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October 14, 2012 | By Caron Carlson

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The staff turnover rate three years ago at the Chesapeake branch of Volunteers of America was 67 percent. The nonprofit organization's charter had been revoked, and the management was on its way out. When new management came in, a top priority was to improve the way in which employees were hired, managed and evaluated. The experience, as IT Director Robinson Neidhardt recently recounted it to me, offers insight into the value of a fresh outlook, new technology and diligent change management.



Caron Carlson

VOA Chesapeake offers a range of services for individuals with intellectual disabilities, substance abuse addiction and other problems in Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia. The organization tends to attract some job candidates who are drawn to it by a calling, and not necessarily by the specific skills or traits required, Neidhardt told me.

"When you look at the direct support professionals, they're in it because they love the people. It is a hard job, and people do it because they love it. They would come to our agency because of our mission and our goal," he said.

As a result, sometimes employees found themselves in positions that they weren't well suited for. And too often, when employees did excel, they were lured away to competing non-profits, as well as for-profit organizations with similar goals that could offer higher salaries, Neidhardt said.

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To better match candidates to jobs, VOA Chesapeake deployed an evidence-base human resources software program called Talent Chaser. The software links behavioral tendencies with the traits needed in specific positions. An online exam screens applicants for specific roles based on factors that are initially identified by management and then refined by results from periodic performance appraisals. Appraisal ratings go back into the applicant screening exam, continuously improving it. As time goes on, the exam becomes better at identifying individuals with the right mix of aptitudes and attitudes for different positions.

The integrated software for hiring and managing staff adds steps to both processes, and some managers did not appreciate it, Neidhardt said. ("Step one," he said, "is that nobody likes an additional step.") With the evaluation process at so many organizations being a rote exercise reluctantly conducted once a year, the Talent Chaser system required a considerable change in mindset, and not everyone was up to it.

"With the standard evaluation [at a typical organization], it's done once a year, and you kind of cut and paste what was done last year. It doesn't really get the attention we'd like to think it does," he said. "Training our supervisors and letting them know that the evaluation matters for their future as managers was a cultural change."

Three years after deploying the software, VOA Chesapeake has reduced its turnover rate to 23 percent. What's more, the employees who are deciding to stick around are more productive than ever.

"A more qualified person does a better job," Neidhardt said. "Somebody who has the right skills and mindset is going to be happier. We can do more with less. Our staff level is 100 people lower than it was in 2009."

While non-profits are not in the business of making money, they're also not in the business of losing money, Neidhardt pointed out. By deploying technology that helps get the right people into the right jobs, VOA Chesapeake has increased its per employee revenue by 24 percent in the last year alone—a good reminder of the role that IT leadership can play in turning an organization around. - Caron

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