

# How Small Businesses Can Compete in a Heated Job Market -- WSJ

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## FULL TEXT

Smaller players are turning to different strategies to get -- and keep -- the talent they need

Cheryl Winokur Munk

Businesses of all sizes are struggling to find workers these days -- but the hunt can be especially difficult for small companies, which must find ways to stand out among big competitors.

Some smaller players have found smart tactics that help them succeed in this tough environment. They are attracting and retaining talent by leveraging advantages that large corporations don't have, and offering attractive lures that big companies can't necessarily match. Here's a look at some of those strategies.

Use searchable job titles

At many small companies, employees wear lots of hats, so they often have more flexibility when it comes to creating titles. But what you call a role -- at least externally -- can impact your ability to attract candidates.

When Company Folders Inc., a commercial-printing operation in Pontiac, Mich., wanted to generate more interest on Indeed.com, the job-search site advised the company to modify the titles in its job listings. For example, the company started using the easily understood title "sales manager" rather than "account director," the company's internal name for the role. Likewise, the business adopted "customer-service representative" and dropped "print project manager," says Vladimir Gendelman, the company's founder and CEO.

Another tactic used by Company Folders is to create multiple postings for the same job, with each description tailored to a particular target audience. For example, when hiring for a customer-service position that combines sales, graphic design and print production, the company would post three descriptions of the job, one for each aspect of the role. That way, the business can attract a wider array of people -- who can see themselves in one of those niches but not necessarily all of them, Mr. Gendelman says.

Stress the culture

Small companies often find it hard to compete on salary. But they may have other ways to get on candidates' radar screens and keep them happy.

One method is to stress the company's culture during the hiring process. Small businesses often have an edge on larger ones in this area: Thanks to their size, it's much easier for them to foster a unified and welcoming culture that big competitors can find it hard to match.

"As the world quickly evolves, small-business owners have the opportunity to be nimble, offer value-driven perks, create a strong culture and find new talent to take their businesses to the next level," says Carissa Reiniger, CEO and founder of Silver Lining Ltd., a small-business advisory firm.

Small companies, for example, have to stay competitive with salary and benefits, but they don't necessarily have to make the highest offers to attract talent, Mr. Gendelman says. When job seekers are sold on the company, the position and the potential, they are often willing to accept slightly lower pay, he says. "You would not take \$50,000 instead of \$100,000, but you will take \$85,000 instead of \$100,000 for the right job, especially if you think there is upward mobility," he says.

In December of 2020, Mobile Outfitters, a Philadelphia-based provider of customized phone accessories, found that competition for workers was particularly fierce. The company bumped the pay it was offering by about 20%, but that didn't increase the number of applicants, says Dennis O'Donnell, the company's co-founder. Even when Mobile Outfitters did finally find hires, the employees left within three to six months. And all of them left for higher-paying jobs.

The lesson for Mr. O'Donnell was to make working at Mobile Outfitters more about the company's culture – a supportive and challenging work environment. For instance, the company employs workers in several different states, countries and time zones, and they are allowed to do their jobs remotely. The company also asks its workers to set their own 90-day goals and doesn't micromanage to ensure these goals are met, Mr. O'Donnell says.

The company still lists the salary in its job descriptions, but the opening line of every posting mentions that the company culture is the No. 1 reason people choose Mobile Outfitters.

"If someone is choosing between us and another company, and says, 'I really liked your culture, but the other company is offering 10% more,' our answer is simple: 'Go with the other company,' " he says. "We want people who put culture first – in this aspect, we can really differentiate ourselves, deliver on our promises, and end up with truly happy employees – and happy employees don't leave."

#### Refine the interview process

Small businesses can also be more nimble than big rivals in interviewing candidates – because they usually don't have red tape and entrenched methods for handling the task.

Mobile Outfitters, for instance, rejiggered its interview process to make it more welcoming for candidates. During the initial phone screen, the company started telling candidates explicitly what the process will be like and the topics that will be discussed. Company representatives also tried to make interviews a more collaborative process – where candidates have space to ask questions about the job – and offered potential hires flexibility in scheduling the talks on evenings or weekends.

It is quite a change from what they used to do. Back in 2019, when the company was getting hundreds of applicants, it had candidates jump through numerous hoops in the application itself, culminating in a 6-hour-plus interview process for candidates who made it that far, Mr. O'Donnell says. The company lost several good candidates because the welcoming culture wasn't coming through in the interview process, he says.

Once the hiring crunch began in 2021, that same job posting got almost zero applicants, so the company changed its approach to make it friendlier. Now the number of applicants is about a quarter or one-sixth what it originally was, Mr. O'Donnell says – but the candidates are generally higher quality.

"We still turn away 95% of applicants, but the difference is those 95% feel good about the process, and the 5% we want to join loved the interview process, so they trust our culture will be equally welcoming," he says.

#### Move quickly

When small businesses have an applicant they like, it is crucial for them to leverage their ability to make quick decisions. So, companies should minimize the steps involved for getting people from candidate to employee – because a slow process creates space for other companies to snap that person up, says Andrew Whitford, co-founder of Removify, an Australian company that provides reputation monitoring and management services. A crucial component of speedy hiring is communicating the company's interest in a candidate early. "Keeping them in the dark means they may take something safer that is offered earlier, whereas they may be more willing to wait if they are aware that your interest is strong," Mr. Whitford says.

Don't be too coy, he advises – straight up tell the candidate that the interest level is high; ask questions about possible start dates and reconfirm the candidate's level of interest in the role. The trick is to make an offer quickly without sacrificing a thorough vetting process or making the candidate feel things are rushed. One way the company manages expectations is to tell every candidate early on that it likes to move quickly on everything, including hiring.

Likewise, clearly communicating a schedule is important. For example, "We'll reach out to you again next week to

discuss next steps" is too vague and creates uncertainty; whereas "We'll be making an offer for this role on Tuesday" is much clearer and allows candidates to figure out all their options and timing, Mr. Whitford says.

#### Consider more entry-level hiring

Given how hard it is to find candidates, small businesses may want to consider shifting their focus, taking on interns and entry-level level candidates who can grow into various roles.

AOA DX Inc., a women's-health biotech startup, has five paid interns every semester, which is more than the number of full-time employees at the firm, says CEO and co-founder Oriana Papin-Zoghbi. The company looks for interns who are willing to be flexible and are open to supporting all different areas of the business.

Young interns, of course, often require more hands-on management in the beginning, given that they are learning on the job and often getting their first exposure to working in industry, she says. AOA often recruits interns who are seemingly fast learners, based on the interview process and their résumés.

"We spend a little more time upfront training and getting them up to speed, but more often than not, they are running independently within a few weeks, and the time invested in getting them trained is well worth the quality of their work," she says.

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