

Become a retention specialist

By Jennifer Kahnweiler, March 2006
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Q: “Our medium sized company has been growing lately and we have seen more people leaving. The management team that I report to has mentioned a growing concern about our turnover. I see this as a real opportunity for me – no one else in our group is focused on retention, and I think this may be a chance to establish a unique role in our HR department. The problem is, I haven’t had any experience dealing with retention. Is there some training I can take to get up to speed?”

A: You are thinking like a leader. In your role as HR Manager you can support the management team by helping them ask the right questions, develop a strategy and execute appropriate solutions. You probably know more about how to approach the retention question than you think.

Some brief background: As it was during the dot.com era of the 1990s, keeping employees is on the minds of most organizational leaders today. An aging population and lower birth rates as well as the migration of people and jobs in a globalized economy have made the competition for workers keener than ever. Replacing valued employees is a very costly endeavor that companies want to avoid.

Mercer Human Resource Consulting published a report which said that over 90 percent of companies surveyed rated “attracting and retaining talent” as the top HR challenge. They also found that more companies than ever plan to build from within rather than continue to recruit outside.

So the question is not whether you should put retention on your plate, but what are the costs of not addressing this? As an HR professional you can play a critical role in focusing attention on the issue and helping your company leverage the gains of the huge investment they already have made in their people.

You can draw upon your established role as a resource person and consultant to your team (after all, as an HR manager, haven’t you been involved in performance management, compensation, and training initiatives?). There is no magic to the retention fix. Once you and your management team determine the key reasons people leave, you

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can and should play an instrumental role in your company's planned efforts to keep valued employees.

You can also add to your expertise by looking outside your company for ideas. Here are some suggestions:

- **Check for classes offered by training companies.** These are typically workshops that last a few days. Look for classes that come highly recommended by colleagues and past participants. The quality can vary greatly so be cautious of programs that over promise results.
- **Read.** Books such as *The Seven Hidden Reasons Employees Leave* by Leigh Branham (AMACOM, 2005) and *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em* by Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans (Berrett-Koehler, 2005) offer some creative and common sense perspectives on how to keep employees, including the key role managers play in coaching employees. Of course, recommended tactics should be customized for each organization's culture.
- **Attend programs on retention offered by consulting firms and local SHRM chapters.** Research reports and surveys on the subject. Invite a few consulting firms in to present their retention programs. You will learn a lot about the topic by listening to their presentations and possibly partner with them.
- **Tap into your network of other HR contacts.** Ask colleagues which companies are being proactive in addressing retention and getting results. Call them or post questions on discussion boards. For example, what are some unique approaches they are using (for example, with Gen Y employees), or how are they gathering data and measuring the success of their programs?
- **Learn the turnover issues at your company.** Review employee surveys, exit interviews and other sources. Look for themes and questions for further exploration. Organize this information into challenges and recommended next steps and present your findings to your bosses.

Let them see that you are a team member who is stepping up to help solve a key business issue and in the process, you will have added considerably to your value to the organization -- as well as creating a valuable HR skill you can market to other employers. And, then, your bosses will need to figure out how they can retain you!

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