

A Top Ops Organization

Synopsis: *How do you measure—and build—efficiency in your operations department?*

Takeaways: *Hire for values, and creatively test aptitude. Confine job descriptions to a Big Three list of tasks, and channel extra time into specific projects that will improve the firm.*

Most of you know Jo Day, co-founder of Trumpet, Inc. (www.trumpetinc.com). I call her firm the “swiss army knife” of advisor software because Day and her team provide broad-based consulting and customized solutions that fit in and around what the traditional software vendors provide (*Assemblage* for bringing together the pieces of your performance reports; *Symphony* for document management; *Virtuoso* for user-friendly integration of CRM with document management software).

But Day and her firm are also thought leaders in operations and change management, which are crucial skills in this hyper-rapid evolutionary environment. You can see her blog here: <http://blog.trumpetinc.com/>, which covers (among other things) how to get staff buy-in for major operational (often software) changes, hiring more efficiently and the perils of multitasking.

Recently, I asked Day for her insights into how to hire, manage and evaluate support staff.

The thesis was: Managing and measuring ADVISORY staff

is relatively straightforward: How much business did you bring in? How many clients are you serving? What’s your client retention rate?

But there are no comparable metrics for the people who execute check requests, make trades and handle routine client paperwork.

Day broke the conversation down into three parts: hiring, measuring and improving. Let’s start at the beginning.

The first thing to know about a potential hire is: how does this person's personality profile fit what is needed to do the job?

Hiring support staff

Trumpet very carefully specifies the type of person who would enjoy doing the jobs they’re recruiting for. Does the candidate’s personality profile fit the type of profile that would thrive in the job? Is this the kind of work the

candidate would enjoy doing day in day out?

This assessment starts on the company website, where there are continuous job postings, because the company is continuously looking for excellent candidates, on the theory that they actually don’t come along very often, and it might be harder to identify that excellent candidate if you’re rushed by a pressing need due to work overloads.

The postings are unusually detailed, which makes it easier for people to self-select—which, in turn, reduces the labor required to evaluate candidates who realize halfway into the interview that this is not their dream job.

The posting lists the job title and the work required in general terms (*Software Support Specialist; to provide workflow advice, training and technical support for our custom software and processes used by financial advisory firms*), and then there’s a heading: Why Work With Us? (*Trumpet’s customer base is professional, collaborative and engaging. You will work with a team of enthusiastic and service-oriented people who are dedicated to continuous improvement. We like to have fun! We host quarterly staff outings and we dedicate a day each year to a charitable cause. We are not just a team; we’re a family. As such, you can have real input into how and where we grow.*)

The self-selection comes from the next section, which talks about what the position requires. For the Software Support Specialist

position, that includes:

A passion for solving puzzles and learning how things work.

Stellar client service skills, including strong written and verbal communication.

Ability to interact effectively with non-technical users and highly-technical users.

Extreme comfort working with multiple software systems.

Ability to prioritize and balance multiple tasks.

A hunger for making things more efficient; we are looking for someone who enjoys initiating change.

Superior listening skills and the ability to pick up on verbal cues during group sessions.

Excellent follow-through with minimal management.

The section further helps the self-selection process by listing some characteristics of people who are probably NOT suited for the job:

You are uncomfortable on the phone.

You prefer face-to-face interaction (since all of our work is done over the phone and via email).

You don't like taking ownership of a responsibility.

You work best with a lot of guidance and direction.

You prefer work to flow to you smoothly.

You are uncomfortable celebrating and sharing mistakes.

There's a more detailed description of what, exactly, the Software Support Specialist does on a daily basis (not listed here

because your support staff labors will differ from theirs), and then there's a closing "Ultimate Goal" which I think might fit nicely with how many advisors see their support staff function:

We want someone who is looking to continuously improve. Even though the majority of the work will be in implementing and supporting our products for clients, we want someone who is willing and able to cross-train in other areas to allow for coverage during busy and/or vacation times.

exactly me!"

Is that all? No. Day is a believer in "hiring to values."

"If you have a good value fit, then you're 95% of the way there," she says. "They have to have certain skills, but you can teach a lot of the rest of it."

How do you measure values? Creatively.

"One of our values is: *we set the bar high and create the 'wow,'*" says Day. So to get insight into that value, we ask the question: *If you were to win a contest, which one of*

Job descriptions list, in detail, the sort of person who would be good at the job. It also lists the characteristics of a person the job is NOT suited for.

We'd like to find out about some of your other interests, so that once you're proficient (and in an effort to prevent burnout), you can help support and train on our other applications, suggest and execute ideas for enhancing our clients' experience, and helping us figure out the "next big thing" for Trumpet.

The point: "The more people self-select out, the less clutter and work you have to go through to sort through a lot of resumes," says Day. "We didn't want to have to dig through 100 resumes. We don't have that kind of time."

She adds: "Our most recent hire's email response to our job post said, I hope this doesn't seem weird or anything, but this is

these would it be for? Put them in order of which you'd prefer, from most to least."

Obviously the values will be different for each advisory firm, but if you define what you're looking for (honesty, quick responsiveness, going the extra mile on behalf of a client, being able to anticipate client needs, accuracy, creativity, being personable), then you can make up your own list of potential contest-winning attributes.

Finally, the interview process creatively tests aptitude. "We found a challenging game that you can load onto an iPad," says Day. "We tell them ahead of time, we're going to teach you how to play it, and then you're going to teach it back to us. We then watch them go

through the tutorial, they play the game, and the game rates you on how well you've learned it. How efficient are you at picking it up? You get three stars, two stars, or one star."

Interestingly, this exercise designed to test aptitude also gave some insight into values. "One of the guys got two stars, and that really frustrated him," Day recalls.

every week."

Advisory firms with questions or problems to be resolved go into a queue, and the next available support person takes them in order. Day says that if there are more than 20 open tickets at any time, then the staff needs to be raising its hand, because the response time has gotten problematic.

Another Big Three item

things that you want that staff person, operating within that job description, to make sure is done to a certain standard. Any other activity is to be handled in spare time, if there is any.

"These are my commitments," Day explains. "No matter what, I have to meet my three commitments. If, for some reason, I find myself not having time to meet those commitments, then I have to raise my hand, because these have been identified as being very important to the company."

Improving

Any additional (free) time is spent on making the firm better in measurable ways, and here again there is an interesting structure around it.

Trumpet uses an online software program that allows any staff member to post ideas for improvement, or to ask questions of the team that might lead to improvements. (A recent example: *What do you think Trumpet's biggest blind spot is?*) This is the raw material for SMARTs—an acronym that stands for Specific Measurable Actionable Relevant Time-Bound.

Trumpet staff members participate in SMART projects whenever they're fully on top of their Big Three commitments—which basically means that instead of being jacks of all trades, their extra time and effort goes directly to improving the company's operations through specific projects.

In the interview process, candidates are asked: if you were to win a contest, which of these would it be for? Possible answers: honesty, quick responsiveness, accuracy and creativity.

"He said: *Why did I get two stars? How can I go back and get it to be a three?* The other candidate got two stars, and was like, *yeah, that's good enough. Let's move on.* Guess which one we hired."

Evaluating Support Staff

Once that person is on the payroll, how do you decide whether he or she is doing a great or mediocre job? Trumpet has implemented a Big Three concept, where each job is given three primary functions that absolutely have to be handled well.

"For our operations people, who provide customer support, one of the three is keeping the ticket counts at the help desk under control," says Day. "We measure the number of tickets that were resolved, and the number of open tickets by the end of the week,

is response time to emails from advisory firms. A third is getting installations done by the deadline. "We want 90% of our installations done by the time of the actual deadline; if we say it will be done by Tuesday, we want it done by Tuesday. If we start missing deadlines, then there's a problem somewhere that we need to fix."

Having a manageable list of performance criteria makes it easy to see whether the hire is working out. "In the first 90-day period, they commit to delivering on their Big Three," says Day, "so that by the end of 90 days, we know if this person is going to make it or not."

Of course, advisory firms will have different measures. Day can envision measuring response time after clients call, or the resolution time between the call and when a client request is executed. The point is to identify the three

One recent example was a redo of the Trumpet website, with dozens of action items tied to the activity and a staff member who took ownership of coordinating the various contributions.

Another project was to study the cycle time of different routine activities—the time it takes from start to finish of different activities and projects. Day’s big insight there is not to focus all the attention on what everyone else is looking at—how much staff time each activity is requiring—but at the bigger picture of the total start-to-finish time.

“In many cases, the long delays are falling somewhere between the staff time boxes,” Day explains. “For an advisory firm, an example would be opening an account, having the IPS finished or the first trade placed.”

You can get incrementally more efficient and tech-leveraged with how much staff time these things take, but the time it takes for the client to get back to you with the signatures might be fifty or a hundred times greater than the actual staff time.

The same is true about the time at the custodian, or the delay if the paperwork is not in proper order. THOSE are where the delays and inefficiencies usually creep in, and Trumpet’s SMART project was an effort to identify those bottlenecks so staff members weren’t constantly multitasking, starting a new work order while they’re waiting for progress on an earlier one, then having to go back and figure out where they were

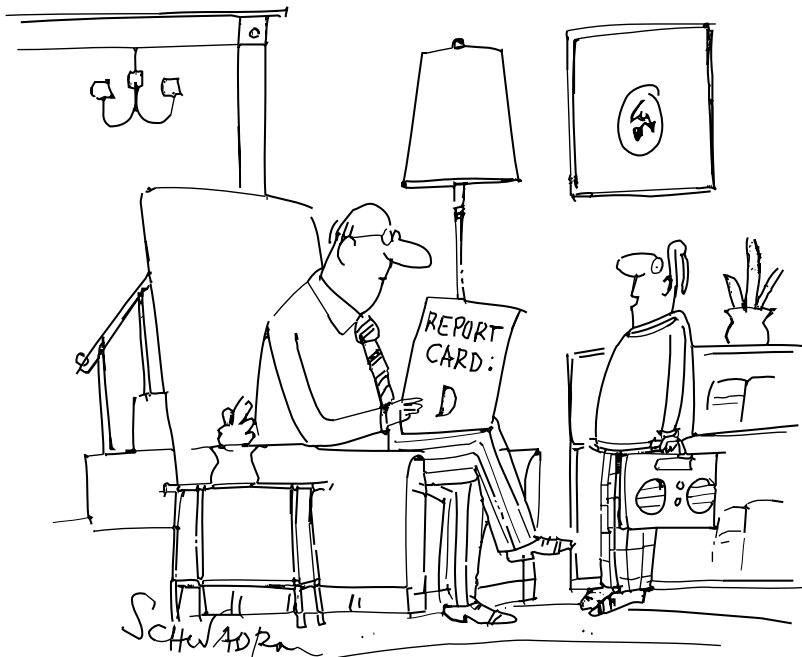
when the client finally gets back to them.

Having a constant stream of SMARTs ensures that any firm will make progress along the path that the owners and staff define—which is much more intentional than the usual way a staff is organized, where the job duties are not as focused, and the time not focused on core duties tends to be scattered wherever a body happens to be needed.

Implementing these relatively

simple shifts in how you recruit, hire and measure operations staff can turn what often seems to be a bundle of confusion and subjectivity into a clear yardstick for evaluation and improvement. But for all the successes she’s enjoyed, Day admits that there is still room for improvement at Trumpet.

“The Big Three has worked out really well,” she says. “Where we’ve gotten in trouble is being too ambitious in our SMARTs.” ■



"I told you I was studying to be a financial journalist."