

LAUNDRY TALENT SCOUTING

REFERRALS, REFUGEES &
'SPECIAL NEEDS' PROSPECTS



Operators outline recruiting initiatives that are helping them address today's staff shortages

By Jack Morgan

As businesses across North America, including laundry operators, continue a slow recovery from COVID-19, a recent rise in U.S. labor participation (61.8%, the highest since March 2020) has analysts predicting that the tight labor market for job candidates might loosen up a bit in 2022. However, unemployment dropped to 4.2% in November 2021, and fierce competition for job candidates—including a virtual bidding war on wages—seems likely to continue in the new year. With that in mind, many laundries are pursuing innovative alternatives to fill their ranks. Below, we explore three examples.

REVVED-UP REFERRALS

For Unitex's Jennifer Ciardullo, harnessing the profit motive is paying dividends for this healthcare operator's efforts to staff 12 plants across the Northeast. The vehicle they're using to draw fresh talent is a multilevel recruitment program with major cash incentives—including a \$2,000 bonus for route drivers who stay 180 days and \$2,500 for successful manager referrals.

"The overall impact of our referral programs is very positive, which is why Unitex heavily promotes our referral programs," says Ciardullo, recruiting manager for Unitex Healthcare Laundry Services, Elmsford, NY. "We feel that team members who refer friends and family are excited about the work they do here, fit into our fantastic culture and feel a strong sense of community. The people they refer have a similar strong work ethic and fit seamlessly into the robust Unitex culture. Team member referrals will always have a positive impact."

It certainly doesn't hurt that by making a referral, a team member earns serious bonuses as well. The Unitex incentive program promotes this fact with slick ads emphasizing sports analogies such as "Hit a Home Run" or "Score a Touchdown," by helping Unitex sign up new talent. A quick summary of the company's incentives include:

- Management team member referrals: a \$2,500 bonus
- Driver referrals: a \$1,000 bonus for new drivers who stay 90 days; another \$1,000 when they reach 180 days of service
- Mechanics referrals: \$500 for mechanics after 90 days of employment and another \$500 at 180 days
- Production and Porters: \$200 after 90 days' employment and another \$200 after 180 days.

Beyond those benefits, Unitex wants to make a winner of every team member who refers a prospective hire. Incentives include \$10 Dunkin Donuts gift

cards when a referral is hired. Everyone who hands in a referral form, whether the referral is hired or not, is entered into a weekly drawing for a \$25 Amazon gift card. There's also the "Super Bowl" bonus: Referrals for all team members hired and in good standing by Feb. 11, will qualify for a \$100 quarterly gift card drawing and a pizza party for the plant staff. The game, Super Bowl LVI, is slated for Feb. 13.

Ciardullo emphasized that team members get recognition for referring a prospect, regardless of whether Unitex hires that person. "Our programs are paid out in cash bonuses, gift cards and end-of-program pizza parties for winning plants," she says. "Our programs don't even require someone to be hired. Just for handing in a referral form, you are entered into weekly and monthly gift-card drawings. We like to give everyone a chance to win something just for trying."

Unitex's payback for these investments is a broader pool of prospects that saves money, while boosting retention. "Our team-member-referral programs have been shown to have significant cost savings, reduced hiring time, improved quality of hires and increased retention," Ciardullo says. "Our statistics show that team members brought in through the referral programs tend to bring in referrals themselves (often "passive" candidates who weren't actively seeking jobs). This creates a positive cycle of bringing in the right fit in terms of experience and culture and ensures continued program growth and success."

REFUGEE OUTREACH

Other operators have attained a comparable virtuous circle of recruitment/retention by seeking out and hiring immigrants—particularly refugees who've left their homelands in search of a better life in the U.S. "The employees fit in pretty well, as long as they are hitting their production numbers and contributing to the success of the team

each day," says Kelley Dixon, general manager/owner of St Croix Linen, St. Paul, MN. "Many have helped bring in referrals once they get settled as well."

For Dixon, the refugee pipeline for staff seeking jobs in this hospitality/food and beverage laundry is largely made possible by not-profit-groups that serve as intermediaries for resettling newcomers and helping them find housing and

jobs in their new country. Dixon began at the most basic level with a computer search that quickly delivered results in the form of possible contacts. "I googled refugee agencies in Minnesota and filled out a form on their website," she says. "A few of them came to tour our facility before sending employees to us."



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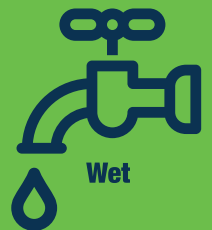
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‘Intercultural Fluency’— A Key for Immigrant Staff Recruitment/Retention

Many laundry operators across North America today rely on a significant number of immigrant staff members who retain strong ties to their countries of origin. A strategy of even-handed tolerance—coupled with a sensitivity to the cultural identities of these employees—can build staff loyalty and

retention, according to a healthcare laundry operator who recently published a book on topics related to immigration and diversity.

“Employers must be culturally aware,” says Emeka Okeani, president of Shared Hospital Corp., a healthcare textile and surgical supply co-op in Nashville, TN. “In other words, they must be culturally competent. This represents the ability to adeptly and seamlessly recognize, appreciate and empathize with various cultural contexts. Yet not losing one’s core culture. It is sometimes referred to as ‘intercultural fluency.’”

Okeani has lived in the U.S. since the late 1970s after emigrating from Nigeria. Today, he enjoys dual citizenship, and recently completed a doctorate in leadership and professional practice. Given the recruitment/retention challenges facing many laundries today, we asked Okeani how to deal effectively with immigrant staff members. There’s no secret formula, he says, but added that thoughtful treatment of these team members is helpful. “It requires effort, intentionality and focus for success,” he says.

One initiative that requires significant outreach, but typically minimal expense, is to work with religious or other not-for-profit groups that specialize in placing refugees who’ve fled their home countries to seek a better life in the U.S. or Canada. The benefit is that this extra support helps immigrants adjust to life in a new country “They represent the needed bridge for new entrants,” he says.

Another valuable yet cost-effective response is to offer immigrant employees classes in English as a second language (ESOL). Again, partnering with not-for-profit groups can help companies assist their nonnative employees in improving their English skills—often at little or no expense. ESOL classes represent a win-win for both companies and their employees by encouraging assimilation.

A third step that companies can take to build loyalty among immigrant staff includes taking a sensitive approach to food choices for staff parties or picnics. Considering dietary practices, such as kosher or other specialty foods, when planning corporate events can show immigrant employees that the company cares about them and their needs, Okeani says.

While this may require extra planning and expense, it’s worth the investment because, “It makes everybody feel welcome,” Okeani says “They say, ‘Ah, they thought about the fact that I don’t eat pork, so they provided something else.’ So, you start to build some camaraderie or loyalty to the company because it is culturally sensitive.” For more information or to order a copy of Okeani’s book, *The Hand*, click bit.ly/EOHand.

Once the employees started arriving for work, a period of adjustment was needed. But the overall impact on both productivity and staff unity was positive. There were, however, some issues to work through. “Yes, the language barrier is an added challenge,” Dixon says. “We’ve had to teach a few people the importance of deodorant.” Transportation to and from work also posed hurdles. “We do have to work around bus schedules on the weekends, and we do work with them to ensure that they hit production numbers (a new concept to some). They show up every day and have been great contributors to our company morale overall.”

The refugee agencies serve as a resource/partner, not only in locating prospects, but in facilitating their adjustment to life in what for many is a radically new environment. “Minnesota has been bringing a large number of refugees into the state, and there are several agencies that work with the state to ensure that refugees can find jobs and housing,” Dixon says. “Now I contact the agencies when we have a job opening (which is often right now!) and give them a job description and pay scale. We’ve gotten comfortable enough with each other that they know what kind of job we have to offer, and they bring the employees who want to work with us in for their first day of work. The agency helps teach them to use the bus to get to work and has helped bring in a translator for the first day or two, if needed to ensure that the employee gets comfortable with our facility.”

Creative approaches and agency assistance helps St Croix work around the limited-English obstacle. “Typically, the agency has them taking English classes before or after work,” Dixon says. “We have lots of pictures in the plant to help with translations, and several employees who are bilingual to help as well. The agency needs to place the refugees quickly, and we don’t require English to feed an ironer or towel folder, so it has been a nice synergy for both of us.”

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EMPLOYEES WITH CHALLENGES

Another group of prospective employees with differing abilities is comprised of people with special needs.

Johanna Ames, president of Ames Linen Service, Cortland, NY, has a long relationship with a not-for-profit group that places employees with a range of physical and/or mental challenges in jobs at Ames' healthcare/hospitality laundry. The assistance that the J.M. Murray Center Inc., Cortland, provides has played a critical role in recent months amid severe labor shortages. "We partner with a local not-for-profit, the J.M. Murray Center, which operates its own production facility, but also has an employment transitions program for people with disabilities who are ready for community-based employment," Ames says. "They have been tremendous partners of ours for over 30 years and have truly stepped up

to support us in the last six months as the labor crisis became more impactful to us."

The Murray Center provides a range of assistance to ensure a positive experience for both its clients and employees like Ames Linen. "The employees typically have a job coach who helps them to learn the job and also provides support for their personal lives and decisions as may be required," Ames says. "Often, the need for and frequency of job-coach visits declines over time as the employees become comfortable and proficient. Our managers work closely with the job coaches to define job expectations and also to communicate challenges that the employees may be facing—whether work-related or not."

The skill levels of the employees placed by J.M. Murray, vary, but the overall impact on productivity is positive, even though additional oversight is often required. "Some of our employees

with disabilities meet and exceed our productivity standards, while others do not," Ames says. "We work hard to match a job to the employee's ability level, so that they go home proud and confident in themselves every night. In general, if we do a good job matching the position to the person, the amount of extra supervision is minimal."

Just as importantly, having employees with special needs in the plant has boosted staff morale. "Our employees without disabilities are very supportive of our disabled team," Ames says. "I see only a positive impact and gratitude for the help, particularly in this current environment with labor challenges."

As the labor shortages in Upstate New York hit critical mass in recent months, J.M. Murray provided invaluable assistance with recruiting staff, Ames adds. "Without the support of the Murray Center this summer, we would have struggled tremendously. I cannot say enough to express my gratitude!"

Another unconventional candidate pool that Ames recently has tapped with success comes from recently released jail inmates "We have worked with the local probation office and hired some people in transition out of incarceration," she says. "That 'pathway' has worked well for us, and we are not afraid of second chances for people who need a job and a way to start over."



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HIRING OUTSIDE THE BOX

The message conveyed by the executives cited above is that laundry operators need to pursue creative solutions to address labor shortages. These can range from revved-up referral programs, to tapping refugees, ex-inmates or people with disabilities for jobs. These approaches are paying dividends for the operators cited above. They can do the same for you. **TS**

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