

WHITE PAPER SERIES

Panel Discussion:

Strategies To Retain Top Performers and Manage Sales Talent

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Strategies To Retain Top Performers and Manage Sales Talent

Editor's note: Following is an abridged transcription of a recent panel discussion about more effectively managing sales and recruiting and retaining top performers. Dario Priolo, EVP of Corporate Development at Miller Heiman leads the conversation.

Dario Priolo: The bottom line is, salespeople are difficult to retain, good salespeople are difficult to find, and the demand for experienced salespeople is extremely high. The result is a very challenging supply-demand imbalance.

Our panelists are Stu Cohen from Cigna Insurance, Al Rainaldi from Profiles International and Tony Bartenetti from Nelson Staffing Solutions.

Stuart Cohen: Cigna Corporation is one of the largest providers of employee-sponsored benefits in the world. Our key business is healthcare. We have over 26,000 employees, and our average sale is several million dollars, so we're very concerned about having people who are very highly qualified in our sales organization.

Al Rainaldi: Profiles International is a test-developing organization; we develop employee evaluations, surveys and assessments, both for the hard skill side and the soft skill side. We have about 46,000 clients that we service worldwide. We have 1,200 representatives throughout the world. And we're translated into 28 languages. About two years ago we got together with Miller Heiman, and we helped develop the *Sales Excellence Assessment* for them.

Tony Bartenetti: The Nelson family of companies currently staff for HR, finance accounting, technical, general staffing in the computer-based and consult-based industries, all in Northern California. Globally we've introduced, over five years ago, a vendor-management solution for large firms that like flexible staff or use a lot of contractors and contingent workers. The other business we have that's really robust for us right now is our 1099 compliance program, which is called Workforce Logic.

DP: What are some of the things that Cigna is doing to better retain high performers?

SC: We have a sales force of several hundred people if you include sales management. And they're segmented

into small segment, middle market and national accounts. We really run the gamut: We sell employee benefits to businesses with two employees to multinationals with tens of thousands of employees.

Our biggest issue really has not been retaining sales talent; it's bringing sales talent in. Now that healthcare represents 22 percent of the average corporation's expenditure every year, and it's out-pacing inflation, we've had to become very consultative. And with an aging sales force, it's very difficult to do.

AR: Regarding retention, how many of you do exit interviews? What are the reasons that people tell you they're leaving your organization? Better opportunity, more money. In reality we find out that people don't leave companies, normally they leave people. So there's a cultural issue, there's a recognition issue, there's a respect issue, there's a communication issue, there could be life-work balance issues, benefits...but the issue really boils down to something very simple: job fit. If win-win works for securing clients, it also works for employees.

TB: I think we'll all agree that there's no absolute way to retain your top talent. But a retention program that has teeth, one where you actually have a committed career path for somebody who wants one that's written on paper with deliverable dates for training and so on, so they know that you mean it and you're not just shining them on to keep them around for a few more months is helpful. If you think about all the things we're doing with our goals, and trying to achieve numbers, employees are like our valued clients, so we need to treat them just like a valued client. So that's what we do.

DP: Now Stu, you're a professional trainer really, right? You head up a business sales and underwriting training?

SC: I spent 15 years in sales and got tapped on the shoulder and went in for an 18-month rotation into training about 12 years ago and have been there ever since.

DP: Let's talk about raising the game with average performance in lower performers.

SC: We've introduced what we call the B to A program. We're looking at really developing our second tier of players. We know we've got a core of top performers that are doing the right things, and they do the right things day in and day out. We really feel that what we can leverage to raise the performance and also to keep that top group hungry, by working with our B players.

The training becomes an incentive for these folks, and it's

the investment we're making in them that we stress. It really builds some loyalty and adds to their future. The first group we did about a year and a half ago. People really take pride in that and want to be part of the talent development program.

DP: Great. How about you, Tony?

TB: We get and provide timely feedback when we see things that need to be addressed, instead of turning our backs and walking away and hoping it gets better. We've learned that when we address the issues in a timely fashion on the spot, in a constructive way, we've been able to turn people around. The basic thing is keeping the key performance indicators in front of them. Making sure they understand how they should be managing their funnel and working within the Miller Heiman sales process to achieve greater results. We really focus on the results and celebrate their successes in the results area, and I'm not going to say we turn around 50 percent of them, but we're saving people who might be going to work for someone else that end up being productive for us.

DP: Al, what are some of the things you've been doing in your role at Profiles around the lower and mid-end performers?

AR: I guess the question boils down to: When you hire a non-performer did you hire that individual with the same process that you hired a top performer? We're looking all the time at what our individuals are doing. If you leave them alone, average performers will start performing at a lower level, and you'll start getting less out of them. And this simply happens because they're smart. They're seeing people that are doing less and earning about the same amount of money, so their activity levels drop. So we look at it simply by, a poor performer, the first thing I want to do, or have the sales manager do, is check their attitude about what they're doing. If they have a great attitude and their head's in the game, the next thing we do is check their activity. If their numbers are there and they're still not giving productivity, we check their skills. And if their skills are just excellent, the next thing we do is we check for job fit.

When we go into an organization we assess all sales positions. We actually create the model for every position in the organization, so simplistically, you've got inside sales, you've got outside sales, you have telemarketing, you have counter sales, they're all sales positions, they're all selling the same product, but under a different circumstance. So when we measure this, we end up building benchmarks and patterns so that we can constantly cross-reference and re-deploy these valuable assets internally before we let them go, because they're tough to get.

DP: Tony, what are you doing and what are you seeing working around accelerating and improving that recruitment process?

TB: What has worked for us most effectively, where we make a hire that sticks and we find somebody that's productive, is referrals. Sixty-two percent of the placements we make come from satisfied clients, from our temp employees or our internal employees, and/or friends. So it's really just working our own networks and asking who do you know that you think would be a good fit for this job. That's where we find a great amount of our talent, as opposed to going to the boards all the time.

DP: Have you formalized that process, are there rewards or incentives?

TB: Absolutely, there's an internal incentive for our team, and then our contingent workers all have a referral bonus program which we tout every which way we can. The other thing that we do and that we encourage our clients to do is create an employment branding program. So that they can be a place people want to work. One of the things that you can do within that, that's hidden further down in a branding effort, but just to make it more fluid, is to agree on the hiring process and streamline it.

If you see patterns in a resume or an interview process that aren't working for you, don't make the hire. Because over and over again you'll see that pattern in their life continues. So what we have is a pattern interviewing process to avoid making those types of hires. We do benchmark our sales producers, and we do that annually, and we use an assessment tool to make certain that we're hiring to that model. And if we deviate from the model, we make certain we have a plan in place to make certain that person has the chance to be successful, perceiving that they may have stress in that job, or they may need training.

DP: All right, thank you. Stu, you mentioned that you're in an interesting situation where you're trying to bring in your next crop of high producers.

SC: We're building our sales force with college grads. And one of the things that's really been interesting is we had this great process in place. We'd get a job fit, we'd assess against it, we'd assess the top 10 percent of our sales force, the bottom 10 percent of our sales force, got the profile, and we hired our first class to begin in June.

DP: Tell us about the on-boarding and ramp-up process for that program.

SC: We're recruiting throughout the year, so we've got to

keep them warm from the time they graduate to the time they show up on our doorstep at the end of June. So we have a very systematic plan of communication, from who their sales manager's going to be, from the president of the company--we do weekly calls with them, we do individual calls, we do group calls, and we really have to keep them warm because, at that age, the next offer for an extra \$2,000 or, it's a little bit warmer in Southern California than it is in Seattle, and all of a sudden they're not showing up, so we have a very specific five month program of just keeping them warm.

DP: Tony, what about some of the things you see, just more specifically around onboarding and ramping up new hires, either within your organization or within your client's.

TB: We make certain during the interview that we're very open with what the job is and with what the responsibilities are. When they show up on the first day we welcome them in grand fashion, so that we remind them that they made a great decision to come work for Nelson. They get their job description, which we go over; we share with them again the key performance indicators they're supposed to have, we'll give them an orientation program that includes some of the following, but also more: field time with a sales manager, working the fields, seeing what they do, job shadowing a producer, so they can see how they work out in the field, and then really getting them through the Miller Heiman process that we've adopted to make certain that they see how that can help them and get them comfortable with that. And then they get visited again within 45 days for more field time so we can help provide that timely feedback.

About Miller Heiman

Miller Heiman has been a thought leader and innovator in the sales arena for almost thirty years, helping clients worldwide win high-value complex deals, grow key accounts and build winning sales organizations.

The company is headquartered in Reno, Nevada and has offices around the world. More information can be obtained by visiting the company's website at: www.millerheiman.com.