who's worth it. But don't forget, you want to offer more than money. Money is often the only thing poachers have going for them, and if you can offer more in terms of culture and perks, you will be able to keep them (or re-recruit them later).
- 15 Hand Out Prizes** - The venue can be a Christmas party or a late Friday meeting, but handing out prizes/awards for leadership or on-the-job excellence can be a great morale boost. Formally recognizing great contributions will keep those contributions coming.
- 16 Stagger the 4-Day Work Week** - This up and coming concept is getting a lot of buzz, but doesn't seem entirely practical for an industry that needs boots on the ground 5 or more days a week. One participant offered the idea of staggering the 4-day work week, with one group of people working Monday - Thursday, and the other group working Tuesday - Friday. This way, employees still enjoy four 10-hour work days, but there is always someone at the office/in the field.