



The Retention Intention

If you think you know why employees are leaving, think again.

by Kenya McCullum

Do companies really know why employees quit their jobs? According to human resources expert Leigh Branham—author of *The 7 Hidden Reasons Employees Leave: How to Recognize the Subtle Signs and Act Before It's Too Late*—most of them really have no idea.

“When most employees leave, they usually get a pay increase wherever they’re going, so in order not to burn a bridge or get into the ugly truth about what may have made them think about leaving in the first place, they just give the answer that they’re getting more pay,” he said. “This usually turns out to be true, but it’s not the full answer that’s really going to help a company understand what they need to do to correct problems they may be having.”

So, what is the full answer? Branham says that although employees will cite pay as the reason they quit their jobs, 60 to 80% of the time, his research indicates that only 12 to 15% of employees leave for this reason alone. The rest of the time, the primary reason is something other than salary; something often more personal and less tangible than the numbers on a pay stub.

The Boss-Employee Relationship

If you want to know why employees quit their jobs, in most cases you don’t have to look any further than their direct supervisors. This relationship can have the strongest influence on how an employee feels about a job. If the relationship with a boss is rewarding, then employees tend to overlook other areas of the job that may be lacking. However, if the employee-boss relationship is difficult and strained, this opens a Pandora’s Box of other reasons that an employee may have to leave because they will begin examining all the reasons they feel unfulfilled.

“Generally you find if that’s a good relationship, employees are not as likely to be looking elsewhere but if that relationship is not good, then it seems like all the other factors start to come into play as far as their

pay, compensation, and work environment,” said Nancy Gerhardt Davies, human resource director at Bodman LLP.

Employees report several reasons that their relationship with their boss can turn sour, including not receiving the feedback they need to know how they are performing, not receiving the recognition they deserve, and not undergoing adequate training that allows them to do their jobs.

Branham says that these issues are particularly important with younger employees because they have become accustomed to many years of receiving feedback and coaching from their parents and teachers. For these employees, something as simple as a “thank you” or “good job” from a boss can go a long way toward job satisfaction.

Growth Opportunities

Employees want to feel connected to their workplace and one way this connection is fostered is through the opportunities for growth. These opportunities can range from promotions within the company to new responsibilities in a current position to training that can expand employees’ skill sets and make their jobs more interesting to them. These strategies can make employees feel more connected to their jobs because people get frustrated at work when they’re not learning or being challenged. Without these growth opportunities, employees will become disengaged; they will do the minimum they need to do but will not be actively contributing to the company.

“These employees stay at their jobs, but they’re mentally checked out,” said Branham. “They’re not contributing and so you end up keeping people who probably should be moving on. They’re unhappy, but they feel trapped.”

The problem of disengagement is much more common than many employers realize. Studies show that only 25% of the American workforce is completely engaged in their jobs and are performing at their best. On the other hand, 60% of workers are disengaged from their jobs and are doing the bare minimum to stay employed. And the last 15% of workers are actually so disgruntled that they are actively working against the interests of their companies

and doing whatever they can to undermine their employers.

Work-Life Balance Issues

Walking the tightrope between a successful career and an enriching life at home is nothing new to employees. What is relatively new, however, is the fact that employees are becoming more vocal about their need for the flexibility in their jobs to juggle the two. Whether they have child or elder care considerations or they just want enough time out of the office so they don’t burn out, many employees are looking for solutions to the work-life balance dilemma.

There are several solutions that a company can implement to give employees the flexibility they need to excel at work while taking care of the home front, including flex time and telecommuting options. The key to making these policies successful is to find out what employees need and tailor the solutions to them accordingly.

“It’s difficult to know what to provide for everybody and what to provide to a few people. That keeps some companies from doing anything at all because they’re afraid they’re going to have an inequity in what they provide,” said Branham. “I see more and more companies going to a sort of cafeteria approach where people pick and chose what’s important to them and I think that is the wave of the future. The main thing is to have a life-work balance benefits committee that meets to consider very carefully any new initiative because there’s dozens of things you can do for life-work balance.”

Loss Of Confidence And Trust

With the many corporate scandals that have been exposed by the media in recent years, it’s not surprising that many workers feel that they cannot trust their employers. In fact, about half of the new hires coming into companies today believe that management is guilty until proven innocent. Generally, this lack of trust is related to a loss of faith in whether the senior leaders know how to make the company successful or whether they are being truthful with employees. If this trust is broken, it is often difficult to regain it, particularly if there are ethical issues involved. It’s not impossible, though.

If a breach in trust occurs, the best thing for a company to do is tackle the issue in an upfront manner, letting employees know that the management is aware of the problems and is working to correct them. And in cases of gross mismanagement and dishonesty by senior leaders, sometimes the offenders have to be removed from the company

in order to make employees feel more secure. An open and honest approach will show employees that a company is sincere about cleaning up the issues.

Don't Ignore The Tangibles

Although financial concerns are not the primary reasons that employees leave their jobs, that doesn't mean that these issues should be ignored especially with the economic challenges that are being felt around the country. A good salary, health insurance, and other benefits can help to make employees feel valued and give them more incentive to stay. Even in a bad economy, employers must remember that although good employees may not be able to find another job right away, they eventually will and it's important for companies to do whatever they can to keep them.

“Those employees that are your best employees— peo-

ple that are dependable, go above and beyond on the job, put in the extra effort, and produce quality work— are the people competitors are going to try to get when there's an opening. Employers that think they don't have to provide as much because there's nowhere for employees to go will be very surprised when they lose some very key employees because they've maintained that type of attitude,” said Davies.

About the author:

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Retention Strategies

Although employee retention may sound like a daunting task, there are some relatively painless strategies that any company can implement to keep employees happy and engaged.

- Establishing a personal connection with your employees lets them know that they're more than just a cog in the wheel. Do you know their hobbies? Do you know their children's names and what sports they play? Finding out this information about your employees will show that you have an interest in their lives and that you're willing to listen.
- Recognizing your employees regularly is an effective retention tool that doesn't take a lot of effort. Some ways of recognizing employees include giving spot bonuses throughout the year based on performance or when projects are completed, recognizing yearly service anniversaries, or even providing ice cream on a warm summer afternoon.
- Simply write a thank you note and give employees a pat on the back for a job well done. Recognition doesn't have to cost much.
- Keep Millennials engaged. In the book *Keep The Millennials* authors Dr. Joanne G. Sujansky CSP and Dr. Jan Ferri-Reed share some ideas for keeping younger workers engaged in your company. They encourage companies to be zany. Some tactics of the companies they profile in their book include: Calling a two-hour meeting then surprising everyone by taking the staff bowling; ring a cow-bell every time a sale is made; have each team plan a parade once a year but don't announce when they will be; give a crown for a day to the person who takes initiative and solves a problem.
- Many HR experts advise employers to begin their retention efforts during the recruitment process. Although this may mean that positions are open longer than you would prefer, if you thoroughly screen candidates to ensure that they fit into your company's culture, you can find employees that are less likely to leave it.