

Executive Decision

The right executives can help a fleet to chart a new direction. And the best candidates may not even work in trucking.

Mike McCarron doesn't need to look very far to see the advantage of hiring executives from outside the trucking industry. Three of his top managers had no industry experience before they arrived at MSM Transportation, and he believes the team is stronger because of it.

"People from the outside tend to think outside the box," insists McCarron, the fleet's managing partner. "They bring a fresh perspective. They bring energy."

MSM Transportation is not alone in this thinking. Bison Transport is another fleet that focuses most of its attention on determining the right overall fit for the corporate culture, notes fleet president Don Streuber. Even the company's vice president of human resources was hired from outside the trucking industry.

As important as experience may be in the search for front line employees such as drivers and

mechanics, there can be an advantage to casting a wider net in the search for senior executives. This is particularly true if a board of directors is hoping to update the corporate culture that it oversees.



The nature of the different thinking emerges as soon as job candidates begin to describe the ways they would address a particular challenge, suggests Jeff Abram, president and owner of Search West, an executive search firm that specializes in industries such as transportation. "You'll see the [hiring] panel look at each other and say, 'Wow. Why didn't we think of that?'"

The skills developed in a sophisticated industry could be readily transferred to any business, adds Sylvia MacArthur, president of IRC Global Executive Search Partners. "Any industry that is service oriented, that works in business to business environment, could have some very valuable skills to offer."

Still, even when a fleet is committed to a wider search, it may face

challenges when trying to attract senior candidates to a

relatively unknown career path.

“One of the challenges for the trucking industry would be just the cache of the industry,” MacArthur says, suggesting that an executive search firm will need to demonstrate a job’s appeal. “It’s getting candidates to understand the scale of the operation ... it’s hard for an internal HR department to do that.”

“There’s so many stereotypes attached to our industry, and it really changes as they start to meet people in the industry,” Streuber agrees.

The issue cannot be addressed entirely through larger compensation packages, either. If anything, senior executives tend to be attracted more by the opportunities for personal growth and the chance to put their own fingerprints on the business.

“It’s the legacy thing,” Abram says.

Indeed, MacArthur suggests that an industry’s top performing companies may not be the most attractive option to some of the most valued candidates.

The search for a new member of a fleet’s executive team will also require some close attention to the hiring process itself. If the search committee is too large and lacks an ultimate decision maker, valuable candidates may be lost in the delays.

MacArthur recommends using an interview panel that consists of people from across the organization – including some of those who will ultimately report to the hired candidate. That will ensure different feedback on the various answers emerging throughout the interview process.

“The more rounded a picture of the individual you get, the better,” she adds.

Once hired, an external candidate will also need to be trained in the specifics of the role. “You have to be prepared to invest in the people and the training, but you’ve got to do that with everyone you hire,” McCarron suggests, referring to differences that will exist with everything from computer systems to processes. A candidate with the right business acumen can learn the industry itself.

Bison has embraced an approach similar to many banks, exposing new hires to a variety of

departments to determine individual strengths. Yet it also tries to be aware that some of the differences from one industry to the next are not limited to columns on a spreadsheet.

Compared to those who oversee the production of “widgets,” executives in the trucking industry need to be more aware of the impact that decisions will have on daily lives, Streuber says.

“The decisions we make affect the lifestyle of the driver. An executive has to have a sensitivity to that.”

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