Mercenaries and FOMO: The Problem with the War for Talent

War for Talent. The concept that recruiting and retaining talented employees becomes increasingly competitive every year, to the point that companies have to fight for the same talent.

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If you're in the business world, you've probably heard of the phrase, "the war for talent." As a quick refresher, for those of you who might not be on the front lines of recruiting, the war for talent is a term that was coined in the late 90s as a description of the landscape of the workforce. Basically, it's the concept that recruiting and retaining talented employees becomes increasingly competitive every year, to the point that companies have to fight for the same talent. The concept has given rise to a bunch of articles with titles like Winning the War for Talent in 2017, with HR professionals spouting their (well-researched) opinions on talent management in a constantly evolving workplace.

Bored yet?

Look, I'll be honest – I never really gave this phrase any real thought prior to a few days ago. Yes, I currently work in the HCM industry. I went to business school. I've had a number of internships. So sure, I've heard it before. But "the war for talent" has always seemed like a management problem, something the higher-ups concern themselves about because they're making hiring decisions. As an entry-level millennial, all I cared about was that I got a job after graduation and that it was a job I really liked.

That's where I was wrong.

"The war for talent" is my problem, too, because without us realizing it, that phrase has had a drastic effect on my generation's experience with job-searching and hiring. And I only just realized it a few days ago, when my team and I were brainstorming answers to SHRM's NextChat forum (yeah, the Society for Human Resource Management hosts some great real-talk sessions every week). "The war for talent." Let's delve into that metaphor a little bit. If this is a war, then companies become countries, the different sides fighting for their own personal successes. Employees, therefore, would be the front lines of defense – the soldiers, if you will. These "soldiers" are the talent that companies need to fight their corporate battles. The problem is, "the war for talent" mentality turns employees into mercenaries. Bear with me here – for those of you who are not as big of a nerd as I am, a mercenary is a soldier that is paid to fight. Rather than fighting loyally for their own country, mercenaries will fight for whoever pays them the highest salary.

Now, what does that sound like to you?

Millennials get a bad reputation for frequent job-hopping (among other things). We're often lured by the prospect of a bigger salary, more perks, more kegs in the office. I'll let you in on a little secret: there's this concept that we've self-identified as FOMO (the fear of missing out). It's the fear that somewhere else, there's a better life, a better situation, a better job – and we might be missing it. FOMO, I think, is an innate human social phenomenon, and it has been drastically amplified by social media, there's no question about that. We don't even have to actively think about the possibility of a better job somewhere else anymore. I recently started getting emails from LinkedIn saying, "Sabrina, let recruiters know you're ready for your next gig – share that you're open and let your next job find you." Translation? *"There might be something better out there!"* Personally, I ignore those LinkedIn emails because I love my job (*cliché, sappy, you're so lucky, Sabrina shut up* – I know). And I do know that I'm lucky because I'm in a rare situation where a company focuses on actually nurturing its employees. But many millennials don't get enough out of their jobs, so it's easy for them to develop the mercenary mentality and follow the money or the perks from company to company. Disclaimer: I know I don't speak for all millennials. There will always be those who are solely motivated by money.

But if you're a Gen Xer or Baby Boomer reading this, trust me when I say that the yearning to actually get something out of a job applies to far more millennials than you'd think. After thinking about this, I don't like the phrase "the war for talent." At all. And my team of fellow millennial marketers doesn't, either. Instead of fostering a collaborative work environment for the benefit of the company and employees alike, it pits us against each other as we scrabble for the highest mercenary fee. So we're going to start referring to it as *"the pursuit of work meaning."* From where we're sitting, that kind of sums up the millennial point of view on job searching. Money is great, don't get me wrong – but what we really need, all of us is to give and get value from our work. So here's my advice to companies: think about how you recruit talent to work for you. Are you promoting a culture that will develop loyal employees, or are you playing the mercenary game with dollar bills and beer carts? **drops mic**

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