

Breaking the myth of part-time

What is part-time work? The US Department of Labor defines part-time as 34 hours and under. TAPP defines part-time as 32 hours and under or project work which does not equate to more than 32 hours on an extended basis (i.e. 6 months).

Part-time does NOT mean temporary, entry level, or a specific type of work. Individuals can work part-time in almost any industry and level. There are dentists, lawyers, doctors, nurses, administrative assistants, executive directors who work part-time. It is not limited to small businesses either – there are part-time employees of the Fortune 500 companies too.

In 2016, there were 27.7 million Americans who were classified as working part-time and of these 23 million were working part-time by choice. That translates to 3 in 4 employed Americans work on a part-time basis. A powerful and growing segment of the US workforce.

Why should a company care about the trend to part-time?

Retention

It is well documented that it is less expensive to retain a good employee than it is to hire and train a new employee. Creating a structure for employees to transition to part-time, aids in retention. It gives HR and the employees an option when life events happen that might prevent an individual from being able to work full-time. Reduction to a part-time schedule tells the employee that he or she is valued. It also provides an opportunity to tailor the position to that individual's strengths and likes. (not always the same thing).

Highly Skilled Workers

There is a brain trust of individuals who want to work part-time. Women who worked prior to having children had been staying at home and now want to work part-time. Baby boomers who are at the cusp of retirement and either don't want to or can't afford to stop working completely. Plus students, caregivers, and individuals for whom maintaining a balance between personal and professional time is a priority.

Innovation

Every staff member can provide innovative ideas on how to improve a process within the company or have an idea for a product or service but are they encouraged to do so. Very often staff at all levels become so focused on completion of the daily tasks that they don't have the time or energy to think of new ways. Part-time staff bring a fresh perspective to a role. Many individuals working part-time are very efficient and so may be innovative in how they handle their job. In addition by sharing the work load, others may have more time to reflect on their roles.

Is part-time right for your company?

The work force is evolving continuously as technologies change and outside factors shape beliefs. In order for any company to be competitive (whether on a local level or globally), it needs to recruit, retain and develop highly skilled employees. Some of these employees may be full time and some may be contract and some may be part-time.

Regardless of the size of a company there may be tasks which do not require an individual 40 hours per week. Often these tasks are lumped into the job description for another individual. The IT manager may also be responsible for graphic design or the training staff may handle the social media. How well this works out varies widely.

The person responsible may

- be perfectly competent to handle that task but if it is not his or her top priority, push it off until it can't be ignored.
- Or hates the task so it is avoided or the individual is in a bad mood when forced to complete the task.
- Or love that one project to the detriment of some other aspect of their job.
- Or the dual projects work well for the employee for whom it was originally assigned but when someone replaces him or her, it no longer works.

When might be a good time to consider hiring someone part-time?

There are a myriad of scenarios which might prompt a company to hire part-time:

The perfect candidate applies for an open position but is looking for 4 days per week.

An employee leaves who wore two hats and upon reflection, it is determined that one of those hats is better worn by someone part-time.

You have project work but want the person to be part of your team.

The company is growing but not quite at the speed that hiring full time is possible.

Something in the industry or world changes that requires someone with a specialized skill. For example many companies are hiring a social media manager and this may often be part-time.

Our workforce is aging. The baby boomers are starting to face retirement. There are many articles about this and the impact that it will have on a skilled workforce. A mass exodus of this generational would be incredibly detrimental to the American economy. Many baby boomers have indicated that they want to work part-time or need to work part-time. This provides an opportunity for companies to hire a baby boomer who is ready to scale back but not out of working.

There are less obvious reasons to hire someone part-time.

Someone who works part-time is often very focused and efficient. He or she knows that her time is limited and therefore is less apt to 'waste time' chit chatting or even surfing the internet. Staying late to

finish a project isn't an option so they make every effort to finish the work while there or work with others to ensure that no one is left hanging.

Having some part-time staff can create balance in your company. If you have hired individuals for tasks that you or others on your current team don't like, then most likely that person has a different skill set. Although managing someone who is very different in approach, can be challenging, that person may add a much needed view point to discussions, brainstorming sessions, etc. Ideas are often generated by random conversations (and rarely on demand). Building a staff with those who are passionate about what they do and want to contribute will foster good ideas.

Side Note: Some recommend that bosses hire those who are different from themselves in terms of personality. If you wonder whether your company has done this, have everyone take a personality test – there are many to choose from – Myers Briggs, DISC etc. After completion, have everyone on your team state the outcome. It may be very eye opening. It also provides a forum for each team member to learn what everyone's strength and likes are.

Many people who have hired part-time staff consider these individuals to be true professionals and a dependable, important part of their staff. But others will relate a 'horror' story of why hiring part-time doesn't work and why they would never do it again.

How can you have a good experience? Hiring someone is a lot of work and the basic process your company has adopted shouldn't change based upon the number of hours an individual works. Do your due diligence from structuring the job, to writing the job description, to interviewing, to integrating the individual into your staff.

The very first step is structuring the job. Some positions are clear cut in how many hours the person will work. E.g. a hygienist or a security guard will do their assigned tasks during the set period of time. They are not jobs which traditionally create overtime. Others such as bookkeeping or graphic design or IT may not be as easy to define. Take time to delineate what exactly that individual will do. Have the person currently performing the task, write down how much time he or she spends doing the activity. You may learn that it takes the person 20 hours one week, 10 hours another and 25 the third.

Will the person work in the office? From home, a set number of hours with a set schedule? Or will it vary based upon the workload or their schedule or another variable?

If the person will be working from home, whose equipment will he or she use? Are you set up to connect to the person through Skype, your phone system and access to files on your server? How accessible to other staff or clients will the person need to be?

Do you have concerns about hiring part-time? If appropriate, weave them into your questions. A true part-time professional will want you to be comfortable with the arrangement and want to work with you to be successful. Check with an employment lawyer to ensure that none of your questions are in violation of any regulations.

Once you have defined the job, actually writing the job description and then the job ad should be easy. Remember this is the time to sell your company. Be clear on what you offer, what the advantages and benefits are. Include expectations for hours, whether the individual can work from home etc. Make sure

you include needed skills and experience. If you want this individual to work for your company for the next 4 years, make it sound permanent – not a temporary stop gap measure. (see addendum for more ideas)

Compensation –determine a compensation package. If you are looking to attract the best and brightest, the salary should be competitive and in line proportionally with that of full time staff. If you offer benefits to your full time staff consider offering benefits on a prorated basis to your part-time staff. Benefits may include paid holidays, paid days off (vacation/sick time); access to insurance, 401 K. Not everyone who works part-time will need insurance but offering access can be a selling point to the right candidate.

In an economy such as the one we are experiencing 2012, there may be many candidates who are willing to work for pay alone. However, is that the best candidate for your company? When the economy improves, will that person stay? What is the cost to your business to replace staff on regular basis. If you are able to provide benefits, it has the ability to pay off in the long term.

Hiring Process

There are companies which specialize in part-time positions so if you prefer to have a staffing company screen your candidates, think about using one of these. Similar to any other position, ask for referrals from your staff for potential candidates. There are also job boards such as www.tapponline.net which specialize in part-time which help in reducing the number of individuals who are looking for either part-time or full time. Requiring a cover letter may help weed out those who are looking for full time and hope that a part-time position with your company will morph into full time. If this won't be the case, you

When interviewing, remember that you can not ask why the person is working part-time... this could put you into unlawful territory. However, if the job requires nights, weekends or some additional hours you may be able to ask whether the person would be available for those circumstances. Being very clear about your expectations for the person's availability. It is important to set the groundwork for expectations during the interview. If you advertise the position as being 20 hours per week but it really varies week to week, ultimately neither you nor the employee is going to be very happy.

Preparing your staff

One concern that companies sometimes have about part-time, is if I allow one person to work part-time, everyone will want to work part-time. Although most people might want to work part-time, few are in the position to do so.

Engage your staff in the process. If the hiring is due to someone leaving and a restructuring, there are a number of ways that your staff can be helpful. (see the addendum TAPP into your talents and passion and those of your staff.)

There are going to be times when the part-time staff is not available. If the individual you hire has worked in a part-time position, he or she will provide valuable information on how to handle those gaps. You should think about your expectations from your staff when they are not working. Technology has enabled us to stay connected 24/7 A person working part-time may be doing so because of other obligations. If you want the person to stay connected when not working, will you compensate him or her for that time? This should become part of the negotiation process.

A sticking point for other staff can be who will handle the work when the part-time person is not working. A system needs to be in place that creates clear communication for all team members. Hiring a part-time person may result in better planning for your company. If you had been reactionary, this could force you to be more proactive. If your company already has a great structure in place for planning, you have some of the tools in place to create a successful relationship with the part-time employee.

Start the discussion about coverage with staff prior to hiring. Your staff might have some great ideas of how to handle the situation. A lot depends upon how much time is really needed for the projects to be assigned. If your team works together to discuss upcoming deadlines which impact the part-time professional, then there will be fewer surprises.