

Hiring teens presents mentoring opportunity

As a parent, I see teen employment from a new perspective. As my daughters and their friends explore the world of work, they face such positives as responsibility, high expectations and flexibility. Unfortunately, they also face some negatives: unrealistic demands and expectations that can make their first job experiences confusing and frustrating.

Grand Valley managers can find a great resource in our teens. Are teens difficult at times? I'm a parent of two, I know they are. However, they also can be eager employees, ready to be trained in your methods.

The costs and benefits of hiring teens include the time and effort invested in training, but also the opportunity to mentor the future work force and benefit from their energy. Work is an integral factor in providing a sense of purpose, direction and self-esteem necessary to the overall physical and mental health of an individual. Work benefits us through learning opportunities and the satisfaction derived from contributing to the success of the business, not just a paycheck.

With inexpensive teen labor comes great responsibility. As an employer of teens, what can you expect? When employing adults, you can expect work to be a high priority. Employing teens means that you understand that education — including the benefits of extra-curricular activities — is, and should be, the teen's priority. Recognizing this, consider the following:

■ Hire enough employees. "Part-time" for one teen meant working 34 hours in his first four days, including several school nights well past 1 a.m. Allow for true part-time work by starting teens with a 10-hour, two-to-three-shifts-per-week schedule and building from that as the teen masters the time management skills required to juggle school, work and personal life. Post schedules well in advance to help teens manage their time wisely.

■ Schedule consistently. Another teen was scheduled to work beginning at a certain time, but with no specified shift. At times, shifts were five to six hours, and at others, less than two hours. That's great profitability management, perhaps, until you consider turnover costs. Teens with part-time jobs need regular schedules, knowing that they'll earn enough to meet expenses, but also can plan time for other activities. Erratic and/or burdensome schedules lead to turnover.

■ Comply with the law. Staff appropriately to provide for breaks and lunches. Colorado Minimum Wage Order No. 22 applies to most employers in the service sector and requires breaks and meal periods. Also, pay employees correctly and promptly. Teens don't know to ask for paychecks early in their careers. Don't leave checks in your desk and wait. Seek out teens, hand them their checks and thank them for their efforts. (And watch for those big smiles!)

■ Hire busy teens. While this might seem counter-intuitive, the adage about giving a project to a busy person to make sure it gets done rings true. Busy teens are engaged teens who become good employees because they've learned to get things done and juggle schedules. It requires you to have enough staff to "cover" when the teen needs schedule changes to accommodate other responsibilities and working with them to show the proper method for requesting shift changes and time off.

■ Treat teens with respect. Teens see through adults very quickly. Treat them as just another "body" to use and toss out and they'll leave. Allowing an atmosphere of drama and cliques makes new employees feel unwelcome and reluctant to stay. Remember the questions that you had as you entered the work force: What is my schedule and when is it posted? When do I get paid? Am I doing this right? Am I doing this well? I need a day off, will they be mad? Spend time up front setting the teen up for success. Establish clear expectations and recognize good performance. Teach them about working and your business.

■ Teen networking. Networking seminar leaders could learn a lot from the high school network. Ignore all of the points above, but turnover is likely to be high. Eventually, your candidate pool will dry up. Teens talk to each other and to parents and other adults. One topic is you as an employer. There are businesses that have bad reputations as teen employers. In fact, there are businesses I no longer frequent because of how they've treated teen employees.

■ Have fun! Teens can be a joy to work with. They have energy, enthusiasm and tremendous potential. You can make a huge difference at a critical point in their lives. Jump in and enjoy the ride!



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