MANY SPA OWNERS are finding the ability to meet the increasing demand for services is limited by the supply of qualified, job-ready therapists. This is the downside to healthy growth in the spa industry. In fact, according to the SPA 2011 U.S. Spa Industry Study, the number of spas has grown from 4,140 in 1999 to 19,900 in 2010 in the U.S. alone.

“This is driving unprecedented demand for certified and licensed spa therapists, spa managers, and support staff,” indicates Su Gibson, spa management lecturer at Conrad N. Hilton College at the University of Houston and organizer of the Houston Spa Association.

“Our industry is also expanding globally,” adds Prio Zores, director and CEO of Illy Luxe Beauty Therapy College in Melbourne, Australia. “Today’s workers are highly mobile, providing them with greater opportunity for locating internationally. Savvy therapists access employment opportunities through web recruitment to obtain international positions. Also, Generation Y gets bored easily and sees movement as a way toward greater stimulation and career advancement.”

“It’s also extremely difficult to go outside the industry to find workers. Spa work is so specialized, investing the necessary time and money to train inexperienced hands-on therapists from unrelated industries is not cost-effective or time-efficient. Quite simply, schools are not graduating enough qualified applicants to keep up with spa growth.

Because each spa is unique, it can be challenging to find applicants who not only have the education, skills, certifications, licenses, and availability required, but also have the right temperament, attitude, and nature to attend to your spa customers and fit in with the spa team.

This can make some spa directors feel desperate to fill a position, especially when it has been vacant for some time. However, resist the temptation.

“Don’t fill the position with the first applicant who meets the basic requirements if he or she is not exactly what you’re seeking,” advises Gibson. “In some cases, this may turn out to be a good choice, but usually, the applicant may not be a good fit for the spa team now or in the future. It doesn’t have all the desirable attributes managers had hoped for.”

“Hiring anyone who can do a job is a bad idea,” agrees Angela Cottright, owner of Spa Gregorie’s which has multiple locations in Newport Beach, Santa Margarita and Del Mar, California. "When we lower our standards, we ultimately pay the price."

Finding the Talent You Need
Being thorough in candidate selection is the best way to reduce employee turnover and ensure smooth, uninterrupted operations. It costs, however, require time, patience, and knowing exactly what your needs are in terms of personnel. According to Gibson, traits that are usually good in any spa environment are a collaborative and caring nature, responsibility, and dedication to both providing the best spa experience to the client as well as contributing to the company’s growth.

An entrepreneurial spirit is not necessary, but if the manager or director can channel that drive into the spa’s performance and continue to provide challenges and career opportunities for the type of employee,” she says. "Some typical warning signs of a poor candidate might be overtly boastful, unwillingness to undergo additional training, insensitivity in availability, and lack of enthusiasm for the spa or any of the tasks associated with the position for which they are applying.”

Partnering with Schools and Institutions:
An effective way to find qualified spa staff is by establishing relationships with local and national schools who train students going into hospitality and spa-related fields. Some of these facilities have placement offices that will help students find internships and job opportunities.

Aromatherapy class at Conrad N. Hilton College at the University of Houston.
STAFF SHORTAGE

"Invite the local college to bring their students in for tours," says Zoitos. "This is a very effective way to promote a steady stream of future staff. Even though our college is located in Melbourne, we have recently established an internship program with Spa Hayman on Hayman Island, a luxury resort located in North Queensland 3.5 hours from Melbourne by air."

Also, he adds, even if local colleges don't have the highest standard of training, spas can collaborate with the schools to upgrade courses and enhance the quality of training so they can graduate suitable future employees.

Stay in touch with instructors and recent graduates and let them know about your current and future needs. "Local beauty schools have an alumni database full of potential employees," says Juanye Berry, director of spa education for Belus Academy located in Pomona, California. "You can bring in your top performers into your spa on externships. This way you can learn your culture and values and when they graduate, you can immediately hire 'experienced' employees who meet your needs."

Curriculum varies from college to college. At Conrad N. Hilton College, for example, an introduction to spa management course is offered every semester; other courses such as spa wellness and product development, wellness trends in hospitality, spa concept design and spa administration are offered on an annual basis.

Did you find it to be difficult to find qualified therapists to hire in 2011?

Belus Academy also provides an advanced curriculum that consists of training and classes that are not part of the regular program. "This keeps staff in the field and our alumni up to speed with the latest trends and trends," says Berry. "We also partner with UC-Irvine to promote its online spa and hospitality management program.

Keeping the Talent

Because high staff turnover rates are an ongoing challenge in the spa industry, focusing on staff retention may be a more effective strategy than recruitment. This reduces costs associated with the recruitment, hiring, and training of new staff, as well as potential lost revenue if clients are turned away because the position is vacant.

"Be sure that scheduling allows therapists to achieve suitable work-life balance so they don't burn out too quickly—this is especially true for Generation Y therapists," says Alex Zoitos of Elly Lukas Beauty Therapy College.

"Motivating and retaining a therapist is a unique challenge because the monetary reward is usually not the most important factor," says Zoitos. "Recognition, respect, training, and career development opportunities rate highly when graduates are asked about their expectations. Also, be sure that scheduling allows therapists to achieve suitable work-life balance.

"All humans crave attention and recognition, including spa staff," says Conright. "Be sure to share positive feedback from guests. Ask staff how they are doing, know about their families and personal lives and show genuine interest."

HIRING TIP: Although it’s common in the industry—Spa Gibson, spa management lecturer at the Conrad N. Hilton College, recommends against riding other spas for top staff. It’s quite possible that workers who are willing to be poached by you will not be loyal to your spa either when other spas come calling," she warns.

ISPA recognizes that one important solution to creating qualified spa professionals is through training and education. With a vast list of resources like the Financial Management for Spa, Retail Management for Spas: A Comprehensive Introduction, DPA also partners with the American Hotel & Lodging Educational Institute to make these resources accessible. Visit digital Pulse at experiencespa.com to view the list of schools that use ISPA’s educational resources.

Ongoing professional development is also a big motivator because it reflects commitment to employees and provides them with additional skills and experiences that they would otherwise find hard to achieve.

"Spas need to offer a good training program to keep their staff motivated and fresh," says Berry. "There are so many new developments in our industry. It is vital to provide regular training, from vendors or outside institutions, to keep staff on the cutting edge of their craft, thereby providing better services to their clients and higher returns for the spa.

Hire the best people for your company—don’t settle for a candidate who “almost” fits.

"If you happen to find a candidate who is perfect and wants full-time work, but you only have a part-time need, find a way to hire the candidate anyway," recommends Gibson. "Or if you meet someone you think would be a great addition to your team but who isn’t available at the moment, stay in touch—things change quickly in the spa environment and you want that person to think of you first if a job change is imminent."

USE THE ISPA JOB BANK to post and access current open positions as well as overhead our database of resumes. Visit experience spa.com to access the job bank today.