“She really tries to get below the surface of an issue and knows what questions to ask to do so. I believe we will not only hire more efficiently but also more effectively as a result of our work with Roberta Matuson.”
—Amy Waryas, former director of human resources at The Boston Beer Company

“A comprehensive, actionable guide to the single most important ingredient of any organization’s success—attributing and retaining great talent on a sustainable basis.”
—Jerry Golub, vice chairman and former CEO at Price Chopper Supermarkets/Market 32

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What many organization leaders fail to understand is that you can’t simply transplant a competitor’s talent strategy and achieve the same results. But a company that takes the time to examine its own environment, select talent accordingly, and nurture its people will stand tall, regardless of economic conditions.

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*Robert Chinsky Matuson* is the CEO of Matuson Consulting (www.matusonconsulting.com), a top management-consulting firm established twenty years ago, which has helped organizations of all kinds—including GM, Microsoft, and Best Buy—achieve dramatic growth and market leadership through maximizing talent. Matuson was named one of the LinkedIn Top Voices for Management & Workplace in 2018. She is quoted regularly in media such as the *Wall Street Journal* and *Working Woman*, and on NPR, Fox Business News, and CNN. She blogs for *Fast Company*, *Forbes*, and *Thrive Global*, speaks regularly to large professional and lay audiences, and has eight courses with Lynda/LinkedIn.
EVERGREEN TALENT

A Guide to Hiring and Cultivating a Sustainable Workforce

Roberta Chinsky Matuson
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Every spring, my husband and I drive to our local nursery and select plantings for our garden. Without fail, I find myself attracted to some flowers that require growing conditions that we simply do not have. Admittedly, some years I’m able to convince my spouse to purchase these beauties anyway, thinking they’re way too pretty to pass up. But the results are predictable every time. Halfway through the growing season, we have to get out in the yard and pull a bunch of dead plants. A similar pattern occurs in organizations: Leaders convince themselves that certain candidates will grow and prosper, even though these people are obviously not well suited for the climate in the organization.

I have firsthand experience of what it’s like from the employee side of things to be working in an environment that is completely wrong for me. Years ago, I was hired by a firm who should have never made me a job offer. The company was all about pedigree degrees. If you didn’t attend a top-tier school, then you may as
well not have attended college. The work atmosphere could best be described as elitist.

I wasn’t born into a wealthy family, nor did I attend an Ivy League school. I also wasn’t comfortable working in a cutthroat environment. Needless to say, the experience was a disaster for me and for my employer. Eventually, I found a work environment more to my liking—and my former employer unearthed someone who was a better fit. However, from what I’ve been told, it took them a few more rounds to get this right.

**Five Common Workplace Cultures and the Talent Best Suited for Each**

“Culture,” which is defined as a shared set of values and beliefs, varies among workplaces. As a consultant whose work spans across a number of diverse industries, I have a bird’s-eye view on how organizations operate, both formally and informally.

I’m going to focus on five common types of culture you’re most likely to encounter in the workplace. Then, I’ll offer guidance in terms of what variety of talent is best suited for each culture climate. When reading through this list, keep in mind that hybrid cultures exist. Also understand that larger organizations often have distinct subcultures operating simultaneously across separate departments or teams.

**Bureaucratic**

This type of culture is generally found in hierarchical organizations like government agencies, hospitals, large service firms, and established family businesses. In these types of organizations, you’ll find a great deal of structure, systems processes, and norms that appear to have been in existence since the beginning of time. “We’ve always done it that way” can be heard echoing through the halls of organizations where paintings of legacy leaders line the walls.
The talent that’s best suited for this type of organization are yes people. This species of employee goes with the flow without question. They like structure, and they find comfort in operating in a world where things remain consistent and predictable.

**Innovation**

A culture of innovation is a culture in which conventional ideas fall by the wayside—or are thrown out the window. This type of culture is commonly found in start-ups, high-growth organizations, and groundbreaking companies. These companies push themselves to stay on the cutting edge of industry trends and developments. Strict lines of communication and structural hierarchies often give way for the sake of airing out innovative ideas and working through untested solutions. Companies in this space are breeding grounds for fertile new concepts.

People who thrive in innovative work environments are the pioneers who embrace change. These employees are not afraid to challenge the status quo, and they are constantly scanning for ways to improve systems, products, and the delivery of services. This species of talent has a high level of stamina; it is not risk averse, and it is extremely creative.

**Empowerment**

Empowerment cultures are those in which all employees feel valued. Regardless of position, rank, or length of service, employees are meant to feel as if their role in the business is critical for operational success. Employees at all levels of the organization are comfortable approaching their superiors with questions and suggestions. Should a conflict arise, steps are taken to make employees feel as if they stand on equal footing with one another. Bona fide requests for bonuses, wage increases, and position changes are seriously considered and are granted when appropriate.
Individuals who are confident and comfortable standing their ground are ideal hires for these types of organizations. People with low self-esteem need not apply! Those who enjoy working in an environment where promotions and pay raises are awarded based on contribution—not time spent in the job—will be a great fit for this type of climate.

**Class System**

Professional services firms are the first thing that come to mind when I think about the class system of culture. Hiring decisions and promotions are made based on lineage. If employees are born into the right family and attended the right schools, they are quickly ushered in. These employees are then groomed to move up in the organization. Everyone else is pretty much a second-class citizen.

Talent from top-flight schools like Harvard, Yale, and Princeton generally do well in these types of work environments, as these people are accustomed to being among the elite. When staffing this kind of organization, look for high achievers who understand the inner workings of distinctly competitive environments.

**Family Business**

Family businesses are notorious for nepotism, which is fine if your last name matches that of the person whose name is on the front door. The family business culture is also highly political, as family members battle it out to secure their legacy.

Adjusting to this type of environment can be challenging for some. When possible, look for candidates who have experience working in family businesses. Candidates who are accustomed to working in a matrix organization may be a good fit as well; it's not uncommon to have more than one boss in a family-owned business. Look for employees who have realistic expectations in
terms of career advancement, as opportunities in these climates can be limited.

**Where to Dig for Talent**

If you’ve ever been to an amusement park, you’ll know exactly what I mean when I tell you to “go left” when searching for talent. If you step back and watch all the people flooding into the park the moment the gates open, you’ll notice an interesting phenomenon. The majority of people will go through the turnstiles and turn to the right. To the right, amusement-goers will find big crowds of people, long lines, and lots of frustrated visitors. Meanwhile, people who enter and head left have significantly shorter wait times for rides, food, and the purchase of park souvenirs. A comparable thing happens in the hunt for talent. Employers unthinkingly follow the crowd, when they should be scouring for talent in places that competitors frequently overlook.

You can unearth a gold mine of talent when you dig where no one else is digging.

**Go for a Ride**

I’m always amazed by how many people who use ride-sharing services like Lyft and Uber ride in silence. I always engage my driver in conversation and have discovered an incredible pool of talent that’s yours for the asking. Many drivers are earning money on the side while working toward college degrees. Others already have degrees and are between jobs. A number of drivers are former professionals who have turned to driving because their employers were unable to offer them the flexibility they needed to balance the demands of work and family. The list goes on and on.

Not one of these people grew up dreaming of driving for a living, but here they are. The next time you slip into the back seat of one of these cars, put your phone down and start a conversation
with your driver. This person may be the perfect candidate for the job you are trying to fill.

**Try the Starbucks Strategy**

Every day, millions of people across the world line up at places like Starbucks for their morning lattes, with only caffeine on their minds. Most people don’t give any consideration to the individuals making their drinks, nor do they acknowledge the people taking their orders. Some people order their coffee through the store’s online app and have minimal personal interactions with their baristas. If this sounds like you, then you are missing out on a huge opportunity to secure talent.

In April of 2015, Starbucks began offering their employees full tuition at Arizona State University’s online program. This initiative affords both full-time and part-time employees without a four-year degree the opportunity to earn a bachelor’s degree for free. Employees have no obligation to remain at Starbucks after they graduate. And as I write this, Disney announced that they will pay full tuition, books, and materials, for hourly workers who want to earn a degree—including a master’s degree! So, what does this mean for you?

The person serving you in a coffee shop or greeting you at a Disney park might be working at one of these places to better themselves. And who wouldn’t want to hire someone who is willing to do whatever it takes to grow? Keep this in mind the next time you are waited on by someone who could very well be a perfect addition to your team.

**Look for Those Who Are Fifty, Full of Energy, and Fired Up for Work**

Is it me or are employees at companies getting younger? Somewhere along the line, people reach an age where they are no longer
viewed as valuable contributors by employers. In some organiza-
tions, this may happen when you hit age forty, and in others, fifty
seems to be the magic number. This trend is happening across all
industries. Today, companies are falling over one another to snag
their share of younger workers. Just because everyone is doing this
doesn’t mean you should as well. Go against the grain. Seek out the
experienced workers that others are ignoring.

There are many benefits to hiring mature workers, including the
fact that most won’t be dragging themselves into work after a late
night of partying, nor will they be demanding corner offices (or any
office for that matter) after their first week of employment. Older
workers have considerably more experience than their younger
counterparts, which means you won’t need to invest a ton of money
bringing them up to speed. The best part is, because other compa-
nies are focusing on younger workers, you are less likely to get into a
bidding war to secure this level of talent.

Give Non-degreed Applicants a Chance

Would you pass on hiring Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg sim-
ply because he doesn’t have a college degree? How about Richard
Branson, CEO of Virgin Group—or Bill Gates, former CEO of Mi-
crosoft? I doubt it. Yet some 61 percent of employers have rejected
applicants with the requisite skills and experience, according to a
2017 study conducted by Harvard Business School.¹ The reason?
The HBS study reports that these rejections were a result of only
one factor: the simple fact that the applicants in question did not
have a college degree. If current trends continue, the authors explain
that “as many as 6.2 million workers could be affected by degree
inflation—meaning their lack of a bachelor’s degree could preclude
them from qualifying for the same job with another employer.”

For example, in 2015, 67 percent of production supervisor
job postings asked for a college degree, but only 16 percent of
employed production supervisors had one. According to analyses, the authors of the 2017 Harvard Business School study conclude that more than six million jobs are currently at risk of degree inflation. When you insist that workers have college degrees, your labor costs are artificially inflated; at the same time, the labor pool available to you is significantly decreased.

Think about the results you want people to achieve, and then sort out whether a degree is a “must have” or simply a “nice to have.” If you can widen your net ever so slightly, you’ll have way more candidates to choose from. And if a degree is critical for success in your organization, you can follow the lead of companies like Starbucks and Disney and offer to reimburse the cost of tuition for those candidates who agree to return to school in the evenings to complete their education.

**Budding Talent**

I bet there are a bunch of people in your own organization who are about to blossom. Then why do so many companies look to the outside when filling jobs, when talent is right under their noses?

This phenomenon happens for a number of reasons, including outdated personnel policies and office politics. Let’s start with outdated policies. Many companies have policies stating that an employee must be in his or her job for at least six months before being eligible for a promotion or a transfer. This policy may have been appropriate when employers had the upper hand in terms of hiring. However, this rule makes no sense today, given how easily employees can find jobs that are a step up from the one they already have.

If you’ve got an employee who is ready to advance or to try something new, then let them—or someone else will! In fact, yesterday I was talking with a CEO about this. We were discussing how tight the labor market is for entry-level café workers. He’s
identified several companies that are making aggressive attempts to poach his workers. He’s being proactive in his attempts to ward them off. Managers are now required to have conversations every thirty days with their employees regarding performance and future opportunities with the company. When necessary, they accelerate the promotion schedule they typically follow. Workers are encouraged to follow their passions. Employees can try out jobs in other departments before committing to a new career path. They can also return to their original roles, should they decide they were happier where they were.

Office politics is a known killer of budding talent. This occurs when leaders put themselves before their people. For example, a leader discourages an employee from considering an opportunity elsewhere in the organization because she doesn’t want to lose an employee who makes her look good. Or a manager does nothing to help his employee land a new position in another department because he feels threatened by that leader.

Remember: If you don’t help your people grow, they’ll pull up stakes and go elsewhere.

**Military Veterans and Active Military Spouses**

According to the Department of Labor, the veteran unemployment rate for military vets as of July 2018, was 3.0 percent.² So why am I telling you to seek out what appears to be this scarce source of talent? Because the numbers don’t paint the full picture. Veterans who have given up on finding a job altogether, and those who are underemployed, are not reported in these numbers.

Nearly a third of veterans are underemployed, according to a study from ZipRecruiter and Call of Duty Endowment,³ a non-profit foundation that helps veterans find jobs. This means they are working a job that they are overqualified for, which is where you come in.
These men and women have sacrificed a lot to serve our nation. Thank them for their service by seeking them out and offering job opportunities that are in line with their skill level. Statistics show that veteran turnover is lower throughout the arc of a veteran’s career than turnover of nonveterans. Additionally, a majority of employers report that veterans perform “better than” or “much better than” non-veterans. Now can you see why I’m calling attention to this hidden patch of talent?

There are a number of government and state agencies that can connect you to veterans. You can also have job postings on your company website automatically included on The National Exchange, a daily government feed delivered directly to veterans, at no cost to you.

And let’s not forget about the men and women who make it possible for many active military personnel to serve. Active military spouses are often overlooked by employers who fear it’s only a matter of time before they are forced to relocate. Their loss is your gain. Today, many jobs can be done remotely. Before you go the more traditional route of posting jobs on the big name boards, check out the Military Spouse Employment Partnership. This is a site created by the Department of Defense to connect employers and military spouses. There are a lot less companies posting here than on more traditional boards, which means you stand a better chance to secure talent.

**How Leaders Can Create and Sustain Flourishing Subcultures**

As I’ve mentioned earlier, it’s important to remember that organizations have subcultures. This is why it’s not uncommon to hear one person say that a particular organization has a great company culture, while someone else is telling a friend how terrible it is to work for the very same company. Subcultures vary, depending on
who is in charge of a particular department or the workgroup. Remember this when promoting or hiring people into leadership roles.

A leader’s values and beliefs greatly influence the employee experience—perhaps even more so than the overall culture in the organization. If you don’t like what people are saying to others about working in your department, then change the narrative. Of course, to do so, you have to change your own behavior first.

**Executive Coaching**

You don’t have to be the CEO of your organization to benefit from executive coaching (although CEOs can certainly benefit from it). If you are a middle manager, you are probably responsible for overseeing a subset of the daily operations that support the organization’s mission. You may think you’re doing a stellar job leading your team. However, perception is what matters most. An executive coach can help you see what you may be missing. Most executive coaches will do a 360-degree assessment, which is designed to give you a panoramic view of your leadership capabilities. The coach surveys or interviews your team members, boss, and peers regarding your leadership style. When conducting interviews, it’s not uncommon for a coach to uncover other issues impacting the broader corporate culture as well.

Having this information can be quite beneficial for a leader looking to improve team, department, or company-wide culture. First, you will gain a transparent analysis of exactly what behaviors you need to work on to become a more effective leader. In turn, this will have a direct impact on how team members feel about their particular work environment. You also get the side benefit of discovering issues that could be negatively affecting how people feel about their larger departments, or about the organization as a whole. This is information that your coach can
help you leverage to improve your company, while further securing your place within it.

Some of these issues may be fairly easy to address. For example, you might discover that employees are frustrated with your lack of flexibility in terms of their work schedules. A good coach can provide guidance and help a leader become more employee focused. In this scenario, your coach may recommend a quick fix such as a few adjustments on either side of the clock. This will help you demonstrate your commitment to improving the employee experience.

If you are in the C-suite, you’re probably focusing on company strategy, revenue growth, profitability, and keeping your stock price up (if you’re a publicly traded company). Blind spots are less obvious when things appear to be going well. But maybe, with some outside help, you could be doing even better. It is easy for executives to become almost strictly inward looking, especially when they have been very successful. But these blind spots can become devastating when performance moves in the other direction. A good, neutral assessment can provide clarity for executives.

Finally, it’s important to remember that office politics exist in every organization. This makes the coaching environment a rare safe place to think through various topics. You may have ideas that you aren’t ready to openly share with other executives, until you’ve had the opportunity to fully flesh them out. Maybe you have the next groundbreaking innovation for your company under your hat, and you just need someone to help you figure out the best way to present your new solution. Executive coaching provides a safe haven to have these conversations, and this is one of the top reasons that executives hire me to be their guide. I’m able to provide a perspective that those in the organization either can’t, or won’t—for fear their job may be on the line.
BYO Nutrients

An organization won’t necessarily offer to provide you with executive coaching under the company budget. If you ask, and your request is denied, consider investing in yourself. Trust me, when employees are lining up outside your office door to work for you, you will see your investment paid back in hefty dividends. You may receive an unexpected promotion (along with a pay increase) or be assigned a plum project that could help you leap to the next level in your organization.

Selecting the right coach is a personal matter. However, if you are looking to shift the culture in your company or work area, look for someone with a track record of helping leaders create work environments where employees love to come to work, and customers love doing business.

Applying the Knowledge

The following questions will help you identify and nurture the right talent for your environment:

- What words would you use to describe the culture in your organization?
- Given your company culture, what characteristics should you be looking at when seeking and assessing talent?
- Which sources of hidden talent will you include in your evergreen talent strategy? (Feel free to add some that you’ve discovered on your own.)
- What personnel policies need to be eliminated or revised?
- How will you address those leaders who are preventing their people from considering new opportunities in your organization?
Do you perceive different subcultures across your organization? From your position in the company, how can you positively influence the varying subcultures you observe?

What steps will you take to improve the work experience for your people?

What goals will you work toward if you have the resources to hire an executive coach? What specific outcomes would you like to see?
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