New Recruits
Bring Transferable Skills
Some highly skilled potential employees are now available with talents the apartment industry wants. As many apartment industry firms decry the dearth of good job candidates, several have turned their eyes to other industries that recently incurred layoffs. The retail, food service, hospitality and mortgage industries offer prime recruits who are driven to close sales, trained in customer service and have an eye for detail.

Searching for a Seller

UDR has turned to the mortgage industry, especially in California, because mortgage sellers are highly motivated by compensation, driven to close deals and have a good handle on sales strategies, says Jerry Davis, Senior Vice President of Property Operations for the Colorado-based REIT.

For example, if a leasing professional wants to sell extras such as an apartment with a top-floor view premium or one that comes with the use of a free large-screen HDTV, the commission becomes higher, Davis says. Some might say those upgrades are too difficult to sell because, for example, the resident might already own a TV, “but good sales people find a way to sell them,” Davis says, “and so they earn more compensation.” And compensation is what motivated sales employees are after.

At Mercy Housing in Atlanta, retail, food service and hospitality employees have brought skills applicable to the apartment industry. Susan Sherfield, CPM, Regional Education Director for Mercy Housing, which develops and manages affordable housing, explains that apartment communities need people who can bill an order and make customers feel welcome, so a restaurant hostess or hotel front desk clerk who specializes in customer service would be an asset.

The hospitality and retail industries have proven to be ripe resources for high-quality employees at UDR as well, because those employees bring with them the right set of customer service and sales skills. “The hospitality industry has to reload their vacancies every couple of days,” Davis notes, “constantly having to sell and gain repeat business.” For that reason, hospitality and retail employees practice and hone their selling techniques day in and day out.

“Desk clerks, group sales people or concierges figure out how to make people happy and go that extra mile to do so,” Davis says, and those are skills that onsite community staff need.

Employees from the hospitality industry also have an eye for “the little things that make the difference,” a trait that can well-serve an apartment community, Davis says. For example, UDR has started offering towels in its fitness centers. The company used to believe that residents would steal the towels, but under the influence of hospitality industry employees, the company has found that towels that boast the property’s monogram are generally not stolen and come at minimal cost, he says.

Southern Management, a Vienna, Va.-based property manager with 25,000 apartments in the Mid-Atlantic, has not found “any one niche that is perfect” for apartment candidates, says Olivia Hunter, Recruitment Manager. Someone in hospitality or retail who may want a change in hours could be a good addition to site staff, but so could

**BY RACHEL F. GOLDBERG**

Some apartment companies look to other industries for prime employees who are driven to close sales, trained on how to provide excellent customer service and have a sharp eye for detail.

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Susan Sherfield, CPM
Regional Education Director, Mercy Housing, Atlanta, Ga.
Implementing behavioral interviewing techniques during the hiring process can greatly increase the chances of a successful hire, whether or not the candidate has previous related experience.

Behavioral interviewing’s premise is that a person’s behavior does not fundamentally change over time. How they have responded in certain situations in the past is a good indicator for how they will perform in similar situations in the future.

The first step in developing behavioral interviewing questions is to determine core competencies needed to perform the position the manager is recruiting for. Competencies include a combination of behaviors, knowledge, skills and abilities and job-related experiences.

While a job description includes specific skills that are required to accomplish certain tasks, such competencies describe how the individual goes about performing the work.

For example, a core competency for a property manager position may be “consistent leadership,” whereas that competency would not be necessary or as important for a leasing consultant position. A competency for a leasing consultant position might be “action orientation.” Each competency should be clearly defined and include observable behaviors that, when performed effectively, may indicate acceptable performance.

Next, the manager should determine which competencies are most important and develop questions that will draw detailed responses from the candidate to determine if the candidate has the desired characteristics. Questions should be open ended, and typically start with a phrase such as, “Give me an example of…” or “Tell me about a time…”, and usually have several follow-up questions to elicit more response from the candidate.

A follow-up question could be as simple as, “What happened?” or “Tell me more about that.” The interviewer wants to understand the impact or end result of the situation the candidate is describing.

The S-B-I Model

One way to prepare for and conduct the interview is to use a three-step process sometimes called the S-B-I Model, which stands for Situation-Behavior-Impact. The Center for Creative Leadership created the S-B-I model, which is used as a tool for giving and receiving feedback, but is also an effective framework for behavioral interviewing questions. For example, if perseverance is a key competency for a leasing consultant position, the manager may want to determine how effective the candidates are at overcoming objections and closing the sale.

Even if candidates don’t have previous leasing or sales experience, they may have related work and life experiences where they have had to exhibit perseverance. An example of a behavioral interviewing question for this competency using S-B-I may be: “Tell me about a time when you persuaded someone to see another point of view. What was the situation? How did you respond (behavior) and what was the outcome (impact)?”

To fairly and accurately assess candidates’ interview performances, organizations should establish an interview rating system and each interviewer should rate the candidate’s capability for the core competencies based on the interview. Next, interviewers should discuss their findings and compare their ratings.

The process of preparing for this discussion will help the interviewers to be more disciplined and objective in their assessments, as they will have to explain the reasons for their ratings.
anyone ready for a sales position, she says. For maintenance or custodial positions, Hunter says she looks at trade schools, auto mechanics, the Job Corps, hotel maintenance and self-employed technicians.

Hunter adds that Southern Management has a strong training program, “so wherever we find people with the right motivation, outlook and attitude, we can train them to work for our company.”

Training for Old and New

The strengths of mortgage, retail, food service and hospitality employees come to the fore when the economy is down, competition is fierce and rents stagnate. Waiting lists for available apartments have disappeared, Davis says, and the competition to hold the price and gain market share is intense.

As competition has increased, closing leases has become more important, especially in California, the UDR executive says. Apartment companies are clearly focusing on employees who can make a sale and on creating commission or compensation packages that motivate them. But because companies are looking outside the apartment industry, training new hires is key.

UDR is tweaking its training program to focus on sales and service techniques, Davis says. This modification should help sales employees at UDR catch up to any newer employees who bring stronger sales backgrounds.

FYI

See the April 2009 issue of units magazine for “Corps Competency,” which details how NAA Education Institute partnered with a technical school in South Carolina to help develop trained maintenance technicians. Contact NAA’s Jeffrey Lee at jeffreylee@naahq.org for details.
Mercy Housing’s training program has to take a different approach. As a non-profit company, staff knowledge of compliance with different government programs is a must. “Some people who may have a background in conventional property management may have a hard time learning the nuances of affordable housing,” Sherfield says. To address this, the company supports longer training periods for new hires.

Training is particularly important for onsite staff, Sherfield says. Even if they come with customer service skills, employees from other industries still need to learn about apartments. Support roles such as accounting and IT, on the other hand, “can be filled from any industry because the skills are more consistent from field to field,” she says.

A good training program can prepare an employee for his or her apartment career if the employee has a healthy attitude, willingness to learn, flexibility and an openness to try new things. The “attitude factors” are most important, Sherfield explains.

Whether employees previously sold mortgages, cars, food or hotel services, “the biggest thing for me has always been to always be looking,” Sherfield says. “You never know where you will run into someone who will be accommodating, efficient and effective in their work, which is more significant than the kind of work they are being effective in.”

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