Recruitment, Training and Competency Evaluation of Laboratory Staff

Speaker / Author: C Makirimani
Worley Parsons Consulting Engineers
Box 7012 Mthatha 5099
E-mail: cmakillers@yahoo.com
Cell: 072 061 7108

Abstract

Many economical and life related decisions are made based on laboratory test results. The credibility of the testing laboratory is dependent on the human resources who carry out the testing work. It is on this premise that this paper focuses on laboratory staff that are responsible for carrying out the testing. This paper seeks to expound the importance of recruiting the right calibre of staff in the laboratory, enhancement of quality through training and the competency evaluation of the laboratory staff. The recruitment process should consider culture compatibility of the organisation and that of the staff members. If the organisation has a culture of being the leader, excellence, innovation and the drive for vertical expansion, then the recruitment process should focus on employees who are innovative, have the drive to excel beyond all odds and with high aspirations. Training involves in-house training as well as external training. The purpose of training will spell out whether it should be external or internal. Consideration should be given to the budget and purpose of training such as retention or meeting future goals of the organisation. Competency evaluation is done for reasons such as salary increase, identifying further training needs, retention or layoff needs, expansion needs of the organisation, rating the credibility and competency of the organisation as a whole, system development, budgeting purposes as well as goal orientation. The success of any competency evaluation program is determined by how it is done, who does it and for what purpose. If employees regard competency evaluation as extra papers required by management or directorate, then the system is regarded as a failure. The recruitment, training and competency evaluation of laboratory staff should be given utmost attention for effective and efficient utilisation of laboratories.

Key words: Laboratory, recruitment, training and competency
Introduction

Many economical and life related decisions are made based on laboratory test results. Apart from the availability of viable and traceable systems, the credibility of the testing laboratory is also dependent on the human resources who are responsible for testing. It is on this premise that this paper focuses on laboratory staff that are responsible for carrying out the testing. This paper seeks to expound the importance of recruiting the right calibre of staff in the laboratory, enhancement of quality through training and the competency evaluation of the laboratory staff.

1 Recruitment

In the context of this paper, recruitment refers to identifying, attracting and hiring the best candidate for a particular job either from within or outside the organisation in a timely and cost effective manner. The process involves the analysis of the job requirements by the recruiter, attracting the prospective incumbents through advertisement, screening and placement of the right candidate.

The main issue in recruitment lies in how one can attract the right candidate. The following points are some of the main issues that should be considered in attracting the right candidate:

1a. An understanding of the organisational culture

Culture is a way of doing things. Culture plays a pivotal role in determining the compatibility of an employee and the organisation. Many cultures are depicted by various ways things are done in the organisation. An organisation’s culture can be classified in different ways:

Mercenary Culture: The mercenary culture is characterised by high solidarity and low socialisation. People in such an organisation are intense and fiercely goal oriented. A highly innovative employee might be the suitable candidate for such an organisation where the main aim is goal orientation.

Market leader: Characterised by those organisations that are market penetrators, they are always at the forefront with innovation and introduction of new systems. Such companies are ideal places for aggressive employees who forge for excellence.

Market followers: Some companies do not want the risk associated with leading the market. The prices of market followers are always on the lower side so as to attract customers. Recruitment in such organisations should focus on easy going employees who do not want drastic changes as in market leaders.

Outsourcing of the recruitment process should therefore be done to recruiters who are really well versed with the organisation’s culture.
1b. **Market Dynamics**

Owing to the rampant environmental changes taking place in the whole world, we are heading towards a situation whereby jobs are becoming obsolete overnight. It is only the multi-talented employees that are going to survive job obsolescence. The usefulness of a talent currently and in the near future will determine whether employment should be on a contract or permanent basis.

**Contract employment**
- Employees get an opportunity to explore other avenues
- Skill enhancement
- Costly in terms of recruitment and induction

**Permanent employment**
- Improved loyalty and commitment
- The drive to achieve the goal is enhanced
- Investment in training will yield future results

Organisations should spell out when they should embark on temporary employment and when to employ permanently.

1c. **Organisational Strategy**

The recruiter should consider whether the organisation is aiming for a cost saving strategy, market competitive strategy, diversifying and harnessing market changes.

2. **Training**

At times the rightly recruited employees fail to produce to the required level due to lack of training. Training can be defined as any endeavour to improve employee’s current and future performance by changing attitude or increasing knowledge and skill. It is normally necessitated by:

- The need to improve production and to cut costs
- In preparation for job promotion or change in job assignments
- The need to improve human relations
- To match employee specification with the job requirements
- To improve on competitive edge
- To replace redundant skills with new market related skills
- Organisational expansion and diversity
- Environmental changes
There are different types of training such as:

2a. **Induction Training**

The performance of the individual in an organisation is dependent on how the employee settles in an organisation during his first days. Induction is a type of training given to both skilled and unskilled employees as they enter the organisation. Induction is a stress reducing process which involves informing employees what is expected of them in the job and assisting them to deal with the stress of change. The main reasons for carrying out induction include the following:

- To quickly acquaint the employee with systems and procedures relevant to the job
- To introduce the employee to co-workers so that he does not remain a stranger
- To give the employee the chance to understand the requirements of the job
- To introduce the employee to the required behaviour pattern and culture of the organisation
- To inform the employee on the goals of the organisation

2b. **Lectures reinforced with coaching**

This is when an employee acquires the knowledge of the job through training at a tertiary institution such as acquiring a microbiology degree at a university. Such qualifications should be enhanced by coaching, mentoring and supervision. Further training is still required after acquiring the tertiary qualification in order to allow the employee to gain the required dexterity in doing the job. In the laboratory industry, such dexterity enhances reliability and reproducibility of results.

2c. **On the job training**

This is also known as hands on training. The employee is taught how to do the job whilst being productive. Although it is a cheap method of getting testers in the laboratory industry, poor results obtained while the employee is trying to acquire the required skill and dexterity is a cost to the industry and to the economy. Although generally used, on the job training should be done as a correlation and when employee is able to produce results that can be compared with those of a competent tester should he then be allowed to do productive work.

2d. **Apprenticeship training**

This involves lectures accompanied by physically doing the job. This method is the most ideal in the laboratory industry. Under the apprentice training, the employee spends a certain amount of time under a supervisor. Academic training on its own does not equip the employee with the required skill to strive in the workplace.
3. **Competency evaluation**

This is an assessment done on employees to verify their ability to carry out a given test. This can be done in form of a direct observation where a checklist is prepared and used. The checklist will show if the tester is able to perform the test as stipulated in the test method. Generally, in the laboratory industry, the checklist will include:

- Use of the correct equipment
- Checking equipment before use (Verification of equipment)
- Preparation and conditioning of sample
- Testing
- Calculations
- Reporting

An employee is then regarded as competent if he is able to perform the whole test. The most important aspect of competency evaluation lies in the proper design of the checklists to be used for each test as well as the datum score to be used.

Other methods of competency evaluation include monitoring of records and retesting. Retesting falls under the reproducibility concept which stipulates that a good tester should be able to produce results within certain tolerances if he/she carries out a test twice under the same testing conditions, using the same equipment and same sample. If the retest results matches with the initial results, then an employee is deemed competent. However, this parameter is analysed in conjunction with the ability of the employee to follow the test method, lest the results are comparable but still carry a systematic error.

Some of the advantages of competency evaluation are:

- It increases employee’s internal mobility
- It clarifies the job standard required
- It outlines developmental and promotional paths within the organisation
- It can be used as a reference source for the day to day requirement of the job
- Reduces client risk
- Creates an opportunity for immediate superiors to identify the training needs of the employee

**When to evaluate laboratory testers**

- Before an employee starts performing any test in a department so as to avoid losses
- When an employee moves from one department to another
- When a new employee joins the organisation

Purported dexterity should always be verified.
Who then should carry out the competency evaluation process?

- In the laboratory industry, immediate superiors should be competent enough to carry out the evaluation and identify the training needs of an employee
- In the eventuality of there being no competent manager with the required dexterity, an evaluator can be sourced out

Conclusion

Clearly in the laboratory industry, key to the quality of work lies effectively in efficiency of recruiting, training and competency evaluation of laboratory staff whose calibre should be of the highest possible standard at all times.

Reference

2016 Test and Measurement Conference

