Recruiting Young Talent in the Chemical Industry

Finding the Winning Formula

Skill Pool - Securing steady inflow of "new blood" to the market is key to long-term sustainable growth. Access to diverse and skilled pools of technicians, engineers, managers and support staff is vital for successful industry expansion. The chemical industry is certainly facing the difficulty of attracting professionals, and it is important to promote a positive image to the new generation of professionals.

Public perception of chemical industry has gained positives recently (Pan-European Survey, Cefic), with an average score of 56.5 in the UK, while a number of industries such as IT and finance are facing recruiting difficulties. The banking industry's reputation is damaging its ability to recruit graduates, Lloyds CEO António Horta-Osório once said. Promoting a positive image requires consistent cooperation between governments and key stakeholders, including industry players across the supply chain - such as chemical producers, distributors, logistical partners and end-product manufacturers.

Trends in the Industry Sector

Some sectors are more attractive than others in terms of perceived career opportunities. The majority of graduates within the chemical industry at the moment tend to be entering into more buoyant markets such as the oilfield, oil and gas, and mining industries, where graduate schemes tend to be well marketed and advertised.

Likewise, graduates are more likely to be aware of opportunities with global manufacturers rather than distributor companies. The chemical distribution sector struggles to attract young talent due to various reasons: misconceptions on lack of career opportunities; poor brand image; little or no knowledge of what it is like to work in the sector, etc. Textiles and industrial coatings are perceived as having little or no progression and growth opportunities and a significant drop in activity across Europe due to production plants on shut down or moving to locations such as the Asia Pacific.
Is it possible to identify a typical industry newcomer? A lot of talent within the chemical industry tends to be graduates who move into technical positions from chemical-related degrees; only after five to seven years of experience will they move to a chemical distributor in order to enable career progression and personal growth.

"Most graduates start work within a year of completing their primary degrees; they are typically in their early 20s. If they go on to a post doc first, they usually enter the workforce in their mid-20s," said Laura Merritt, director at Whitehall Recruitment.

Natalie Kaye, senior consultant at Mackenzie Stuart, recommends that individuals entering the chemical market tend to adopt one of the following approaches:

- Join an independent laboratory; a new recruit could give insight in sampling and testing of fluids from the industry and quickly has the scope to be involved in offshore visits.
- Join a chemical vendor; two initial routes are possible, either as a development chemist in a technical team in the lab or as a service chemist performing trials and optimization of chemicals in the field.
- Join the sales team within a chemical vendor; here, newcomers could either work directly with the customers onshore as an account manager or with the offshore customers as a platform chemist in a full time position.

The gained experience should then allow for the opportunity to join either an operator or one of the now many consultancy firms as a production chemist. Finding a self-starter with strong commercial acumen is certainly a challenge; technical excellence does not guarantee success in gaining sales orders. Even for the most technical of positions, it is not just about a science degree - it also personality, varied management skills and ideally some industrial experience. The chemical industry cannot leave it to schools and universities alone to develop commercial awareness of their graduates. In order for companies to benefit, working in partnership with educational bodies is necessary; this could include regular work placements for students or working with academics on developing vocational courses that would further develop the skills of future employees.

**High Caliber Graduates Will Pick And Choose**

How can companies make sure to be the first point of call for the new generation of innovators?
A company's corporate communications department is of vital importance for attracting high caliber recruits. Distributors would be well advised to invest resources to develop efficient brand communication programs. Companies on the ICIS Top 100 Chemical Distributors list receive a steady flow of the best candidates. Why? Because of their recognizable brand names.

It is also important to know how to target potential employees - advertising on job boards, in local universities, in science journals and industry publications are all good places to do outreach. Social media provides a powerful medium for reaching today’s generation of professionals: Companies would be well advised to develop their LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, blogging and other social media channels.

**Responsible Care: What's In It For Me?**

Many companies incorporate social responsibility into their business strategy. But only a few turn this concept into their main differentiating claim, both for targeting their customers and exceptional professionals.

- Responsible Care contributes to sustainable development, benefiting not only environmental and social aspects but also delivering numerous business benefits. Communicating your corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies to wider stakeholders can provide a meaningful strategic differentiator and a superior alternative to the "green" positioning. Positioning a brand as green is often not enough to generate economic value - and would be difficult to apply this concept in a purist B2C meaning, especially for the chemical industry.
- Social-responsibility resonates with every member of our society, no matter the role in the economic chain. Socially responsible marketing builds positive perceptions with the company's suppliers, distributors and final consumers.
- According to study by Cone, 79% of millennials (born between 1982 and 2002) want to work for a company that contributes positively to society.

The motto here is do good - and talk about it. Companies need to make sure local communities, universities, schools, technology and R&D bodies know about their commitment and work in this area. CSR is at the heart of chemical distributor Cornelius' culture and a strong differentiator on key accounts. It is a great way to differentiate from competition - and to attract newcomers. A high percentage of the company's employees are under the age of 30, and they are the true ambassadors of the social responsibility at the company. There are a number of business benefits generated from Cornelius' commitment to CSR practices. Retention of staff, brand exposure through public profiling in local and national press, development of business through differentiating angle - all of which translate into the bottom line
profitability.

**Once You Gain - Retain**

Distributors can find it difficult to retain young people if they begin their careers fresh out of school. This is because many cannot compete with the career development opportunities that many large and multinational chemical manufacturers offer. However, more small and mid-sized enterprises realize that offering training and career development is essential. For example, Cornelius has a distinct Cornelius culture, putting great emphasis on motivation and giving employees opportunities to improve their qualifications and take part in further training programs.

To gain the most out of new recruits, companies must train and develop their graduates. Schemes and sponsorships for holiday and industrial work placements put in place by a company makes an offer more attractive to graduates actively seeking to develop their career. Companies should also offer incentives to stay with the company through performance bonuses and regular salary increases. Last but not least, new recruits should be kept up to date with new technology through conference attendance, seminars and university projects.

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