



EPISODE 1

Finding Unicorns - How to Recruit and Hire Top Performers That Haven't Been Available in a Decade

Introduction: Welcome to Strategic Insights brought to you by PrideStaff. On each episode, we bring you interviews with leading management and appointment experts from across the country. Your host for Strategic Insights is Brad Smith, and now here's Brad.

Brad Smith: Hello and welcome to this episode of Strategic Insights brought to you by PrideStaff. PrideStaff is an award-winning national staffing, recruiting and workforce partner. I'm your host for Strategic Insights, Brad Smith. And today I'm pleased to welcome Kevin Pratt, Owner and Strategic-Partner of the Akron, Ohio office. Kevin's going to talk to us about his background and experience working as a strategic HR leader. He's going to share some tips on recruiting and management best practices. And also outline the concept of unicorns, top talent that hasn't been available in a decade.

Brad Smith: Kevin, thank you so much for joining the program today.

Kevin Pratt: Yeah, no problem. Glad to be here.

Brad Smith: Kevin, let's start by doing a little introduction. You're based in Akron, Ohio. You're the owner of the PrideStaff, Akron, Ohio office, but you haven't always been in the staffing seat. In fact, you were on the other side of the table in strategic HR management for large organizations.

Brad Smith: So you have a very interesting perspective on things and I think some unique insight that you can offer to employers and then your clients. So tell us a little bit more about your background there?

Kevin Pratt: Yeah, so before my tenure here with PrideStaff, I worked in corporate America, came over about seven years ago to start my own staffing firm. I worked for two large Fortune 500 companies that did various HR roles, from HR leadership to safety, risk management, EEOC compliance, those kinds of investigation type work. I literally sat on the other side of the table from where I'm doing right now. So when I'm out there talking with my clients or

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prospective clients now, I really get where they're coming from. Right? I understand they have a lot of unique pressures, a lot of stress and ever changing environment and I think that they get that. And I think it comes through that we've been there, done that and understand kind of what they're going through. And I think it kind of helps to have that kind of insight when working with them.

Brad Smith: It certainly does. It gives you a different perspective and lets you know what challenges your clients are truly facing and what they're trying to accomplish for senior leadership within their organizations. It also helps position you as a true partner to those organizations and not just a vendor. You're working to help overcome their biggest challenges.

Kevin Pratt: Yeah. I mean, that's true if you think about it. I mean probably the fastest changing part of HR right now is talent acquisition, right? It's as specialized as accounting, IT or anything else with just different job boards, different technologies. And it's just difficult for companies who don't do this everyday to keep up. And I feel like we can do a great job just meeting with our clients, talking to them about what's going on in the market, pay raises, just supply and demand, all that kind of stuff. And it's just a lot of resources, frankly, that they don't have access to and it's kind of fun helping them out that way.

Brad Smith: Kevin switching gears a little bit. In Ohio, your economy is starting to reopen. You mentioned talent acquisition and we're also going to need the talent re-engagement plan. As companies begin to bring employees back from layoffs and as the extended unemployment benefits begin to expire, what are you seeing in the market and what do companies really need to plan for?

Kevin Pratt: Well, we just started with manufacturing last week. This week, it's kind of business services. Next week, it's going to be more of the retail, personal care, that type of stuff. So with our manufacturing and our general office operations, generally I see that the clients are wanting to get back open, but everyone's still trying to figure out what does compliance mean and what do they have to do? What do they want to do? How are their employees perceiving this a return to work? How are they dealing with the general fear that is out there and how do they come up with a plan to deal with all of those things? So I think it's just a real challenge as everyone's trying to figure out the logistics of making this all happen while still being very empathetic to the real concerns that people have.

Brad Smith: That's a great point and there are real concerns. Not to be too self promotional here, but you mentioned earlier how working with a national staffing provider offers resources that might not be available on your own. And at PrideStaff.com, there are a ton of resources to help organizations as the economy begins to rebound. One of those is a 30 page ebook and a guide

to reopening, a guide to turning the lights back on that will help to address a lot of the challenges, Kevin, that you just mentioned.

Brad Smith: Now, one of these challenges we hear across the country is, as States are reopening, as companies are turning the lights back on, they're having a challenge bringing people back on board that may have been laid off or furloughed because of the extended unemployment benefits. Employees are opting to actually stay unemployed because in some cases they're making more money than they would working. Are you seeing this right now in your neck of the woods?

Kevin Pratt: We are. I think it's realistic that everyone's going to see that in some situations people are making way more, sometimes double what they were making before. And it's hard to explain to somebody why they should turn down that short-term money. They're just trying to make ends meet and find food for their family. Right? And we're trying to explain to them that there's going to be a longterm impact of turning down maybe what's your perfect job. And recently Ohio has published information to employers that they want to know if employees are turning down work and staying on unemployment. That's going to be a really tricky situation and we'll have to see how that whole thing plays out. But clearly if you turned down an opportunity to return to work, then you're not eligible for unemployment. But it's just kind of a slippery slope going out there and reporting employees and doing those kinds of things. But at the same time, that's the law, right? So that's where I feel like employees, employers, staffing companies, we're all just trying to figure out how all this works.

Kevin Pratt: You know, what's interesting though? Because I'm just always this optimistic person, that I see unicorns, right? I mean, there's a lot of people that are still applying to jobs and isn't that really who you want? Somebody who could be sitting at home getting a free payday and they're saying, "No, I want to go back to work." And I really believe that those are the people that are going to help our clients get up and running and rebound faster than some of the other people.

Brad Smith: So you bring up a good point over the last decade, maybe even more, we've seen record low unemployment rates. So hiring has been an absolute challenge in finding good quality people that have the exact right skills that you're looking for was very difficult. But you brought up the concept of unicorns and I think a lot of our listeners probably know what you mean when you refer to unicorn. Some people refer to them as purple squirrels, but for those that may not know the concept, can you explain that for us?

Kevin Pratt: Yeah. It's kind of depends on who you talk to, what the term is, right? But the way I see purple squirrels are just those really difficult to fill jobs, right? So a client will give you a laundry list of things that they want and all 10 things are

must have and then the pay rate is below market. And all those kinds of things that just really, really make it difficult to fill up a job. I see unicorns is just those great candidates. Those candidates that we wish we could always find, but never can. And what we're seeing now is those unicorns are back. There's a lot of people that are applying to jobs and we have really ramped up our recruiting because we're seeing talent that we haven't seen in years, literally. And I think once this rebounds, I don't think we'll see him again for many years, right?

Kevin Pratt: So I think the companies that are really strategic, really have a sense that they will bounce back, they kind of understand intuitively that now is probably the best time to upgrade staff and make that investment in the resources that are really going to help them bounce back faster than their competition. And really that's what it's all about, right?

Brad Smith: It certainly is. It's about improving that strategic backside of things. Now, Kevin, what are some strategies you use or that our listeners can use to help attract some of these unicorns?

Kevin Pratt: Well, I think it's a lot of things. So attracting them as one part of it clearly and we on the PrideStaff side and do an amazing job. Our marketing department, I feel is like top notch, and I mentioned I worked with some big fortune 500 companies. And I feel like here at PrideStaff and the partnership with you, we do it as good as anybody I've seen. Right? So, that's one part of it. Obviously our social media presence is outstanding. All the steps that we take to really have strong search engine optimization, that's really helping us win the recruiting war.

Kevin Pratt: But I think in addition to that, once employers get people back, they really have to pivot towards employee retention. There is going to be a lot of hurt feelings when employers have had to look people in the eye and lay them off and say, "You're non-essential." You don't just get over that overnight. Right? So as these people return to work, there's going to be a real effort that has to be carried by human resources leaders, and leaders throughout the organization to welcome these people back and have honest and open and empathetic conversations with people that just because we couldn't keep you at the moment doesn't mean that we didn't care about you and find value in you personally, but we had to do what we had to do to survive. I don't think the strategy of just saying, "Hey, it happened and whatever, let's get back to work, everything will be fine." I just don't think that is going to be the way to restore the relationships that have been damaged through this.

Brad Smith: So employment branding is huge right now. Externally companies really need to think about what they're doing to attract new people. What are you doing to make yourself an employer of choice? But then internally, we also need to think through what we're doing to make people feel appreciated and

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comfortable? And then short-term, right now, it's really about making employees feel safe coming back into the workplace. And a little bit longer term, it's thinking strategically, how do we make this an amazing place where people want to come to work?

Kevin Pratt: I think that was hugely important before when things were going well. And I think with this kind of market disruption, you always have unintended consequences. I think there's going to be a big surprise with a lot of employers when not all their employees return. I think they are assuming that most people will come back, but these people have been sitting home, they've been applying to jobs. Again, they've been told they're non-essential. There's a lot of things to overcome there and I think employers are really, really going to have to work hard to get past that.

Kevin Pratt: And really, we used to have conversations with clients ahead of time or before this and say, "Hey, what makes you an employer of choice? When we're selling this to potential candidates, which we have to with such low unemployment, how do we sell your company as the place that people want to go to?" And I think going forward at the talent acquisition and the retention side, it's going to be more important than ever that leaders really think about, how do we attract people and how do we retain them and how do we want to treat them to make sure that happens?

Brad Smith: For sure. Hiring those superstars is still going to be a challenge. But on the flip side of things with record high unemployment rates right now, in a few months, maybe even a few weeks, we're going to see a large flood of applications as those extended unemployment benefits expire. Now when that happens, internal HR departments are going to be hit with a wave of people coming off unemployment looking for work. And in some cases, those people are just looking for any job at all. It's going to be extremely easy to hire the wrong people. How can partnering with a staffing firm, like PrideStaff, help companies better navigate this huge influx of potentially unqualified talent?

Kevin Pratt: Yeah. Great question. So it really reminds me of my corporate days, right? You would spend weeks and months trying to fill a particular role only to get to the finish line and that person accepts the counter offer from their previous employer or ghosts you, or just decides that they don't want to do it. And how deflating and demoralizing is that. And it's really interesting as I talk with my clients now, I feel like that's one of the biggest benefits of working with a professional recruiting and staffing company like PrideStaff is. We are presenting vetted, background check, drug screen, reference checked people that are willing and ready to start now, instead of starting the process all the way from the beginning.

Kevin Pratt: And I think to your point, when the government figures out the whole unemployment incentive that they've created, that eventually is going to go

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away and people will definitely be scrambling. And there's just really no way ... I mean, I worked for really big fortune 500 companies, and there's no way that they could handle the volume of people that we handle every day. I mean, last year we saw 10,000 different applicants that came through our system and we talked to dozens of people a week. There's no company set up to handle that kind of volume, and they're going to need us more than ever.

Kevin Pratt: I feel like technology has been a great thing. And we talked about how technology was going to be somewhat of a fix for the talent acquisition side. And I think in a lot of ways, it's actually made it more complicated because you have so many more job boards and so many more locations and so many more places that both candidates and clients go to find people that there just isn't one good place to go to anymore. And so, so many good candidates are lost and clients miss so many good people because they're just not on the right particular board. And I feel like we can really cut to the chase on all of that.

Kevin Pratt: If we go in and we embed ourselves with an organization or we know what their values are and what their culture is and the kind of people that they're looking for, we can really fast track their hiring and really find them people that can hit the ground running for them and just go literally from months to days in their recruiting process.

Brad Smith: So as companies begin to reopen, you mentioned more of a tiered approach starting with some manufacturing and business operations and so on. So it's going to be a phased reopening across the country. When you're working with your clients, do you recommend that companies and organizations wait until they've officially opened and entered a further phase in the reopening before they start recruiting and hiring efforts? Or do you suggest that they get a little bit more proactive and begin building a bench of talent right away?

Kevin Pratt: Well, planning obviously is always key and it's almost always the first thing that gets missed, right? When you're an HR leader and you're constantly putting out fires and running reports and doing all the compliance things that HR now is, that it's very hard to think about constantly having a pipeline of candidates available to you. I mean, it's a lot of work and it isn't work that you see an immediate return on that investment. I definitely think, from our own point of view, we have been recruiting as much as ever during this pandemic. I mean, we have stayed busy. We are seeing talent that we haven't seen, which we've already talked about. My LinkedIn is growing exponentially as people are starting to reach out or answer or connect.

Kevin Pratt: And so if an organization cannot do the recruiting on their own, cannot do that pipeline cannot do that constant drumbeat of talent, they really need to partner with somebody who's doing that every day. You just don't have time when you're trying to find the best talent till you get in a work order for one of

your department managers says, "Hey, I need an accountant," or "I need a sales manager." To start the process from zero is just going to literally take months. But when you're working with a professional staffing and recruiting firm, I have almost 10,000 connections on my LinkedIn, right? So it literally can be a couple of hours, a couple of days until I have a half a dozen really good candidates for somebody, because I'm out there constantly talking with those people and networking. And that really makes all the difference when you're trying to find the best people, that reactive versus proactive.

Brad Smith: Yeah, it certainly does. And I love how you and PrideStaff as a whole really partner with companies. You try to get a more intimate understanding of what a company truly needs, so you're going above and beyond just job requirements or required skills and you're learning more about the culture. You're learning more about what it's truly like to work for that organization so that you can make a better, longer term, successful fit. You also mentioned earlier how important things like culture and employment branding and how important that side of things really is.

Kevin Pratt: Yeah. I mean again, it's everything. When you're trying to fill a job, you can have 10 finalists that all have the technical skills, but maybe one or two would be a good fit. And so really embedding yourself with clients, getting to understand who is a good fit. I was one of those weird HR guys that love the meetings, right? I love the brain power. I love the brainstorming and all the creativity that came from problem solving big ideas and now I get to do that sometimes with my clients. I'll sit in as their HR rep to give them my perspective and my point of view on things. And in addition to that, when you're working with some of your regular clients and they have requests for you and you just nail it on the first time because you really know what they need, man, there's no better feeling than that. Right? That's where you're really adding value at a high level for your clients and it's fun.

Brad Smith: Yeah. And there's really no better feeling on the other side of things too. So being a buyer and putting in that partner that truly gets you, being able to trust them and know that they are an extension of your team, not a vendor, that's a great feeling as well.

Kevin Pratt: Oh, it's everything, man. I get all goosebumps just thinking and talking about it. And it's fun when you finally get to work with a client who was hesitant for the last year or two and then six months down the road, they're like, "I won't use anyone else but PrideStaff." That's when you know you're doing well and it's fun for sure.

Brad Smith: That's terrific. Well, let's look to end things on a high note. You mentioned earlier, you're an optimist and I absolutely love that. I try to be as well, but I think you have that surely under control there. Any parting words of wisdom for the people listening?

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Kevin Pratt: Yeah. I would say that I'm a devout optimist to an annoying level sometimes, but I just know that things will come back. Right? I know the American spirit, I know our way of life. We've always bounced back from any kind of challenges thrown at us. And I learned while serving in the army that your body can do whatever your mind tells it to do. Right? And I think of the same thing when it comes to business. These are definitely tough times, but if we stick to our processes and we stick to what we know works best, and we work our tail off, double down on everything that we were doing, we'll bounce back.

Kevin Pratt: Everybody, your competition, your clients, everyone's dealing with the same thing, but you be the leader. Right? You can be the one who steps up and says, "Hey, we're going to fix this. We're going to handle it. And we're going to come out stronger than ever." And PrideStaff is a staffing and recruiting firm that's top 1%. Right? So, you work with somebody who really knows what they're doing, is really as vested in your success as you are, there's really no way that you can lose, right? So I'd just say, just stay optimistic and just go out there and get it done.

Brad Smith: Kevin, I absolutely love that attitude. And at PrideStaff, we're certainly optimistic. We know that we're going to come out of this stronger and we want to help everyone that's listening come out of this stronger too. So whether you're looking for help on a specific hiring requirement, you want to talk more strategically about overall workforce management, or you want to find and recruit that unicorn that you've been searching for for over a decade, please visit PrideStaff.com. Talk to one of our offices, talk to one of their recruiting and workforce experts there, and they can help you come up with a strategic plan to help overcome the workforce challenges you're faced with.

Brad Smith: I mentioned earlier to PrideStaff has put together a whole collection of amazing resources for both your staff and your employees and your HR leadership to help overcome these challenging talent acquisition times. Be sure to download our 30 page guide on "Turning On The Lights" with some great insight into recovering quickly and fast and securing the talent you need to take that next step for your organization. Be sure to click that subscribe button and stay up to date with some amazing thought leadership on HR management work force planning.

Closing: Thank you for listening to Strategic Insights brought to you by PrideStaff. Whether you're looking for high level workforce consulting or staffing help to meet demands, PrideStaff is here to help.

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