

MANAGING FOR RETENTION

If you are concerned about high employee turnover at your place of business, you are not alone. A 1997 survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) found that 3 out of 4 employers are concerned about the number of voluntary resignations in their firms. In addition, SHRM's most often asked question from its members is how to reduce turnover.

Quick fixes to retention problems just don't work. Approaches like offering retention bonuses are, if implemented without other organizational changes, generally ineffective ways to curb turnover. The solutions to today's employee retention problems are related to organization culture - how you treat employees. The key is to make employees feel productive, satisfied, and valued so they're less receptive to other offers of employment.

In a recent survey titled "The National Study of the Changing Workplace", 3400 employees were asked what they considered very important characteristics of a job or workplace. The top three responses are as follows:

Open Communications - Simply put, employees want to be told what's going on in the company. A failure to pass on information is viewed by employees as intentional - a way to keep them in the dark, whether it is or not.

Opportunities to Balance Life - Today's employees are seeking quality of life. The "have it all" 80's are behind us, and there is a desire to return to simplicity in our lives.

Meaningful Work - Employees want more than a paycheck; they want to be able to say at the end of the day, I've helped someone or somehow made a difference.

In light of the findings from this survey, following are some retention tools worth trying.

50/50 Meetings Hold special breakfast or lunch meetings where management speaks half the time about what's happening in the company and employees have the floor for the other half to share their concerns, ideas, etc. This approach could also be incorporated into regular staff meetings.

MBWA The phrase Management By Walking Around was coined by management expert Tom Peters. Take some time out to "rub elbows" with employees at their work stations. Don't just observe - talk to them. They may not

talk back at first, but once the trust level is established, this provides a great opportunity for management to get feedback from employees. On a related note, eliminate class distinctions among employees. Things like reserved parking for management are resented by employees and easy to eliminate.

Other Methods to Obtain Employee Feedback Implement suggestion systems, employee committees, or conduct an employee opinion survey. One caveat, though, don't ask employees' opinions if you have no intention of making changes. In that case, you're better off not even asking.

Acknowledge Non-Work Priorities Accept and acknowledge the fact that for most people, work is not their number one priority. Employees want to be respected as people with families and other commitments, not just workers. This can be done by implementing such approaches as part-time or flextime scheduling, job sharing, telecommuting, or phased retirement.

Organizational Mission Employees want to have a sense of purpose and focus about their jobs. If your organization does not have a mission statement, develop one, and include employee input in the process. For a mission to be effective, it must be infused into the organizational culture. Talk about it (a lot), post it in the lobby, put it in the employee handbook. Do whatever it takes to weave the mission into the everyday work lives of employees. By having a meaningful mission that is understood and practiced, you will help employees see the big picture and make them realize they are more than just a cog in the big wheel of your company.

Foster pride in one's job Employees should be proud of their affiliation with your company and of the work they do. You can help develop the pride in your organization by developing the company into a good community citizen. By supporting community organizations and encouraging volunteerism in the name of the company, you will create a positive image for the organization that helps with both retaining and recruiting employees. Encourage employees to personalize their work. The best example I have heard of this occurred at a grocery store, where a bagger began putting a slip of paper containing an inspirational "thought for the day", which he wrote and signed, into the grocery sacks he filled. Customers caught on and stood in line to receive his messages, but his enthusiasm was also contagious to his co-workers, who adopted their own ways to personalize their jobs.

One final note - most of these approaches don't cost anything. Resolving retention problems requires management commitment, not company dollars.