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The most critical challenge facing America's chief executives and their organizations is finding and retaining the best talent, particularly in top leadership positions. That's according to a December study from the Society for Human Resource Management, or SHRM.

"We were surprised by the absence of research and tools to address these human capital challenges," said Larry Fogli, director of the SHRM Foundation's Research task force. "CEOs and business leaders have identified this as their top need; now we need to respond quickly and provide the necessary assistance."

As a teamwork, conflict and leadership consultant, Rick Brenner has explored this problem from both sides of the management-employee divide. It does seem a paradox, he said, until you consider two factors: the survey mechanism, and the financial

markets.

"If survey responders believe that their responses even might be traced back to them, then they tend to supply the 'right' answers. With regard to employee relations, the right answers put the employee and the job seeker first," said Brenner, principal of Chaco Canyon Consulting in Cambridge. "The 'party line' is recruiting and retention are priorities and we work constantly to improve our performance."

Short-term priorities

The financial markets, on the other hand, typically demand management take actions that lead to relatively short-term gains. Policies that boost retention and recruiting metrics do pay off, Brenner said, but policies with long-term payoffs are often sacrificed for the sake of the financial markets' shorter-term priorities. In his view, that's why long-term performance improvement in recruitment and retention remain elusive.

Greg Almeida, managing director of Professional Staffing Group's new diversity consulting services, has a different take on the recruiting problem. From where he sits, he doesn't see a collective desire to fix the problem. A little more focus on diversity, he said, would go a long way.

"Until corporations in this area start to look at diversity as an integral part of their executive recruiting and retention process, they are going to continue to talk to a shrinking

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market of folks," Almeida said.

"Diversity is not an add-on or a secondary part of this discussion. It's a primary part of this discussion because the talent pool is completely different than it was 10 years ago and will be even more diverse 10 years from now."

Here's yet another take: The reason the recruiting problem isn't getting any better is because people talk it to death, argued Dave Carpe, principal and founder of Clew LLC, a competitive intelligence consulting firm in Lexington. What can be done to solve the issue? Carpe said, "I'm inclined to believe that improved talent retention and training programs -- a 'grow your own' approach -- would bode well for major employers."

Few would disagree, but Stuart Sadick, a partner in the Boston office of executive search firm Heidrick & Struggles, makes a final observation. He reminded that recruiting and retaining executives is not merely the theme of the moment -- it's an issue that's always important -- but there is more awareness of the issue's importance today and therefore more studies, more talk and more debate. So what, in his view, is the recruiting problem?

"It's not just about running better ads, using better recruiters, being smarter. It's also about creating an environment and a culture where people want to work," Sadick said. "It's not just about the money, either. Some people go to Google or Microsoft for the money, but those companies also do a lot to get develop a culture where people want to work."

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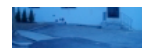


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