

# Copier Careers Article

## The Short-Staff Blues: Costs of Waiting To Hire

Perhaps your dealership has recently dealt with the departure of a key sales representative, a productive service technician, or an experienced manager. In each case, your first reaction may be a form of shock or denial: few businesspeople are thrilled with the prospect of redirecting their already taxed energies into the recruiting, advertising, and/or networking necessary to replace that departing employee.

It's true that hiring can be a time-consuming necessity for your business. It's also an endeavor that always involves some risk. But have you thought much about the many costs of not hiring to fill a vacant position, or of delays in filling a new position that would satisfy a clear business need?

There are many important reasons to get into "hiring mode" and take decisive action quickly when you need to, and this article explores those reasons in terms of both damage control and opportunity cost for your business. How well you are able to keep customers and staff satisfied, while keeping the freedom to pursue new, profitable opportunities, may depend on how quickly and efficiently you hire new staff members.

### With Holes in Your Workforce, Can You Compete?

Although we can't know which NFL teams will play in the next Super Bowl, one thing is certain: both teams will put 11 players on the field at a time. Imagine if a player were injured and one of these coaches decided simply to play the game with 10 players instead. It wouldn't be hard to predict the outcome, whether the lost player were on offense or defense, a superstar or workmanlike role player.

No matter how much extra effort other team members make, or who is willing to try to "play out of position" while still covering their own assignments, this disadvantage will determine the outcome. The under-manned team might hang in there for a few plays, but the weakness will be quickly exposed. We can easily picture the fatigue, inability to execute the game plan, additional injuries, and other problems that would follow.

This is an extreme analogy of course, but doesn't the competitive nature of your business suggest you should do everything possible to field a full squad at all times? Expecting other employees to fill the holes when you leave a key position open is not that much different from playing a high-level competitive sport with only part of a team.

### Protecting Your Assets through Fast Action

What are your most valuable business assets? You may own one or more buildings and a significant amount of IT equipment. Vehicles? Inventory? These are certainly valuable assets, but most executives and managers will answer this question by identifying uniquely human assets – customers, staff, and your collective skill and knowledge are really at the heart of your business success.

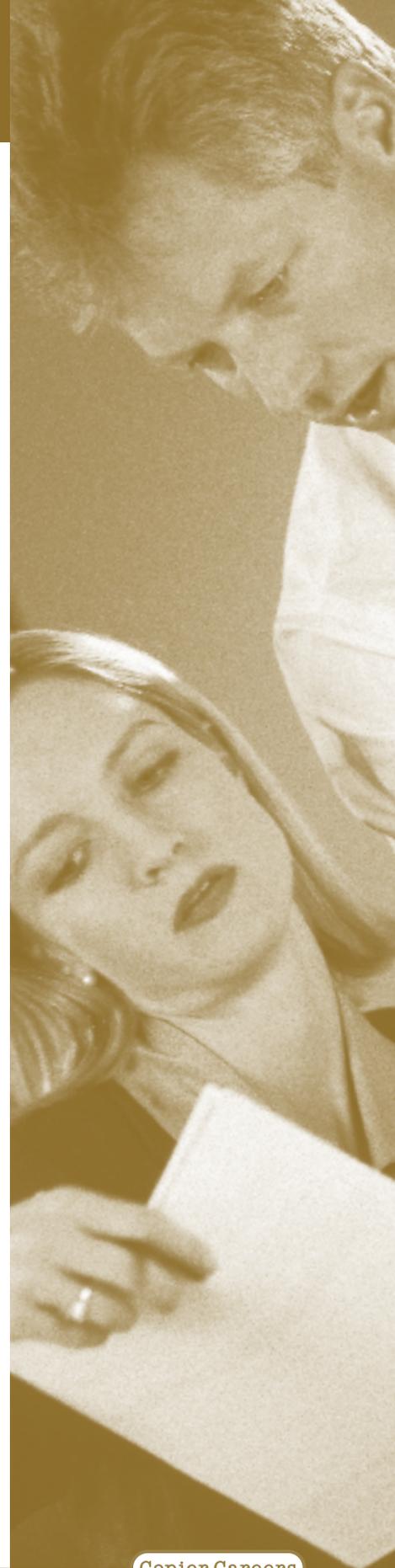
Let's consider the destructive impact of not hiring on the one asset you absolutely have to protect: your customer base. For example, when a valued customer loses contact with their designated sales representative, his lifeline to your business must be maintained and restored. Even if contact with the departing rep was infrequent, that customer's confidence in your business is at serious risk if you do not quickly demonstrate your continued commitment to their satisfaction.

It's universal, but especially true in the copier industry: you don't get by with any type of visible performance decline for very long. No excuse, however valid, is sufficient if customer needs are going unmet. Your most loyal customers may lose patience and faith in you, and eventually look elsewhere (to your competition) if they sense that no one is available to deal with their needs. On the other hand, if you show customers you can perform damage control in the short term, and even upgrade the position with a little time, you may turn this problem around and ultimately strengthen the relationship.

### Damage Control on the Service Side

On the critical service side of your business, the damage to customer satisfaction and confidence can be even more serious. If your response time suffers noticeably when you lose a service technician, customer downtime and frustration will quickly become an issue you can't ignore.

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In addition, maintenance-intensive pieces of equipment like copiers and printers tend to have “personalities,” which is one reason why a service technician with direct experience at any given customer location is so highly valued. Not only does that experience solidify the relationship, it saves time on both ends in the identification of problems and solutions specific to that customer. The sooner you are able to make a new, productive hire with the ability to learn your customers’ needs and solve common problems efficiently, the more likely you will keep your customer base intact.

## Human Costs Are Business Costs

It’s reasonable to expect other staff members to pitch in and pull together when you lose a key contributor. In most cases, they will respond with extra time and effort—up to a point. However, just like the 10-player NFL offense or defense, you can’t expect your staff to sustain the extra work and cover the extra responsibility for long.

Can each of your remaining service technicians handle an extra call or two each day? Possibly. Chances are, though, that your “superstars” are already at or beyond capacity, and that any service technician will expect some form of additional compensation for the extra effort.

Regardless of whether you incur the direct financial costs of overtime wages or added incentives, you will pay for staying understaffed any longer than you must. According to an extensive 2005 survey of service technicians conducted by Copier Careers, a leading recruitment firm ([www.copiercareers.com](http://www.copiercareers.com)), 87 percent of techs are already reporting some interest in moving on from their current companies. Their most commonly reported reasons were the quest for “more job stability” and “less stress.” With dealers already challenged to retain these valuable employees, pushing them harder is very likely to send some over that edge – producing an even more critical staffing problem or, at a minimum, serious staff morale issues.

## Isn’t There A Financial Up-side?

Running a “lean” business is a worthy goal, but running short of human resources can really hurt you. When you have difficulty making a hire, and the position remains open for a lengthy period, you can try to take comfort in the fact that at least you are not paying salary or hourly wages during this time. You can also try to be relieved that you don’t yet have to worry about transition or training as long as there is no one to introduce, orient, or train.

Giving this a little more consideration, though, we know that these are short-term gains at best, and shortsighted thinking at worst. Each business day that your company remains understaffed, you must deploy resources in ways you ordinarily wouldn’t. Instead of delighting customers with fast, efficient service, you may have techs scrambling from one call to the next and spending more time negotiating unfamiliar circumstances.

If it’s your sales department that’s going understaffed, you are probably missing key opportunities and foregoing the thorough follow-up that keeps business coming your way. In summary, damage control is very costly, in obvious and less visible ways, and you need to be fully staffed and working toward maximum efficiency whenever possible.

## Operating Short of Staff Simply Doesn’t Pay

Another key issue here is what you don’t do – because you can’t – when you attempt to operate without enough productive employees. The definition of “opportunity cost” provided at [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com) is, in part, “The true cost of something is what you give up to get it. This includes not only the money spent... but also the economic benefits that you did without...”

This economic concept doesn’t only mean that it’s important to make careful, strategic buying decisions of hard goods and services. We can apply the same idea to hiring—again, whether you need to replace an employee or add one. When you devote your energies to short-staff damage control over a lengthy period, what do you give up? If the answers include, as this article suggests:

- **Customer satisfaction;**
- **Employee morale and loyalty; and**
- **Efficient use of your existing resources,**

then it’s logical to include that there are few more beneficial ways to spend your time than actively pursuing candidates that will put your organization back on a level playing field.

Making that hire requires a substantial investment, but the returns can be outstanding. Once you’ve brought the new person on board, employees and managers across your organization (including yourself) can direct more time and energy applying their own skills to their own responsibilities. Even though some training may be required to get your new employee up to “full speed,” the individual will likely also add new ideas and approaches to your business mix. People are the real assets in business, and success can depend on keeping enough of them on our side. If you’re successful in doing this, you’ll be better positioned to compete on the highest level.