

Top Tips for Keeping Your Top Talent in Place

BY JULIE BOS

Competitive salaries and stock options are no longer enough to keep employees productive, **satisfied** and **committed** to your organization's **success**. Consider these smart strategies to help your workforce stay put.



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YOU'VE SEEN IT HAPPEN BEFORE. An organization that pays top wages and offers great benefits loses a great employee to a competitor for no apparent reason. Of course, some employee turnover is normal, but you soon realize that compensation alone is not always enough.

Succeeding in an increasingly competitive economy while fighting the never-ending battle to retain highly skilled and motivated staff is a significant challenge indeed. A recent U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics study found that the average person born in the later years of the Baby Boom held 10 jobs with different employers from age 18 to 38. And the ramifications of this trend are far-reaching.

For one thing, job-hopping bodes poorly for organizational productivity. A recent study by the Hay Group found that offices with engaged employees were up to 43% more productive, based on comparisons of generated revenue.

The burden of a high turnover also takes a toll on company leaders, who are expected to achieve their goals regardless of staffing issues—and remaining employees, who are quickly frustrated with extra-heavy workloads.

Worse yet, the cost of employee turnover is high—often twice the employee's salary.

Engaged employees, on the other hand, will stay with the company, be an advocate for the organization and its products and services, and contribute to the bottom-line business success.

"Today's companies are struggling to really differentiate themselves from other employers," says Emily Sadlock, marketing manager at Rymax Marketing Services, Inc., a full-service incentive company and manufacturer's representative. "It's standard practice for employees to receive benefits, paid vacations and matches to their 401k plans; but now they're looking for something different—something that really draws them to a company."

But where do you start? Here are some top tips for making sure your top talent stays put.

Go Back to the Beginning

Often times, lack of employee engagement can be traced all the way back to where the problem began—the initial hire. Bringing the wrong person into a position is a misstep that can cost dearly. Worse yet, the problem is completely avoidable.

"Most of the time, the new employee didn't have the right information to decide if the company was a good fit for them, or the company didn't get the right information during the selection process to decide whether the candidate was the right fit," says JoAnn McMillan, COO, Assess Systems, a Bigby Havis Company. "Using the right selection process, behavioral interviews and assessments can all prevent these mistakes."

Be a More Active Partner in the Hiring Process

To avoid hiring hiccups, wise organizations also seek better communication with candidates during the hiring process—choosing to not only reveal more information about themselves, but encouraging candidates to do the same.

"Companies should think about selection as a process, devise better ways to communicate with applicants, and

make the whole process more engaging," says McMillan. "This could include providing realistic job previews, such as describing a day in the life on the job, sharing the corporate culture, providing quotes from department employees, or offering online videos that help applicants better understand the nature of the job."

"In return, companies can ask candidates to make some commitment during the process—like taking an online survey stating their willingness to perform the important job duties," she adds. "This makes them more engaged and committed from the very beginning—long before we bring them in for in-depth assessments to see if they have the right qualities and attributes to be successful."

Involve the Work Teams

If an employee will be working in a collaborative work team, look for ways to include that work team in the hiring process—maybe through a group interview or giving tours through the department.

Building a bridge between the new hire and the work group early on will help them feel like a part of the team from the start, explains McMillan. It also makes the team more committed to the success of that new employee.

Engaging Employees Long-Term

Keeping new-hires on board is only half of the challenge. You also need to engage and retain employees who have been with you for years.

For this to happen, employees need to see opportunities to grow, develop and be challenged in their job. This is true not only for professional/managerial employees, but also for hourly-level positions, as well.

"Many organizations are flatter now," explains McMillan. "There is no longer a path of 12 positions above employees for them to grow into over the course of their careers. Employees are very worried about becoming stagnant; but if you can help them grow, develop and become better at what they do, they'll be much more satisfied in

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Are Your Employees Engaged?

Check for These Behaviors

The primary behaviors of engaged employees are:

- Speaking positively about the organization to coworkers, potential employees and customers
- Having a strong desire to be a member of the organization
- Exerting extra effort to contribute to the organization's success

their current jobs.”

“The advantage of developing internal talent is that these employees already understand the organization and its culture—and are already committed to it,” adds McMillan. “If you can channel those opportunities and help them grow and develop, you’ve got a much better chance of retaining a workforce that is committed to the organization’s success.”

Use Assessments to Explore Employees’ Potential

One great way to evaluate employees’ career potential is through employee assessment tools. According to McMillan, more and more organizations are using them, and for good reason.

“These assessments are growing in popularity because they’re effective,” she says. “They do a great job helping companies mine the current workforce for people with high potential for certain jobs. And in the process of opening career possibilities, they can help employees feel more valued and appreciated.”

Make Mentoring a Priority

Companies that are successful at engaging and retaining their employees have also learned the art of coaching and mentoring.

“In the last year or two, we’ve had more and more clients ask for assistance in developing their managers to be better coaches and mentors,” says McMillan. “Almost everyone has a story about the best leader they ever worked for, and how it impacted their career. Today, people are trying to make leadership more systematic and engrained in the corporate culture, where every manager and supervisor is

expected to get involved in coaching and mentoring.”

“In fact, even in managers’ performance appraisals, they are being held more accountable for how well they are developing their people, much in the same way they are held accountable for their business results,” she says.

Prioritize Employee Recognition

Another way to set your organization apart is by demonstrating your clear-cut commitment to the workforce. Employee recognition programs are a great place to begin.

“Since service awards are largely a thing of the past, today’s companies are finding new ways to engage employees,” says Sadlock. “Many are turning to employee programs for spot recognition, meeting department (or corporate) goals, or successful completion of safety programs.”

“Many times an employee just wants to hear a simple ‘thank you’ every now and again,” she adds. “Incentive programs—including sales programs, recruiting programs, training programs, safety and wellness programs, as well as spot recognition and corporate gifts—are great ways to express appreciation, and carry a lot more weight when they are given outside of the annual review.”

Widen Your Reward Options

What’s the secret to keeping employee recognition programs attractive?

“You definitely need to keep the program and rewards fresh,” says Sadlock. “If the program gets stagnant, people will be immediately disengaged.”

“Obviously, employers aren’t mind readers and can’t always know what

employees want,” she adds. “Offering a wide choice of rewards is really important to employees, so they can choose a reward that they really want and can use. Think about it, when an employee is using his incentive cookware set every day, he’s got a daily, positive reminder of his employer and the incentive program.”

That’s another great reason to avoid those traditional corporate gifts (e.g., clocks, watches and plaques) altogether. Or, at the very least, freshen up the package by pairing that traditional gift with something they can really use—like points that can be redeemed for more practical gifts.

Go Online

Another important element in an employee rewards strategy is having an online component—a place where employees can check out the latest reward incentives. Rather than relying on a printed brochure or catalog, which often becomes out-of-date quickly, employees can always view the latest rewards online, which saves employee headaches—and wasted corporate printing dollars.

Update Your Communication Strategies

When communicating your employee recognition programs, don’t rely on outdated methods.

For example, considering the rise in telecommuters and mobile employees, you can no longer count on a poster in the hallway, copy room or cafeteria to do the complete job. Instead, pump your efforts into electronic communication—like e-blasts and intranet pages—that are guaranteed to reach all your employees, whenever (and wherever) they’re working. This strategy is also the choice for organizations that are going green, and committed to reducing paper waste.

When you’re crafting your electronic communications campaign, don’t forget to keep the messages and graphics fresh, to keep employee engagement high.

Think in Terms of Themes

Sadlock also recommends using a

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program theme.

“By tying your entire program into some sort of theme—such as a sports theme or Broadway theme—you can coordinate all your individual messages within that theme, while boosting employee association and recognition. You can use a mascot, have a launch party or decorate the whole building for your kickoff event. It’s just more fun and engaging for employees.”

Follow Up, Follow Through

Another common pitfall is this: You launch your program and get everyone excited, but the program falls flat due to lack of follow up.

To avoid this scenario, consider partnering with a company that can provide the guidance you need. The right partner can be invaluable in helping you create and execute your communication plan—including the crafting of the messages themselves,

the delivery and the frequency.

Take Action

Nothing is more discouraging to employees than being asked for their feedback and seeing no movement toward resolution of their issues. Even the smallest of actions taken to address concerns will let your staff know that their input is valued. Feeling valued will, in turn, boost morale, motivate and encourage future input. ■



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