

Digital marketing agencies struggle to retain skills

By Caryn Pillar

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Digital marketing companies are finding it hard to attract and retain skills as the demand for talent grows globally.



Source: www.unsplash.com

Finding the right skills

A big challenge has been the rapid rise in digital marketing with many companies deciding they would bring the role in-house.

Demand for great digital specialists quickly saw senior, experienced skills able to pick and choose positions and many agencies struggled to hold onto their seniors and team leads. This was even more evident when it came to the very scarce skills, such as data scientists, analytics specialists, paid media specialists, and particularly account directors with paid media and tech experience.



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South Africans are known for their great work ethic, friendly disposition and ability to fit into almost any cultural environment. What's more, some of the finest digital skills in the world are nurtured locally. However, this competitive advantage can also create real challenges for local people leaders.

Remote working during the pandemic meant global companies could offer dollar- or euro-based salaries 20 to 30% above local market related figures, and still save a good deal on their wage bills. This required us to get creative and really lean into our strengths.

The most obvious advantage was the company's ability to create a mobile workforce and in this instance a global one.



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Rather than losing skills to competitors or even clients, we now enable our teams to apply for jobs across all 22 global offices. We even help with relocation costs and adjust salaries to accommodate the local cost of living. In addition, senior team members can opt to live globally and still work for our local operations and we also allow staff to spend a few months at a time at some of the global offices, while fulfilling their roles for the South African entity.

To complement this we launched the Ignite Platform, which upskills staff through intensive training, including internal courses and certified external courses and degrees. This looks great on their CVs, but also enables them to apply for the sought after positions in New York, London, Amsterdam, Singapore, Buenos Aires and 17 other appealing destinations.

The big win in this approach is that the South African operations also have access to great international skills and with Cape Town now seen as a top global lifestyle destination, we have clearly benefited.



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People choose to work with organisations which reflect their values

While all of these changes and new initiatives appeal across the generations, we have found that the more flexible approach really lands well with younger team members who are looking for a company that is much more mindful of their individual life and career goals.

It's also been important for us to acknowledge just how varied the qualification and age demographics are within our teams. Because digital doesn't necessarily require a degree and there can be a lot of on-the-job learning, our leadership must be particularly mindful of how they choose to engage with their teams. They must find ways that deliver optimal outcomes, while nurturing an engaged and positive workforce, many of whom have very different expectations than was the case just two years ago.

And it is here that we spend a lot of time working with both our management and key leadership teams. Aspects like leading with integrity and how important it is to have great change management skills are high on the agenda. Hybrid work and leading through a pandemic have placed a big burden on our teams and trust and empathy have been cornerstones of leading through uncertainty.

Finally, we simply have to come to terms with the fact that we will lose some skills into which we have sunk a good deal of investment. But this shouldn't deter us. As in all things, if you are acting with the best interests of your team at heart, they will recognise this, and your efforts could outweigh many other attractive offers – even from organisations with much deeper pockets.

ABOUT CARYN PILLAR

People Officer at Incubeta Holdings (Pty) Ltd
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