

# Unlocking the talent squeeze

Professional services firms are  
delivering smarter strategies to skill up.  
Our cheat sheet explains how.



# Game-changing strategies for topline talent

Attracting and keeping top talent are enduring themes for firms, but clever thinking and fresh approaches are solving the perennial people power dilemma.

Border closures during COVID-19 may have exacerbated a skills shortage, but employee attraction and retention were a challenge for professional services firms long before the pandemic.

With competition for talent showing little sign of easing in the shifting employment landscape, employers must adopt winning strategies that appeal to new talent while fostering loyalty among existing workers.

From harnessing technology to minority interest shareholder programs and giving employees more say, practice leaders share five new ways to captivate top talent.

## 1 Prioritise empowerment

If employees are your greatest asset, empower them to solve your biggest problems. That's the advice of Peter Lalor, CEO and Managing Director of Melbourne-based multidisciplinary advisory practice [BlueRock](#).

"We're a highly automated and efficient organisation in terms of how we have used technologies to deliver everything we do, but we put our people in charge of this from the start," says Lalor.

"The philosophy at BlueRock was to let everyone choose the [technology] platform that they wanted, then we watched what happened and let the best ones win."

Lalor, who launched BlueRock in 2008, says this approach runs counter to the style of many professional services firms.

"Most firms form a committee to choose the tech platforms that everyone has to use," he says. "But you risk pigeonholing

yourself and you also overlook the talent that exists in your business."

The recent [State of the Global Workplace report](#) from Gallup shows 85 per cent of employees are not engaged or actively engaged in work. Lalor says empowering employees can boost their sense of connection.

"Let the smart people in your business work out the best way to solve the problem and really give them free rein."

## 2 Consider minority shares

"Professional services businesses need to implement what we call 'employee of choice' strategies," says Grant Bloxham, Bstar Founder and CEO.

Data from [Bstar](#), which provides business advisory technology solutions to the accounting industry, shows only 46 per cent of accounting practices believe their staff are motivated to grow the business.

**"Our philosophy was to let everyone choose the [technology] platform they wanted ... and then let the best ones win."**

PETER LALOR, CEO AND MANAGING DIRECTOR, BLUEROCK

Think differently – go beyond the typical tactics now widely deployed to attract and keep talented people engaged, Bloxham advises.

"This includes more than flexible working conditions, professional development programs and career pathways. ▶



## KEY TAKE-OUTS

When [Culture Amp](#), the global employee experience platform, analysed data collected from employees at 250 Australian professional services organisations over the year to June 30, 2022, it found:

- 1 92% of people agreed they understand how their work contributes to their employer's mission – they were most positive about their contribution to the firm's broader purpose.
- 2 75% said the leaders at their organisation demonstrate that people are important to the firm's success.
- 3 Just 63%, however, felt their perspectives were included in decision-making.

Source: [Culture Amp \(2022\)](#)



We're now also seeing an explosion in minority interest shareholder programs, where top talent is being tapped on the shoulder as future successors," he says.

Bloxham says the programs offer "slivers of equity" to help retain high performing workers.

"More often, we're seeing firms offering employees a five per cent buy-in as an incentive to stay in the business and to help it to grow," he reports. "Locking in talent through minority-interest shareholder programs is very topical at the moment and we expect the trend to continue as employers look for new ways to hang on to talent for the long-term."

**3 Leave repetitive tasks to robots**

Digital technologies drive business efficiencies and provide a competitive edge in a tight labour market.

"People want to do work that is meaningful rather than repetitive," says Paul Goessler National Head of Professional Services, Westpac Commercial Banking, "Automation frees up time to focus on delivering more value to clients, and that in turn drives employee satisfaction."

Data from Bstar shows accounting practices remain heavily dependent on partners or directors, with 70 per cent relying on their personal relationships to retain clients.

**"Automation frees up time to focus on delivering more value to clients, and that in turn drives employee satisfaction."**

PAUL GOESSLER, NATIONAL HEAD OF PROFESSIONAL SERVICES, WESTPAC COMMERCIAL BANKING

"Automating functions allows business owners more time to build up the skills of their employees, which is valuable for the practice in the long term and is more likely to result in a workforce that feels engaged in building its success," say Bloxham.

David Cox, Co-founder and Managing Director of Sydney-based advisory practice ProYou says technology builds "capacity and efficiency" across a business.

"We're 100 per cent cloud based and we're always looking at ways that technology can make life easier," he says. ProYou has used debtor management solution FeeSynergy since it opened for business in 2021. Cox says the automated platform allows employees to focus on building relationships with clients, rather than chasing them for payments.

"I can't remember the last time we had someone working late to get a job done," says Cox. ▶



**KEY TAKE-OUTS**

What do employees value at work?

- 1 Remuneration and reward.
- 2 Wellbeing.
- 3 Experience.
- 4 Different ways of working.
- 5 Career development.
- 6 Brand and values alignment.
- 7 Workspaces and places.

**The Future of Work, What Workers Want** research was commissioned by PwC Australia and undertaken by YouGov to understand the views and opinions of Australian employees and employers.

Source: PwC, The Future of Work, What Workers Want





“Technology gives us that work-life balance where we all know that we don’t have to focus time and effort on things like collecting debtors.”

#### 4 Rethink bonuses schemes

Accounting businesses such as ProYou have developed bonus schemes aimed at retaining talent and developing their advisory skills. Its employees receive a quarterly bonus of 15 per cent of the business’ net cash profit and, while two-thirds of the payment is for their discretionary use, one third is disbursed into the Future Fund, which Cox describes as an “investment tool that upskills our team”.

“We’ve invested in shares, we’ve loaned money to two clients to get their business off the ground and we’re currently in negotiations to acquire a property through the fund,” says Cox.

“We invest in a range of things, and the whole team is involved in making decisions about where the Future Fund money goes. It helps a 22-year-old accountant learn how to prepare and negotiate loan agreements, for instance, and these are then skills that they can bring to their clients.

“We’ve found that about 90 per cent of the team chooses to throw the entire bonus into the Future Fund, because they understand what we’re trying to build and

they want to be part of the team,” says Cox, adding that ProYou owners add an extra 10 per cent of net cash profits to the Future Fund each quarter.

Along with the net-cash profit bonus, ProYou employees also receive an entrepreneurial cash bonus each time they help an existing client with a new service.

“We want our people to step outside the normal show of just doing tax returns and become business advisors, so we’ve created an incentive that helps them to achieve this,” says Cox.

#### 5 Experience matters

A [recent PwC report](#) on the future of work shows employee experience – the things workers feel, see and learn on the job – are among the top three drivers of attraction and retention, along with remuneration and wellbeing.

Lalor says BlueRock strives to align employee experience with the firm’s vision as well as the clients it aims to attract. “Our vision comes down to a simple equation – do things you love with the people you care about and good things happen,” he says. “It’s our mantra. It’s on our website. I’ve got it plastered on my computer and it’s even on a bumper sticker on my car. What people love doing at BlueRock is helping clients with every aspect of their business, so we create the environment that allows them to do this. ▶



#### TOP TIP

On 1 October 2022, new laws designed to make the business of running an employee share scheme simpler, in particular for smaller enterprises and start-ups, came into effect in Australia. [Learn more here.](#)

We use technology to remove the tasks that people don't really love doing and we encourage everyone to pitch new ideas.

"With BlueRock, I wanted to create an 'anti professional services firm', adds Lalor. "I didn't want the typical corporate culture of a mid-tier firm. I wanted to attract entrepreneurial clients and that meant fostering entrepreneurial thinking among our people."

Employee benefits are also an important part of the BlueRock experience. The firm provides BlueRock-funded childcare support for employees returning to work from parental leave, for instance, as well as a free lunch voucher system and regular employee retreats.

"We just took about 200 people to Daydream Island for four days to unwind and relax," says Lalor.

At ProYou, Cox says there's no time for "the typical corporate carry on".

**"We have an open book policy ... It makes everyone feel like they are part of something, and they understand that what they do really counts."**

DAVID COX, CO-FOUNDER AND MANAGING DIRECTOR, PROYOU

"We have an open book policy so all team members can see everything that happens with our business, except for wages," he says.

"As an example, a graduate accountant gets to see the financials of the business and ask questions about why we spend money on this or invest in that. It makes everyone feel like they are part of something, and they understand that what they do really counts."



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