Competing for Talent for Over 100 Years

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Last month on a gorgeous sunny day, my son and I took the Servant Life Tour of The Elms, a famous Newport mansion and summer home to Mr. and Mrs. Berwind in the early 1900s. I never thought that while touring I would be fixated on the age-old battle of finding, keeping, and managing top talent – but hey, I don't go looking for work topics on spring break, they find me! The tour began at the back staircase where we climbed 82 stairs from the basement servant entrance up to the third floor. When we reached the servant quarters, I was pleasantly surprised by how nice they were. The opening of the tour included a story about how hard it was to find great talent during this era, an issue referred to as the " servant problem." Thanks to the widespread impact of organized labor, so many of the mansion owners had to consider ways to keep their talent...including better living! Immediately, all the articles I read every day on recruiting and retaining top talent and the war for talent flashed through my head and I thought, wow. In over 100 years, nothing has changed. And truly, nothing has

changed. On the wall of the servants' bedroom, there was a census of all the workers from the years 1915 and 1925. It included their name, age, birthplace, citizenship, years in the US and occupation. Of the 23 listed during those two time periods, only two of them were US Citizens. Other facts we can relate to today – almost 100% turnover of staff in 10 years, nearly split male and female, a variety of generations represented, with the majority of the workers in their 20s, and tenure amongst the highest paying and greatest responsibility positions including the butler, chef, and housekeeper. About a month ago, we published an infographic on the Living History of the Workforce, which examines the evolution of the workforce from the early 1900s through today. I instantly thought about this as the tour illuminated some comparisons between the labor disputes and press coverage of yesterday and today. The late 1800s marked a surge in both labor unions and strikes, as workers across the United States rose in protest of unfair working conditions. Major complaints often included safety concerns, long work days, and fair wages. While we have laws in place today that help to ensure safe working conditions, other complaints of the era still resonate today. In many scenarios, the 9 to 5 workday has become a myth, with work blending into life for far more than just forty hours a week. Debates over equal pay have been a topic of conversation since the mid-1900s, if not earlier, and continue today. So it's no surprise that unhappy workers will eventually band together to ask for more. When the Berwinds' employees challenged long hours, Mr. Berwind's response was a mass dismissal. He found an entirely new workforce to onboard. But that didn't mean that the complaints went unnoticed. The press has always taken a keen interest in any drama surrounding labor relations. In this scenario, the newspapers massively exaggerated all the known statistics about the estate, the number of employees, and the working conditions to report a supposed "strike." Today, we all know a bad review on Indeed, Glassdoor, or any social channel means companies must respond and handle employee issues, whether warranted or not. Again, not much has changed here other than the modality. A small story of an employee lawsuit or general discontent can explode into a viral story in a matter of hours thanks to the power of social media.

My Reflection on Talent

The most amazing part that struck a chord with me, was the pride these workers felt in not only maintaining a mansion but truly making the experience magical for those who both lived there and visited. Over 40 people made this happen each and every day. The employee engagement shone through every prepared meal, every sparkling window, and every pressed collar. Talk about providing remarkable service! Take a moment, step back in time, and think about how much and how little has changed. The common thread that hasn't changed? We are all human beings with basic needs and emotional needs – remember Maslow! I guess that's why that age-old golden rule always applies. Whether in the gilded age or the digital age, "treat others the way that you want to be treated" is probably the best bit of advice for finding, retaining, and managing top talent. That's what creates the well-oiled machine that's needed to run anything from a household staff of twenty to an HCM company of 150. And if you can experience the tour of any of the Newport mansions yourself, it's well worth the trip to relive the magic of that era.

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