



Alcoholic Beverage Companies need to Work as Hard for their Employees as they do for their Customers

by Scott Rosenbaum, Ah So Insights

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In order to attract and retain top talent, companies must do things differently

This past spring John deBary [reappraised](#) Danny Meyer's seminal book, *Setting the Table*. DeBary questioned the true cost of pursuing Meyer's concept of "enlightened hospitality." Explicit in the critique was the notion that a restaurant can't really "claim to value employees over customers" if it expects employees to "unquestioningly surrender themselves to their guests' desires." This criticism is every bit as applicable to businesses that aren't bars and restaurants.

Employees are less willing than ever to work hard for companies that won't work hard for them. Those stuck in the belief that capital and labor are oppositional forces will view this development with concern. But the continued [struggle to fill job openings](#) coupled with a [shrinking unemployment rate](#) is worrisome only to those unwilling to change. Increasingly, businesses—from [factories](#) to [credit card processors](#)—are finding that taking care of employees is a great way to take care of business. Staff retention, margins, sales volume, and customer satisfaction can all increase if companies do the work to change their relationships with their employees.

Beer, wine and spirit companies—chiefly, importers and distributors—need reckon with what this means now, lest they be forced to catch up later. When an order board representative has better opportunities *outside of the industry*, a company's "competitiveness" *within the industry* doesn't mean much. This is also true for those in sales, marketing, operations, and management. The appeal of "expanding one's palate" or "working with best-in-class producers" isn't as great as the promise of decent, affordable healthcare.

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Beyond better compensation, what does a hard-working company look like to prospective hires and current employees?

Attracting top talent means hiring differently

- Provide [reciprocity](#). A job interview is no longer a one-sided proposition. After asking a candidate how they overcame hardship, be prepared to share how the company has handled a difficult challenge. If you are comfortable asking a candidate why they'd make a great addition to the team, then you'd best be able to explain why the company would be a good fit for the candidate. Traditionally, alcoholic beverage companies, don't "sell" themselves until they make an offer. [Selling the company](#) now starts with the job ad and continues through the interview process.
- When you focus on hiring within a historically homogenous industry, you tend not to get candidates from diverse backgrounds. BIPOC are greatly underrepresented on beer, wine and spirit sales teams. [Companies need to cast a wider net](#).
- If you can't explain how your company is different from others, it isn't. If what your company offers its employees is the same as most other companies, what it offers isn't generous or competitive, it's average. It's okay to be average, so long as you don't pretend you aren't.¹
- If you require a candidate to do an interview assignment or project, [compensate them](#) for it.² Be reasonable and let candidates know the length of time (keep it less than 2 or 3 hours) you expect them to work on the project. Let them know in advance that you will be paying them \$X for their work.

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Retaining top talent means working harder

- Improve your company. [Become a B Corp](#). Put in place a [Quality Management System](#) like ISO 9000. Design [effective incentive programs](#).
- Share success. Though companies have departments and teams, it's often only individuals that are rewarded. Spread the wealth and celebrate equitably.
- Show how and why [decisions are made](#). It's not as scary as it seems. Transparency is not the same thing as democracy. Effective leaders explain without delegating away all the responsibility of decision-making.
- Support your team so that they can support the company's customers. Empowering employees to do good without asking for permission is a great way to [reduce bureaucratic friction](#).
- Have a plan for employee advancement. Too many good employees leave companies they like working at because there's no place for them to grow. Design a path for salespeople and admins to become managers and for managers to become executives. A company's size should not be an excuse for the failure to have an actionable plan.

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(1) Plenty of companies think of themselves as special because of a particular person or a portfolio. People come and go. Even families change. Portfolios are impermanent. What makes a company special exists outside these parameters.

(2) I generally recommend [assignments for job candidates](#). Why? A smart person will give you the right answer; the right person will do smart work. Of course, creating said exercises or homework takes time, which is why it's a great pH test in determining whether a company is lazy or not.