

conomic spending and funds allocation. Job movement is occurring, however—just not with the same momentum as in the past. Candidates currently employed are more likely to remain in their current positions, retaining job security, unless a significant improvement in salary or promotion is ensured.”

**EBJ:** Finding and retaining talent is frequently cited by environmental industry executives as at or near the top of their most pressing concerns. What trends are you observing in the area of recruitment and retention?

J.L.: “In an effort to attract and retain talent, firms have offered several incentives to their employees. Employee referral programs and sign-on bonuses are two of the more utilized incentives. An employee referral program can be a successful tool in recruiting new candidates. Current employees are rewarded for referrals of candidates to the company. Under optimal circumstances, both the employee and the employer may benefit from this program. This tool is used both to recruit and retain employees.

“Partnering with the right recruitment firm can also be an excellent tool in employing and retaining new talent and can result in exposure to a concentrated selection of qualified, potential employees. The most successful recruiting firms maintain continual contact with industry professionals and should perform as an extension to the in-house recruiting team. The most productive firms will offer solutions, advice, and of course qualified candidates.

“It is imperative for a recruiting firm to first understand the needs of the company. Once the needs of the company are understood, qualified candidates who complement the strengths of the organization may be identified. The time and consideration a recruiting firm dedicates to procuring the best candidate for the company increases the success of employee retention.”

**EBJ:** Managers responding to the survey indicated they generally had equal or greater success in hiring quality candidates this past year than during the previous year. To what do you attribute this finding?

J.L.: “My belief is that this is a direct result of the recent number of mergers and acquisitions.” ■

## ECONOMIC DOWNTURN OFFERS OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD SUSTAINABILITY PRACTICE

We rode a wave of green enthusiasm into 2008. Magazine covers touted the benefits of building a green business. Big-box retailers were all about sustainability, tightening supply chains, and offering green product lines. Grocers expanded their organic food sections, emphasizing the environmental benefits that accrue from sustainable agriculture. Established neighborhoods were razed to make room for “sustainable developments.” And, it seemed like one’s carbon footprint was about to become as important as a Dun & Bradstreet credit rating.

The future thus looked bright for the environmental profession or anyone who could build a link to it. But, that enthusiasm evaporated about as quickly as gasoline prices escalated and virtually disappeared with the burst of the bubble in the financial markets. By late spring 2008, it was “drill here, drill now.” By summer’s end, grocers were reporting declining sales of all those organic foods produced using sustainable practices. Shortly thereafter, world leaders openly worried that efforts to tackle global warming would take a near-term, if not longer-term, backseat to restoring an economy based on consumption. Apparently, sustainability is something that is affordable only in the good times.

Reflecting on the way sustainability has been marketed, it is understandable that interest in sustainability has waned in some sectors in the wake of the economic downturn. Charitable giving aside, when finances are tight, it is difficult to convince a business or an individual to spend more for a product or service when the benefit of that additional cost is intangible or derived at some distant point in the future.

In today’s economic climate, businesses and individuals want to reap the benefit of any additional investment in the near term, if not immediately. Does every sustainability project have to require substantial investment, only to produce a long-term return? Sounds like the promise of investing in the stock market, and it doesn’t take critical

analysis to understand how that one turned out. Demanding near-term returns may be the most responsible behavior in today’s business climate. The dedicated among us should be up to that expectation.

Fortunately, current economic conditions allow us to deliver returns on sustainability projects that might have been ignored in more prosperous times. The key to securing these projects, however, is in promoting them as economic performance enhancement projects with sustainability benefits. The same project touted as a sustainability project with enhanced economic performance benefits will not likely receive the same attention, simply because the “green message” has often been associated with additional cost, deferred benefits, and in too many cases, opportunists.

Beware, though. These are not the capital-intensive wind power, solar energy, or biofuels facility construction projects that win achievement awards and public recognition. The opportunity is in lower-profile jobs that nonetheless can provide considerable value. Today, companies have both the time and the willingness, for example, to spend \$20,000 on a study that will yield near-term management options for reducing waste disposal costs of \$60,000 per month by 10%. A year ago, the environmental manager responsible for this type of project would have been wrapped up in permit applications for expanding the facility, an activity that would have been perceived as having higher value.

Opportunities lie in the back-to-the-basics projects that draw on the core skills of our profession: process and control device optimization, feedstock and fuel substitution, energy and water use efficiency improvement, permit modifications to allow more flexible operating schedules or conditions, and waste minimization. In short, the cost-saving projects that were ignored when demand was insatiable and the economy was booming are now front and center. And, in terms of the future of the environmental services profession, these are projects that provide value today, keep qualified staff on the payrolls, and build portfolios that will serve the firm and clients in the future.

So, how does an environmental services firm identify, pursue, and secure these opportunities? By using the back-to-basics approach outlined below:

1) **Identify your best clients.** These are the clients that trust and respect you. They seek your advice and follow through with contracts. They pay their bills on time. You understand their business and you enjoy working with them. Your firm would suffer if their business disappeared.

2) **Determine what differentiates your firm from other service providers.** The differentiator needs to be something more substantive than “our people,” “the quality of our work,” or a “commitment to sustainability.” These hollow claims invite selection based on price. If you’re not sure what differentiates you from others, ask those whom you have identified as your best clients.

3) **Identify specific services that you can offer your clients that can improve their financial performance.** If you really know and understand the business of your best clients, you will understand their operations and processes well enough to understand where cost-saving improvements can be made. Determine how the services you offer can support these improvements. Example: Perhaps your client base is subject to limits on air pollution control device operation that are overly cautious, requiring extremely high pH requirements for scrubbers. The data indicate that lower pH levels, requiring reduced caustic usage, can achieve the required emission limits. Share this information and propose assisting with the permit modification application. Caustic savings will pay for the consulting work in the near term, and with the proper documentation, the project will offer the sustainability benefits that come with decreased chemical consumption.

4) **Approach your best clients with concrete proposals.** You’re going to have to take a risk and share your proposal in clear, concrete terms with your client. You don’t need to share all of the details, but you’re going to have to provide enough information to communicate an understanding of the project and the opportunities for cost savings. Some of your clients will shop your proposal and award the work to a competitor. If so, don’t blame them; something probably went wrong in your execution of step 1 or step 2.

5) **Consider compensation based on cost-savings.** For some projects, particularly those with near-term implementation and payback schedules, you may want to consider linking your compensation to the cost savings realized. This approach demon-

strates dedication to project concepts, has the potential to solidify a relationship, may make the project immediately affordable, and may significantly improve project profitability over the long term. Remember those “partnering discussions?” Now might be the best time to act like a partner, truly sharing project risks and rewards.

6) **Deliver the project as agreed.** In many cases, these projects will be based on proven concepts or practices. There are uncertainties, however—energy prices for example—that will influence the financial performance of the project. Yet it should be possible to scope and deliver projects on the basis of solid science and engineering, with links to savings in dollars and process inputs or outputs. And, remember, these are projects for the best clients, the ones you want to continue working with.

7) **Document project performance.** Once you’ve completed the project, take the time to write a detailed project description that summarizes the scope of the project, the schedule, the compensation model, and the savings, both in terms of dollars and relevant process units. This information will be incredibly valuable when a more robust sustainability market resumes.

The Obama administration is touting a public works program that will dwarf the New Deal, designed to ramp up over a period of at least two years. Undoubtedly, the infrastructure spending package will include alternative energy, energy efficiency, resource utilization, and sustainability requirements. And, with the new administration, we’re likely to see legislation that drives similar private-sector projects, again with an implementation horizon measured in years. While some firms may have project work that will carry them through until these projects develop, many more will need to develop significant new business in the coming months. Pursuing sustainability projects with immediate or near-term economic benefits can fit the bill.

The environmental consulting industry has the opportunity to promote, advance, and deliver sustainability projects today, even in the current economic climate. We just need to frame these projects in terms that reflect near-term business needs, execute them using proven science and engineering, and deliver them to provide long-term business value. If we act on this opportunity, we’ll strengthen existing relation-

ships and we’ll be better positioned to serve those larger opportunities that lie just around the corner.

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#### Who:

- Environmental firm owners and managers, including presidents and CEOs, principals and partners, COOs, operations managers, division managers, CFOs, financial managers, VP/marketing and business development, CIOs and VP/information systems, or by invitation
- Legal, insurance, software, and other professionals who serve the environmental industry

#### For more information:

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