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Talent Plus of Lincoln evolving with trends, builds niche in auto industry

by Dwain Hebda

Lincoln-based Talent Plus, a firm that assists with employee selection and development, is capitalizing on demand for its services, in part, by identifying a niche in the American auto industry as Detroit seeks to regain prominence in the global marketplace.

Building on a decade-long working relationship with Mercedes Benz, Talent Plus is in the midst of rolling out a new product that is helping the automotive industry identify top talent and develop those individuals' leadership skills. Talent Plus President Kimberly Rath said the new assessment tool is currently being rolled out in North American markets.

"As we have seen tools changed, we've evolved with the market," she said. "The new product is built to deliver online assessments."

The new product is designed to help identify successful candidates in frontline positions ranging from parts and service managers to technicians and other positions on a dealer's staff. It employs the same scientific measurements and talent analysis that has led Talent Plus to serve more than 200 clients worldwide, many of them global conglomerates at every level of operations.

If that level of analysis and expertise seems like overkill to land someone to oversee your local Chevy dealer's service department, you're not alone.

But it's just that sort of narrow thinking that Talent Plus has been turning on its ear since the company's inception in 1989, Rath said, making it more in demand today than ever.

"Companies today have an appetite for leadership," she said. "Our clients look to us as a tool to help them identify and better develop leaders at all levels of the organization."

While boasting a client roster in industries that are traditionally reliant on heavy doses of entry-level workers such as retail and hospitals, Talent Plus doesn't purport to deliver mass quantities of warm, employable bodies. Instead, the company scientifically identifies and measures traits that successful employees demonstrate in those roles and then builds an assessment tool for prospective candidates accordingly.

The better the candidate does on the assessment — that is, the more closely they match the ideal suite of skills, interests and abilities — the higher the probability the candidate will excel in the role. That, in turn, reduces turnover with all its associated internal costs and headaches, boosts workers' job satisfaction and provides companies a solid bench strength of personnel.

For as elementary as that strategy appears on paper, the challenge of bringing it to life in the real world requires near-constant reinvention and adaptation of core operating principles, Rath said. From

new delivery systems to refining assessment protocols, each project provides a fresh set of challenges.

"Talent Plus is a journey, nothing's static," she said. "As an organization grows and new jobs are created, that creates new challenges and opportunities for us."

One challenge that has remained relatively constant over time and across client segments has been to redefine corporations' traditional view of employees as inventory, that is, assets to be acquired, warehoused and deployed. Instead, companies are shown how to see their people as capital, something which, properly invested and supported, yields dividends over the long term.

"When we start working with a company, it's typically because a company leader there has a focus on developing a progression plan," Rath said. "It's sometimes challenging because what we're really doing is helping companies to make a sustainable, cultural change."

While some companies experience a great deal of growing pain moving from a management mindset to a leadership mindset, Talent Plus's growth attests it is a journey companies worldwide are willing to take. The company operates two international offices in Singapore and Colombia and its assessment products are available in 25 languages.

Such growth provides its

own pitfalls, namely, the opportunity to drift away from core competencies and get into related areas of operation. Rath said paying particular attention to this has kept the company's focus where it belongs.

"Our core is talent assessment and we are the leader in that," she said. "But when you are working that closely with a company it is easy to get distracted by other needs. We are more than happy to recommend firms if we find a need that falls outside our expertise."

Rath, who has been company president for the past eight years, is a Lincoln native and graduate of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Under her leadership, the company not only expanded into an international presence, but has been named one of the 50 Most Engaged Workplaces and one of the 50 Best Places to Work in the U.S.

Earlier this year, she received the Business Excellence Award, presented by the UNL College of Business Administration Advisory Board, recognizing entrepreneurship and innovation; and the Shield Award presented by Delta Gamma, presented for outstanding leadership and accomplishment in business.

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