Future Industry Leaders in Linen Management

BY SANDY SMITH

ONE DOESN’T HAVE TO LOOK far to see the changes in today’s laundry workforce. Baby Boomers are retiring at a staggering rate; in the fourth quarter of 2016, 800,000 left the workforce. They’re being replaced by Millennials—those ages 19 to 35—who now make up the largest group in the workforce and they’re starting to move into management.

It’s not just the lack of gray hair—and the addition of blue and other bright colors—that showcase these changes. Millennials are transforming virtually every aspect of work, including how they’re hired and what they expect. Add that to the relatively low unemployment rate and there are new expectations for today’s hiring managers.

This is not the place to shake your head and wag your fingers at “those kids.” Instead, it’s time to embrace the differences—and see how this generational shift can play to the strength of a career in laundry and linen management.

“You’re in competition and most people don’t have a clue,” said Paul Fayad, who was involved in the service industry for over 35 years and is currently
the co-founder of ELM, a digital on-line learning company and management consulting firm Positive Leader. He notes that many industries have the same hiring challenges and laundries have to compete for those same workers.

Understanding the changes that Millennials are bringing—and perhaps even playing to those strengths—is key.

“You’d better be prepared to let Millennials know the whys, especially about why you’re in business and why you do certain things,” said Baby Boomer Warren Nesbit, executive vice president of human resources at textile and uniform manufacturer Encompass Group. That is the key to keeping those employees, who are more likely to move jobs more frequently. “People in my generation could go to one company and stay their whole life. That doesn’t happen very often anymore.”

Reframing the Industry

One thing Millennials appreciate: straightforward talk. So we won’t mince words: “People don’t grow up saying, ‘I want to be in a service industry that does laundry or housekeeping or maintenance,’” Fayad said. “It’s not a sexy or attractive industry like technology or even automotive. So you’re starting right off the bat with a smaller population of people who choose to become future leaders in these service industries.”

And then there is the typical work environment. Craig Lloyd, managing principal of the recruiting firm Laundry Careers, said the linen management industry is known to be “demanding. The working conditions are such that you’re not always in an air-conditioned office, not working an exact 40 hours a week. It’s a certain work culture.”

That said, there are ways to showcase how the industry impacts people—and showing meaning is a value that can attract Millennials. According to Deloitte’s 2017 Millennials Survey, it is at work where Millennials feel most obligated to make—and feel capable of making—a difference in the world. Laundry and linen management does that—but doesn’t always do a great job of promoting it.

“When that occurs, people see the work differently and they want to be in management,” Fayad said. “If the focus is 100 percent on metrics, we’re robots, and who wants to manage a bunch of robots? Who wants to make a living out of producing 62 sheets every two hours in order to meet my numbers?”

Nesbit agrees. “You’d better be able to articulate what the company is about, what they’re trying to accomplish. Not those passive candidates as well. That’s critical for Millennials, who are always ready to make a move if there’s a better opportunity out there.”

There are times when jobs must be advertised, but even that has changed. Poage recommends radio and digital ads, especially those that target specific candidates. “You know the best workers in the job that you’re looking for, what they’re interested in, and what they like. With radio and digital, you can then target individuals just like them.”

Forget the notion of putting one ad in the Sunday paper and calling it recruitment. “It’s critical that there’s consistency in the ad message and that they see it more than once,” she said. And “message” is the correct term for any advertisement. “You have to make sure that message gets out there,” she said. “So often, the headline says, ‘Laundry Attendant Needed.’ That doesn’t work anymore.”

One technique that does work is employee referrals. Millennials are heavily influenced by input from others. Textile care services can play to this through a referral program. Poage has found that “monetary referrals do not work well,” she said. “When it’s an entry-level job, you may be offering $500 or $1,000, typically split in two with half when they are hired, and half at 60 or 90 days. When it’s $250 in the paycheck, nine times out of 10, it goes to pay bills. There’s nothing really tangible to say, ‘This impacted me in a positive way.’”

Instead, with contest-based referrals, employees who refer a new employee are entered into a drawing. Poage recommends holding a contest at each location every six weeks or three months. The winning entry might receive a 50-inch flat screen TV, $150 shopping card at an electronics store or a new cell phone with a year’s service. Employees get one entry per successful referral. Poage suggests offering more than one prize so there will be multiple winners if possible. “That also motivates the current team to find great candidates,” she said. Use social media and your company website or newsletter to showcase the prize winners to build more excitement.

This type of referral contest is not only easier to administer, but also pays
dividends. Poage used this technique at a large instant oil change chain. About 47 percent of new hires came in through the contest-based referrals. For comparison, when the company had a monetary-based referral system, only about 4 percent of new employees arrived that way. “If you can get referrals for up to 30 or 40 percent of your new hires, your job is going to be a whole lot easier,” Poage said.

She also suggests working with local high schools, technical schools and community colleges, perhaps even creating part-time jobs or apprenticeships.

Tout Career Growth

Millenials expect rapid advancement—and have said loudly that they expect employers to offer a distinct career path and continued training. Textile care services can succeed in this area, Poage believes, by using video testimonials of those who have risen through the ranks. This can be especially successful if hiring managers can carve out a typical career path.

“Showcase that you really can start at an entry-level hourly position and move up to a management position in an average number of years if you have the skills,” Poage said. “That should be in your recruitment brand message, too.”

It can be especially powerful at reaching those graduating high school who may not want to attend college—or be saddled by student loan debt. (In 2016, the average college graduate owed more than $37,000 in student loans.)

“You can show that by the time peers are getting out of college, you will be making much more than they’re going to make in the next decade,” Poage said.

“The value of work experience is so critical in this environment.”

Fayad suggests testing potential hires to assess leadership potential as part of the interviewing process. “We look for traits that are indicative of future leadership, of intrinsic value, of compassion and value, a service mindset in the service industry. There are specific traits that stand out: empathy, compassion, intrinsic motivation. They want to do this work because they understand the greater good. If we start there, the next step is the desire. A desire to become a manager or leader is more important than me going down and telling people, ‘I think you’d be a great manager or supervisor.’”

The next generation of leaders is probably already working in the laundry—and a quick look around shows who they are. “They become leaders before they get paid to lead,” Fayad said. “They’re the energizers, asking, ‘What can I do to help?’ That’s the type of people you want.”

Encompass uses Lean Six Sigma manufacturing techniques, which aim to reduce waste and variabilities. Giving employees roles in the Lean Six Sigma process provides an opportunity for leadership skills to emerge. “You can really get people engaged in what’s going on in the company and actually participating and solving problems and being part of the Lean philosophy,” Nesbitt said. “We’ve found so many talented people we didn’t know we had.”

Companies must walk a fine line here, though. Recruiting by offering growth potential must be met with both the company’s willingness to train and honesty if things don’t work out.

“Things do change,” Nesbit said. “There are people who will max out and not be able to move to the next level. Sometimes you find out the hard way. You have to be willing to say, ‘This is a good person, a good manager or good technician. Let’s regroup and see what other roles they may have potential for in the future.’ Then communicate with them: ‘We’re adjusting our thoughts and this is why’.”

Whether part of a leadership development strategy or just improving in their current jobs, Millennials expect training, companies must invest in professional development. “That employee who makes $8 an hour can definitely become the lead at $15 per hour two years down the road,” Lloyd said. “Where companies are shooting themselves in the foot, though, is that most are not qualified to be developed as a plant manager over 100–125 people. That’s a complicated job.”

When the laundry is part of a larger company, such as a health system or hotel, getting an investment in training for employees that are not directly involved in patient care or guest satisfaction is especially hard. “If you’re part of a hospital, you’re not involved in direct patient care,” Fayad said. “If you’re part of a hotel, you’re not one of the professionals who has something to do with the customers in the day-to-day operation. So there’s often not enough respect, much less money for training.”

Conversations, though, don’t cost much more than time. And that, Nesbit said, can help build employees and showcase areas in which they need to grow. “Companies spend too much time focusing on improving employee weaknesses and we do also. But what we need to do a better job of is really paying attention to their strengths. What are their strengths? What do they need to do to develop? And what can change?”

Don’t Forget the Other Generations, Either

At this point, there are three distinct generations—with Gen X nestled between Boomers and Millennials. Each must be treated somewhat differently. As if that’s not enough, the next
generation—Generation Z—is turning 18 this year and will soon start entering the workforce. While their work habits aren’t yet known, it will create an additional burden for employers to “know by generation what it is that motivates the person and also what their expectations are,” Poage said. “We know the Millennials; it is immediate gratification and it is critical for them that they’re not just being told what they aren’t doing well, but what they’re doing well.”

In the end, finding the right workers and playing to their skillsets—personally or generationally—can positively impact the laundry and what it delivers. “We do a better job of making it right the first time,” Nesbit said. “And when we don’t get it right, an engaged employee will be more willing to do more to make it right. That absolutely has the biggest impact on what we’re able to deliver for our customers.”

Biggest Hiring Challenges by Type

Craig Lloyd, managing principal of the recruiting firm Laundry Careers, identifies the biggest hiring challenges by type of position.

- **Non-exempt workers without laundry experience.** Lloyd says there is little formal recruiting in this category, so he doesn’t know it well. But it is impacted by the unemployment rate below 5 percent and the need for health insurance coverage.

- **Non-exempt workers with laundry experience.** Laundry is competing with other industries to recruit and retain employees. For those with some technical skills—such as maintenance mechanics—the competition is from “clean technical industries. They (individuals with technical skills) don’t always want to work at industrial plants where they get their hands dirty,” Lloyd said. Providing competitive pay can also be a challenge to the industry.

- **Salaried workers without industry experience.** The industry isn’t all that well known and people don’t tend to think of it when pursuing work, Lloyd said. “But many skills translate. We just have to get better at letting them know the work is there.” Starting salaries can be an issue, especially if the worker has a college degree.

- **Salaried workers with industry experience.** This can be the biggest challenge, especially since Lloyd sees a rise in the number of workers who are not willing to relocate.