



Tackling the Promo Products Labor Shortage

Does the industry really
need to 'adapt or die'?



Why is Hiring Still So Difficult?

The U.S. labor shortage shows no signs of easing up. The Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that **job openings in the U.S. continue to remain at an all-time high of over 11 million.**

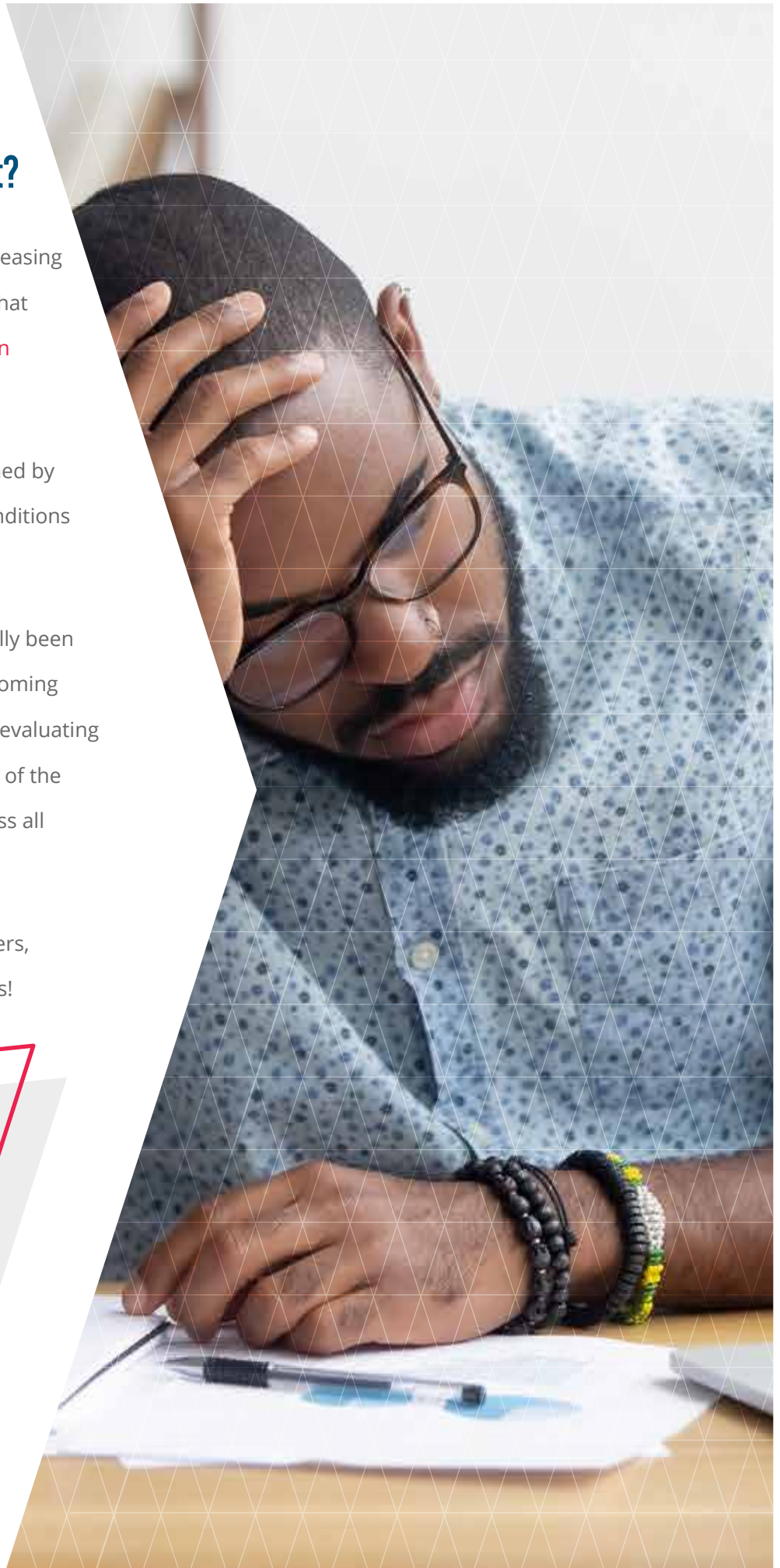
Employers and business owners are alarmed by this phenomenon given that economic conditions are continuing to boom post-covid.

Many analysts believe that what has actually been created is a perfect storm – business is booming after an enforced lull, many people are re-evaluating their careers and leaving their jobs as part of the **'Great Resignation'**, and job openings across all sectors can't be filled.

It's proving to be a great time for job-seekers, but a really tough time for hiring managers!



The Promotional Products industry saw events cancelled in the blink of an eye.





It's a phenomenon that's especially felt in the **Promotional Products** industry. One of the hardest hit by Covid, the Promo industry saw events cancelled in the blink of an eye. The lifeblood of the sector was literally taken away overnight and, as a consequence, many businesses had to say goodbye to valued team members in order to stay afloat.

“

The pandemic has turned the labor market on its head, leaving job seekers with the upper hand and companies wringing their hands over a labor shortage that is endangering their ability to function.

Ranjay Gulati
Fortune

However, now that the industry is getting back on track, promotional products and branded merchandise are once again in demand, and that means as the economy grows, distributors and suppliers are rethinking both how they hire for scale and how they attract the best talent. What many leaders are finding, however, is that scaling without the right systems and people in place has become more difficult than ever before. Moreover, best-in-class talent now has **the upper hand** when it comes to their new job requirements.



Hiring for
Promo Products
takes Time &
Expertise



To many outsiders looking in, the Promo industry looks relatively simple — it's just ordering a bunch of branded pens and mugs for the annual company bash, right?

Wrong! What many people don't realize is that there's so much more to branded merch than meets the eye.

It's an area of marketing where the **'digital' meets the 'physical'** and where employees need to understand everything from design principles, to printing processes, to logistics and fulfillment.

Then there's dealing with clients, responding to requirements in a matter of minutes, and coming up with viable alternatives if certain products aren't available.

And, of course, there's understanding the global supply chain – how the mechanics of supply work and why global events right now have a major impact on the delivery of products for an event in Boise, Idaho.

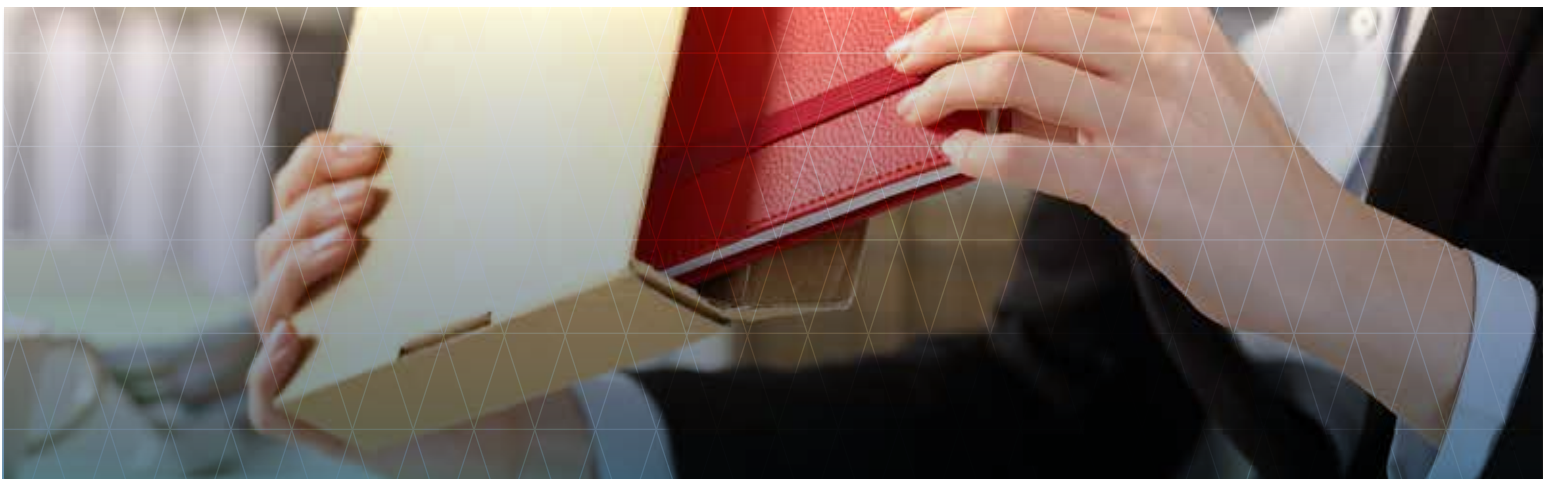
The skills required to work in Promo are varied and wide-ranging, meaning finding the right people for open roles is even more complex.



It's not easy for one person to be creative, client-focused and detail-oriented all at once.

It's really almost impossible to find all of these traits in one person. Someone may possess one or two, but finding someone with all three traits is like trying to find a needle in a haystack.

Mike Harper
Summit Group





Add to this conundrum the fact that all the complex products, processes, and supplier options in the industry demand a simplified way of working, one that matches the fast-paced rhythm of deadlines and functions in a way that makes your team smarter, faster, and their work transparent, regardless of where they are located.

On top of this, there's no official education or training for the industry. It's no wonder that managers are struggling to hire. There are plenty of online courses covering the digital specialisms of marketing – for example, SEO or email automation. But try to find resources covering the Promo Products industry and you're likely to draw a blank.

“ Promotional Products just isn't a course you can take in college – even in the marketing degrees!

Mel Bettua
HPG



What this all means, of course, is that those team members left holding the bag are finding themselves juggling many different roles and getting too bogged down in the day-to-day admin.

The Sales Director is chasing down orders. The Head of Operations is finding replacement products. The CEO is processing invoices!

Not only does no one know what the other person is doing, the lack of people and process slow everything down, and to grow in this industry there's only one speed: FAST.

**As tough as things may seem
today, we have to remember
we've recovered and rebuilt
this industry before.**

David Nicholson
PCNA



Promotional Products — it's Time to **'Think Differently'**



There's a great quote from the team at Harvard Business Review that we keep coming back to...

“ A successful recruiting strategy starts with acknowledging that you won't solve your current hiring challenges by applying the solutions of the past.

Harvard Business Review

If ever there was a time to 'think differently' and adopt new strategies, it's now. And these new strategies don't have to be overwhelming or radical. Very often they can be solutions that are staring us in the face!

Tackling the hiring challenges in the Promo industry while growing is about amping your internal ordering systems to meet today's complex and fast-paced demand, as well as adding that extra layer of support for our teams.

Hiring the right people and harnessing the right processes is about freeing up our more senior team members to do what they do best – whether that's selling more, being more creative in our problem-solving, or optimizing financial processes. And it's still about identifying duplicate work in your system, where unnecessary tasks can be eliminated or delegated to others and how these team members can offer support for day-to-day operations.

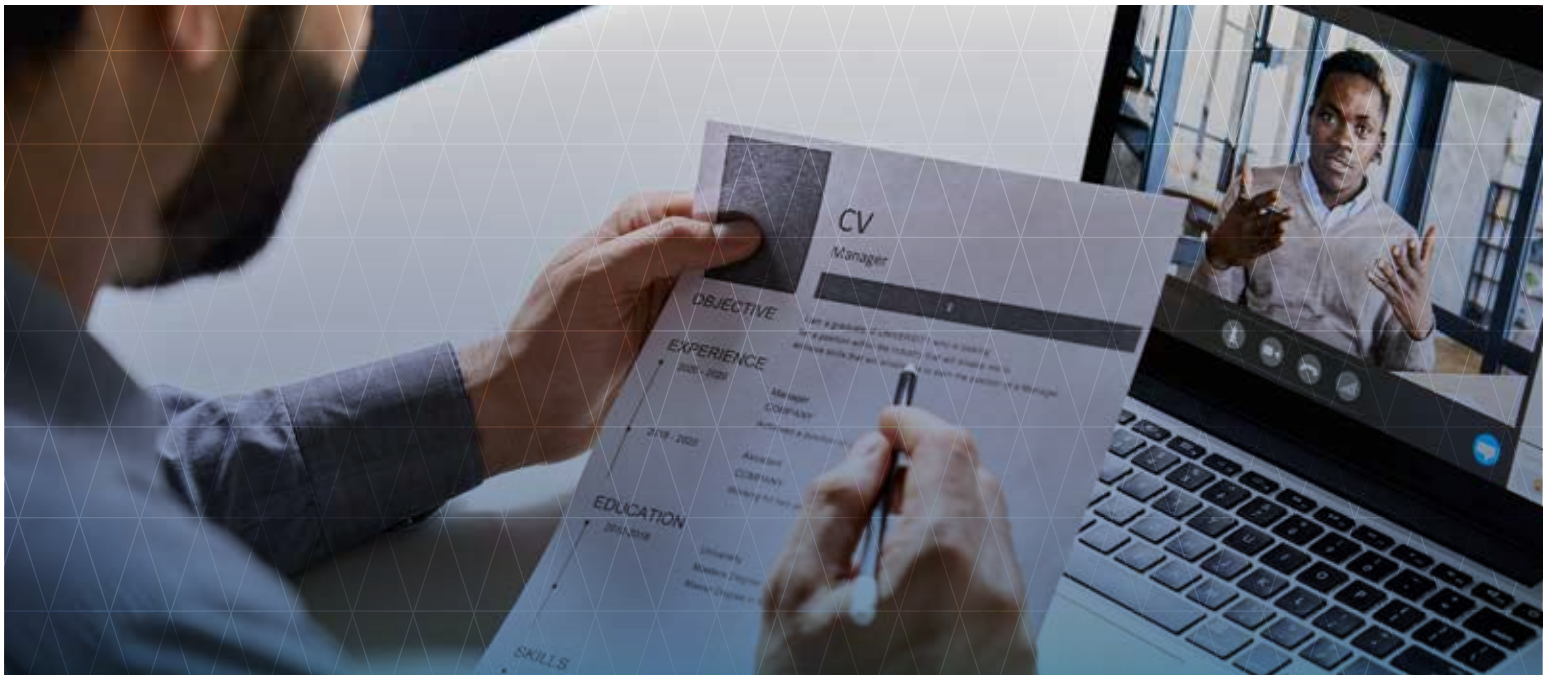


Here are the top 4 things we can all be doing now to tackle the Promo Products labor shortage and fill our open roles!

1 Take advantage of the boom in remote working

One of the positives to come out of the past couple of years has been the boom in remote working and the opportunities this has brought in terms of the global talent pool.

Team members no longer need to be sat next to each other in an office. They can work seamlessly together from opposite sides of the world, communicating via online chat tools and collaboration software, and, oftentimes, getting the work done more quickly too.



Tapping into this global talent pool also means you can afford to be more creative when it comes to the number of roles you need to hire for.

You can ‘think big’ when it comes to adding that extra layer of support for your team and not be limited to the one or two roles you had open.

Take a Sales Admin role for example. Hiring for this type of resource in the U.S. could mean just one full-time role. But take it outside the U.S. and you’re potentially looking at two or three new team members!



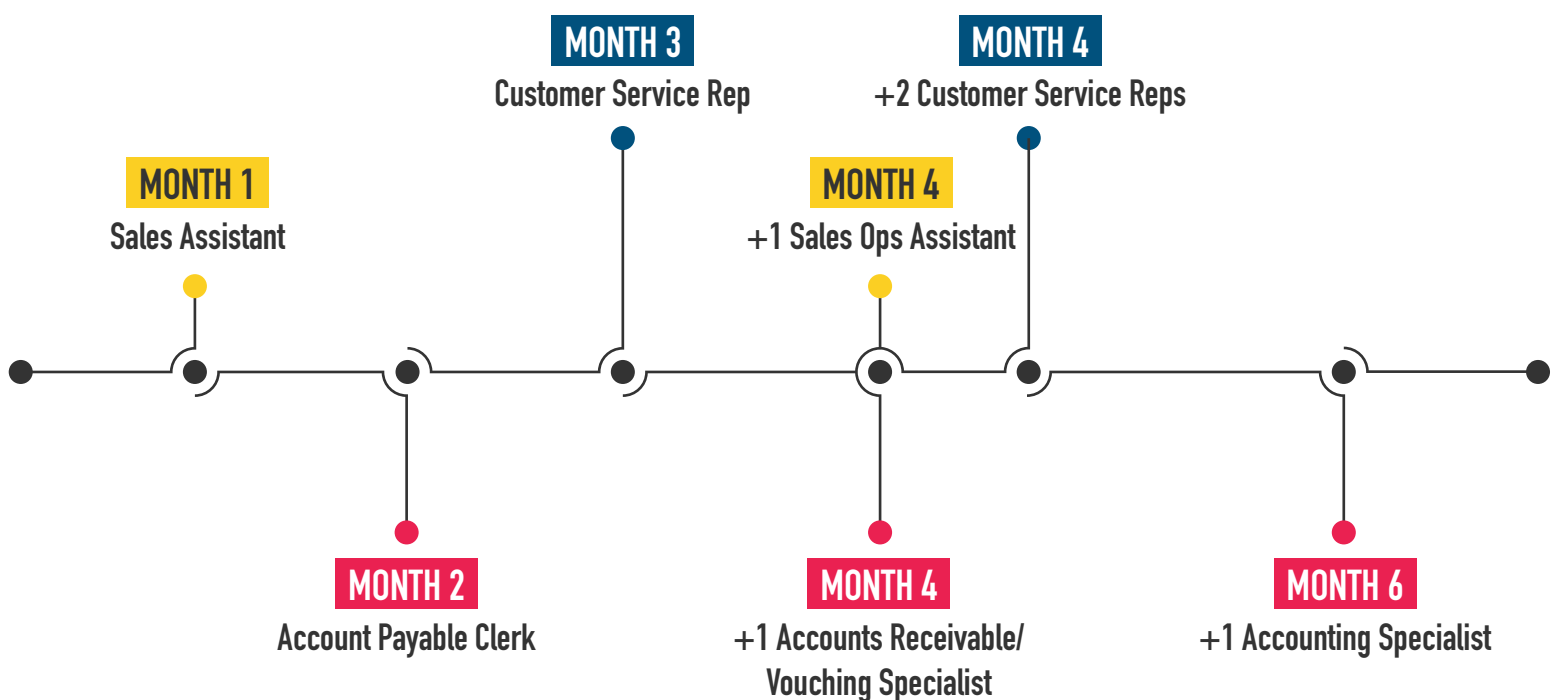
“ Our industry can definitely afford to get more creative in hiring and managing remotely. Early 2019, we only had three people working remote. Now we only have six people out of 20 total that actually come into the office.

Ron Baellow
Bright Ideas

Remote talent often takes a lot less time to find and recruit too. Outsourcing specialists and talent platforms now abound that reduce the recruiting window to a matter of days or weeks.

In the time it can usually take to find and hire someone in the U.S., you could have hired multiple outsourced team members and got your business growth trajectory back on track.

Take a look at this example from a leading U.S. distributor. In just six months, they took on a total of eight new remote team members – could you imagine doing the same with all that recruitment red tape in the U.S.?





2 Implement an integrated & seamless system so you can grow efficiently

But what about managing a (now) global team?

Enter: the right system.

The modern team today can be located in San Francisco or Saskatchewan, in Maryland or Manila, location no longer matters. And having a modern system that allows you full transparency into everyone's work, anytime, no matter where they are located or their role in the company, empowers today's entrepreneur to recruit and hire global talent.

From prospecting to presentation to orders, production, reporting, invoicing and even networking with teammates and suppliers: you need a modern tech system and a global solution that will scale with your growing team and your growing sales.

“ Whether it’s being able to flex key functions to a work-from-home configuration, or having the ability to engage with customers remotely but effectively, COVID-19 has forced the promo industry to take a crash course in doing business virtually.

Chris Anderson
CEO of Top 40 supplier HPG



3 Identify the tasks that can be taken off your plate

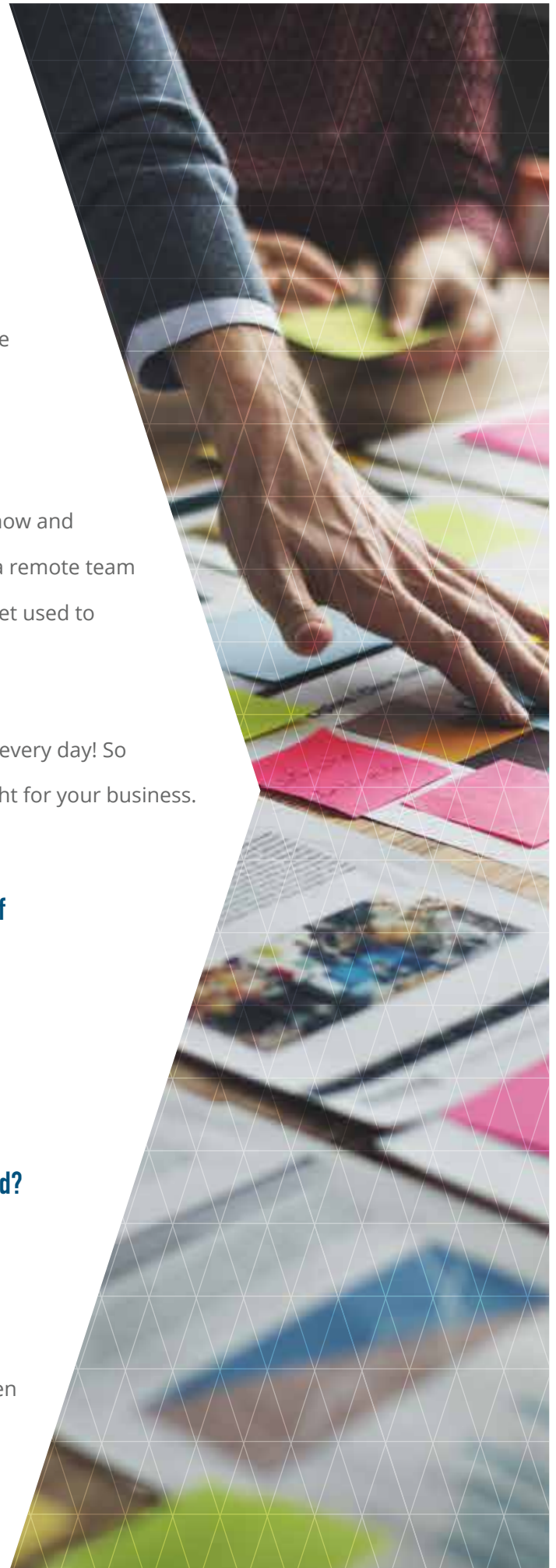
One of the quickest ways to get started with outsourced or remote team members is to give them those activities that you shouldn't be doing!

You know all those day-to-day admin tasks that you've come to know and love over recent months? Well, they are perfect for delegating to a remote team member so that they can quickly learn about your business and get used to how you like to do things.

Identifying these tasks can be tricky though if you're fighting fires every day! So here's a handy checklist to first of all work out if outsourcing is right for your business.

- ☒ Will my business run more efficiently to meet the demands of customers with outsourcing?
- ☒ Can my best employees focus on what they do best if we outsource non-important tasks?
- ☒ Are there workload or burnout issues that need to be resolved?
- ☒ Is there an area where I can save money by outsourcing?

If you've answered yes to one or more of the above questions, then well done, you've taken your first step to identifying how you and your team can hire remotely!





The next step is to identify all those highly repetitive and mechanical tasks that are draining your time. For example:



Sales Operations Activities

- Copying and pasting data from emails to your CRM
- Searching through LinkedIn profiles according to set criteria
- Updating and cleaning out records in your sales database



Accounting Activities

- Data entry done on a daily, weekly or monthly basis
- Processing invoices
- Chasing down payments



Customer Service Activities

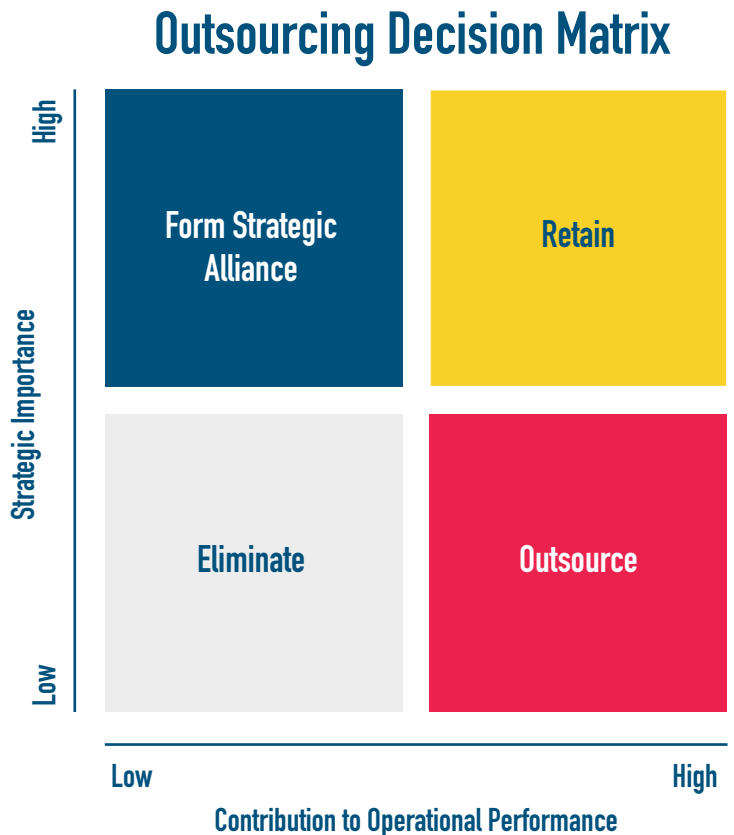
- Processing customer requests
- Sourcing new and alternative products
- Updating project management systems according to client briefs



Then, select one or two of these activities to get started.

If you're having trouble working out which ones to select, then you may find the '**Outsourcing decision matrix**' useful. This has been developed by David Barnes to help managers and entrepreneurs categorize their tasks and work out whether or not they should be outsourced. Simply place each of your tasks identified above into one of the four quadrants of the matrix.

Source: Barnes, D. (2008) Operations Management: An International Perspective



Once you've selected your one or two activities, then the next step is to 'map the process' for each one. But don't be scared off by this mapping idea, it doesn't mean you have to plot out roles and responsibilities against swim lanes and the like! In fact, there's a much easier way that takes just a few minutes of your time.

The next time you or your team member come to do this activity, simply record yourself doing it, with a very basic voiceover of what you're doing at each stage. Don't worry about it being polished – you're not presenting to the board. Just capture in real-time what it is you're actually doing and voila, you've mapped out the process! Now when it comes to training your new team member on what the task is, you can just have them watch the recording.

These simple steps are the very ones we use at Delegate CX. We've used this approach countless times to onboard both new clients and new team members and they are extremely effective at working out what can be delegated to a remote team member. What's more, they can be done quickly and easily in order to free up time in your packed schedule.

“ The prioritization process that Delegate CX uses is fantastic. It really helped me understand what tasks could be taken off my plate and outsourced. Before working with the team, I just didn't know where to start!

Nick Murray
HYGO Branding



4 Let's make the Promotional Products industry sexy again!

Whoever said that the Promo Products industry wasn't sexy didn't understand just how powerful promotional products and branded merchandise can be!

For example, did you know that nearly 100% of consumers say they are willing to go out of their way to get a promotional product?

Or that 90% of people who receive a promotional product can recall the name of the brand afterwards?

That's the power of branded merch.

Problem is, it's something we all know about within the industry, but it doesn't have quite the same reputation outside the industry. Hence the difficulty with attracting new people and hiring new talent.

It's high time we communicated just how powerful and innovative the industry actually is.



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PPI 2019 Consumer Study

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**PR0motion
Marketing, LLC**

[commonsku capture it perfectly in a recent blog article](#) explaining how the industry is undergoing something of a quiet revolution – namely that brands all across the globe are waking up to the power of branded merchandise when it comes to 'brand collaborations' and 'influencer kits.' We're not talking about cheap conference swag here, more the high-end merchandise that speaks to a brand's values and core identity.



“ The swag revolution is real... From solo brands to indie brands to major brands – everyone is getting in on the merch game.

Bobby Lehew
commonsku

The potential of promo products doesn't stop there. As **Sterling Wilson of Pop Promos** explains, “The future of this industry will most definitely be with high-end products that speak to a company's brand and overall strategy. They won't just be a last-minute add-on; they'll be integral to the overall planning process and marketing strategy.”

Still not convinced? Well, take a look at how branded merchandise is even featuring in the Metaverse.

As **ASI set out in a recent article**, promo products could take the form of 'digital skins' and 'virtual fashion' – something that the likes of Fortnite are already engaged in. Then there's the world of NFTs and virtual events where promotional products could take on a whole new embodiment.

As the article goes on to explain, the Promo industry has a real opportunity to take advantage of going forward, “Though brands are finding value in purely digital assets like NFTs and in-game fashion, the true sweet spot for the promotional products industry may be through the intersection of physical and digital goods.”

The article clarifies: “For example, a company could mail out a pair of branded socks or other item in advance of a virtual event or trade show. Then a QR code on the packaging could direct the recipient to a place where they could purchase or redeem an NFT of the digital version of the socks, which could then be worn at the virtual event.”

It's this innovative future that needs to be communicated to the next generation of promo products hires – a future that inspires younger people to get into the industry and not just see it as an outdated way of doing marketing. In turn, these new hires can bring a fresh perspective and ensure the industry continues to thrive, innovate and grow.



“ We need younger people to bring a different lens to the industry. We need fresh, new ideas and insights coming into the marketplace. Older generations can indeed teach the foundations, but younger cohorts need to ensure the survival of promotional products.

Mel Bettua
HPG

Tackling the labor shortage isn't just a challenge facing the Promo Products industry, but it's one made all the harder by the nature of the industry itself. Nevertheless, there are proactive things we can do to create streamlined efficiencies and tackle the shortage to set up our teams for success.

From looking outside our usual geos for our next team members, to implementing systems that scale with growth, to celebrating the amazing potential our sector has for the future, there's a huge opportunity available to Promo Products companies right now and it's time we grabbed that opportunity with both hands!

DCX

+



Want to find out more about the teams
behind this guide?

For hiring and talent, head over to the
Delegate CX website.

For order management systems to scale
your business, visit **commonsku.com**

