

Retaining a motivated, competent workforce with employee engagement tools

It takes tremendous “people power” to keep Riverside County, a major population center, running. What’s the best way to keep motivated, competent employees engaged and on the right career path over time?

Like many other counties nationwide, Riverside has in the past had difficulty maintaining its workforce and filling its positions with top-quality talent. Positions that are difficult to fill include nurses, engineers, animal services workers, public defenders, and probation officers in juvenile hall.

To address this problem, the county has pursued an innovative course of action designed to keep positions filled while improving productivity and quality of service.

Shondi Lee, MEd, is Riverside County’s educational support program manager and principal human resources analyst/ career counselor. As such, she is tasked with implementing and managing the county’s Educational Support Program, designed to assist employees returning to college. One of the program’s key goals is to help staff county departments by, in essence, recruiting current county employees for other county positions—many of which are difficult to fill—and then enabling them to attain the education level required to enter those positions.

In total, the county designates 1,600 job classifications. Riverside employees for the most part enjoy working for the county, and many

Business Challenges

- Difficulty filling positions with top-quality talent
- Identifying the optimum career/educational path for each employee

Company Profile

Riverside County is home to one of California’s major population centers. It employs more than 20,000 people in more than 1,600 job classifications to deliver and manage the various services that make it a desirable place to live.

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of them have held county positions for many years. However, many are also interested in furthering their education and expanding their career to reach new horizons. The Educational Support Program enables them to accomplish this career development while retaining the stability, benefits, and overall desirable work environment that Riverside offers. Additionally, the program offers a variety of other benefits, ranging from loan repayment and various forms of financial assistance to 20/20 work/school splits for certain courses of study.

The program serves a dual purpose. By providing extra value to the employees, it makes county jobs more attractive and enables the county to fill difficult positions with quality candidates. The program also helps boost productivity and other bottom-line results for Riverside. This is primarily due to the fact that it doesn't simply direct employees to available jobs. Rather, it makes a focused and concerted effort to connect employees with the positions in the county for which they will find the highest level of job satisfaction and consequently perform the highest quality work.

Solution

To help pinpoint the right career direction for each individual, Lee relies heavily on the Strong Interest Inventory® assessment from The Myers-Briggs Company (formerly CPP, Inc.). Used for over 50 years by U.S. colleges and universities, the Strong assessment helps individuals select a career by giving them insight into their interests, preferences, and personal styles. It enables them to identify specific careers and academic paths they're likely to enjoy by comparing their results with those of like-minded people who have already found a satisfying career.

Lee first became familiarized with the Strong at her previous position as an academic advisor at a community college and has been using it for this program for nearly a year. "I'm here to guide them through significant transition," said Lee. "The Strong offers a streamlined and easy-to-understand yet very informative format that provides a foundation for what will wind up being major life changes."

Solution

- Inspire 'big picture' thinking in employees who want to further their county career
- Use Strong Interest Inventory® assessment to identify career and educational pathways based on people's interests

“ People who are unfamiliar with the Strong are typically surprised at how accurately it identifies their own interests. Often it identifies fields of work that they had thought about but never really considered. ”

Shondi Lee,
Educational
Support Program Manager,
Principal Human Resources
Analyst/ Career Counselor

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“I want to make sure that the employees I work with are aware of everything and can truly envision the big picture,” said Lee. “I try, therefore, to give them all the knowledge I’ve gained over my 10 years in counseling so that they can make the absolute best decision.”

All participants are required to take the Strong prior to their first meeting. Lee then meets with them for approximately one hour to review the results, explaining what they mean in terms of possible career direction. Additionally, she reviews their resume and discusses their current career aspirations. The conversation always includes discussion of experience, transferable skills, and college transcripts.

Upon reviewing individual participants’ Strong assessment results along with their background, Lee works with them to identify potential careers and then narrow down the list to three or four focus areas.

Once those areas have been identified, Lee provides them with informational resources such as Web sites and printed literature. Once a few career options have been identified, Lee helps participants identify and understand the academic requirements of those professions. She also helps them factor in the cost of a career change and figure out how they can accomplish their goals within their budget requirements.


Following participants’ individual research, Lee works with them to narrow down the list to two careers. They then explore several questions together, such as, “what will it take to get the necessary college degree?” and “are the educational demands feasible for someone with a full-time job?”

She then works with them to identify volunteer, internship, and job shadow opportunities, as well as other activities, to provide a hands-on feel for the day-to-day work in which they’ll be involved. Additionally, she works with them to view their educational path from the perspective of future employers.

Results

- Improved academic performance of program participants due to Strong identifying courses that captured students’ interests
- Improved productivity, better customer service and reduced number of sick days
- High anticipation for improved employee retention rates

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“The goal is not just to go to school for a piece of paper but to actually become qualified to do the job,” said Lee. “Whether justified or not, there exists the perception of ‘diploma mills’ versus true educational institutions. If you go to a school perceived as a diploma mill, you may have to step up and prove what you know to a potential employer.”

The goals of the employees she works with range from a desire to enhance their current profession to a total career shift. Lee’s goal and directive, however, is not simply to help people connect with the career they think they want. Rather, it is to create a path to a career that will enable them to derive true satisfaction and add maximum value to the county through their energy, enthusiasm, and talents. Often the career that people want and the career they’ll enjoy and excel in are not one and the same.

“A lot of people come in and say, ‘I want to be a nurse’ because of job stability and a desire to help people,” said Lee. “However, the reality of the kind of work that nurses do, and the school curriculum required, means that nursing is not necessarily something that everyone will enjoy or excel at. The Strong helps open their mind to other options that are more in line with their interests.”

Understanding that people’s notions of careers often do not measure up to reality, Lee is attuned to certain signs that indicate when an employee’s perception of a profession is skewed. “When individuals have nursing on their form, I always dig a little deeper and often find that they are not necessarily in tune with the job itself and its demands,” said Lee. “The Strong helps us pinpoint those interests and desires that led them initially to nursing and identify other professions that fulfill those interests for which they will be much more suited and likely to find success working in.”

Social worker is another job that Lee identifies as a frequent source of confusion, with people often citing an interest in sociology coursework or their love of children as their motive for wanting to enter that field.

Helping people, Lee says, is something that can be accomplished in a variety of careers, and the kind of help that nurses and social workers provide is not necessarily the kind of help that everyone is going to enjoy providing. Furthermore, the science-heavy curriculum required by nursing in particular is not something for which everyone possesses the aptitude or inclination.

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Lee also points to popular media as a source of misinformation regarding careers. “Careers as they are depicted on TV— particularly those within the medical and law enforcement professions—are often quite different from reality,” said Lee. “Unfortunately, TV often shapes people’s opinions, and we have to work to bring perception in line with reality.”

Results

Of course, there wouldn’t be much benefit in helping people discover what they don’t want to do for a living if it weren’t followed by concrete insight into the kinds of careers that they might actually enjoy. This is where the Strong becomes particularly useful.

According to Lee, reactions to the Strong results are typically very positive, ranging from pleasant surprise to feelings of affirmation. “People who are unfamiliar with the Strong are typically very surprised at how accurately it identifies their own interests,” said Lee. “Often it identifies fields of work that they had thought about but never really considered.”

This, she says, is because most people don’t associate their own interests with a career. More often they are looking at outcomes rather than the kinds of daily activities involved in the work. Rather than having them focus on the end result, however, Lee tries to get them to think about the process— from the education required to the actual carrying out of the work. Many people, she asserts, have a great deal of difficulty separating willingness or ability from preference. When choosing a career, she says, it’s important for people to be honest and say, “I don’t want to do that, but I do want to do this.”

“Using the Strong, I help them factor in those often overlooked aspects of their individuality, such as how they process information, relate to other people, and other items that have much more to do with job satisfaction than a title or pay check,” said Lee.

As everyone who enters her office wants to continue to work within the county, Lee often has to help them identify county jobs that involve activities and work environments similar to those found in careers identified by the Strong. “I try to make them aware of all the options available within the various county departments,” said Lee. “With 1,600 job classifications within the county there are usually excellent options to choose from.”

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For example, Lee worked with one employee who was pursuing a degree in an IT-related field. His Strong results, however, indicated a clear preference for the medical field. Since he had already invested time and money in his IT degree, he insisted on staying the course but later found himself unhappy in his position. Lee helped him find a career path that utilizes his background in a more fruitful way. He is now pursuing a nursing license that will enable him to use his IT bachelor's degree.

Lee also points to how working with people with similar interests tends to completely change employees' perceptions of their job. Another employee Lee worked with was dissatisfied with her job in an engineering department. The Strong assessment confirmed that her interests were quite different from those of people who typically work in engineering. Her interests did, however, strongly correlate with those of people in the social services field. Consequently, Lee helped her make the move to the social services department and begin pursuing a degree in clinical therapy.


Aligning people with their ideal career has bottom-line benefits beyond the abstract. Having happier workers, Lee says, equals higher productivity and less sick time. This, of course, carries over into areas such as customer service, which is directly tied to whether or not individuals enjoy their job.

"When people are in a profession that is the right fit for them, they're more willing to go above and beyond," said Lee. "It should come as no surprise that if someone enjoys their work, they're willing to do more of it."

Additionally, Lee has observed notable improvement in the academic performance of program participants as they pursue the degrees/certificates required for their new career. The retention rate, she says, has been rising, with very few dropping out of school. This, she believes, is directly tied to the ability of the Strong to identify courses of study that effectively capture students' interest—a major factor in academic success—and will ultimately lead to a more educated and competent workforce.

For Lee, the process of implementing and managing the program continues to be a very rewarding endeavor. "I've met with more than 1,200 employees since I started at this position," she said. "This is something that truly changes people's outlook, and it starts with using the Strong to open their eyes to all their options."

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It's very gratifying to be involved in a program that directly improves both the lives of the employees and the overall health of the organization."

The Educational Support Program and its use of the Strong Interest Inventory assessment is helping improve quality of life in Riverside County by ensuring that department positions— many of which are critical to maintaining the county's infrastructure—are filled by candidates who are not only qualified but also passionate about their work. The program, according to Lee, provides bottom-line benefits to the county such as improved productivity, fewer sick days, and better customer service. Additionally, the program is anticipated to dramatically improve employee retention rates in the near future. Riverside County is investing in its most important asset: the people who keep its cities running and make it a place where people want to build their life.



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