

DEVELOPMENT

Trainer as Retention Agent

Help create a workplace where employees commit time, talent, and enthusiasm to ensure the success of the organization.

By Jane Flaherty


Like many trainers, you probably spend a lot of time justifying training programs. You work hard to determine the return-on-investment for your organization and then plead the case for your training budget. What if, armed with the right information, you could have your senior management team standing with you, supporting you, and, yes, even applauding your training efforts?

It's achievable. But to accomplish

that goal, it's crucial to view yourself as a retention agent. The philosophy of the retention agent works like this: You know that the cornerstone of your organization is the employee who is well trained and loves to come to work. As the workforce tightens up due to the forecasted shortage of qualified, skilled workers, you can't afford to lose a good employee. It's your job to help create a workplace where employees remain fully engaged, committing their

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 **"The Coming Labor and Skills Shortage,"**
January 2005, T+D.

Shortage of workers

Looking to the future, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects an estimated labor shortage of 10 million by 2010. A survey conducted by Gantz-Wiley, Worktrends 2004, found that up to 41 percent of your workforce are already looking to take their experience and a piece of your company culture to another employer or, worse yet, to your competitor. Another study, by Accenture, indicates that 63 percent of mid-level managers are readying their résumés, waiting for the job market to strengthen. Current research sends a strong message: There will be a shortage of American workers and many of your employees are poised to jump ship.

Why do employees leave?

When asked why they begin searching for a new job, employees cited the following top two themes:

Poor relationship with the supervisor. Employees felt that their supervisors didn't value their contribution, didn't give consistent performance feedback, or failed to provide clear direction.

Limited potential for career development. In particular, Generation X (persons born in the 1960s and 1970s) and Generation Y (persons born in the 1980s and 1990s) workforces view training and development opportunities as critical. Not only do they value the opportunity to gain skills and advance in their careers, but also they're passionate about staying current in a rapidly changing, competitive marketplace.

Warning signs

Employees leave your organization in two ways:

- Some leave physically, moving on to

work for a competitor. That you can manage—at least you know the employee is no longer on your team.

- Some mentally quit, but physically show up for work each day. That's the employee you have to worry about.

The following warning signs will help you determine your employees' level of engagement or the likelihood that they'll stay and make a meaningful contribution to the success of your team:

Evidence of a "whatever" attitude. While not confrontational, this employee is clearly not motivated. He arrives at work on time, leaves on time, and marginally contributes to keep his job, no more.

Absenteeism. Trouble is ahead when an employee uses up all of her sick, vacation, or paid-time-off time on a regular basis. In severe cases, you may notice a pattern of Monday or Friday absences. When the employee asks to borrow vacation time from the next calendar year, you can assume the prognosis for retention is slim.

WIIFM. Whether you're discussing a vision for the future or your company's summer picnic, this employee is clearly detached and only interested in WIIFM—what's in it for me, right now?

Benefits of keeping your workforce

The cost of replacing an employee is staggering. Most human resource professionals estimate it costs between 70 and 200 percent of an employee's annual salary to replace lost talent. Those costs include recruiting for the position, paying overtime to get work completed, interviewing, training, and the time it takes to get the new hire up to the performance level required.

Are the potentially straying employees worth saving? Most definitely. The Gallup organization, through their Q12 engagement survey, have shown that employees who have an above average attitude toward their work will generate

38 percent higher customer satisfaction scores, 22 percent higher productivity, and 27 percent higher profits for their companies. It's clear that maintaining a vital, engaged workforce has a significant impact on your bottom line.

Why do people stay?

Are money and benefits important? Sure. But, assuming your pay and benefits are competitive, pay may not have as much affect on retention and job satisfaction as many leaders think. In fact, a 1999 Hay Group study of more than 500,000 employees in 300 companies found that of 50 retention factors, surprisingly, pay was the least important. At the top of the list, the most common reasons respondents gave for wanting to stay with a company were

- career growth, learning, and development
- exciting work and challenge.

That's good news for employers and great news for those of us in the training industry. While we may have limited ability to affect an employee's pay, we certainly have tremendous opportunity in the areas of learning and development.

Training as a retention factor

At Peter Barron Stark & Associates, we've conducted employee opinion surveys representing the opinions of over 70,000 employees in multiple industries. When we isolate the "best of the best companies"—which consist of the top 25 percent of companies in our benchmark—we find that the positive responses related to questions dealing with t&d are over 20 percent higher when compared to all companies represented in the benchmark. Not surprisingly, companies in the "best of the best" category also report a significantly lower employee turnover rate.

It's clear that a strategic focus on the importance of a comprehensive, well designed and delivered training pro-

gram not only enhances your organization's ability to attract and retain the best employees, but also it clearly has a positive affect on the bottom line.

So, what can you do to reenergize employees who appear to be on the way out? Better yet, how can you keep employees from reaching that desperate place of wanting to jump ship?

Focus on t&d

To ensure that your talented people stay, and stay engaged, you can't afford to miss training in the following areas:

Leadership training for managers and supervisors. As the leaders go, so goes the company. Your leaders typically were selected for their experience and technical expertise. Some may do a great job of leading their team, and some may experience people challenges. Remembering that people join your organization for a job, but leave it due to a poor relationship with a supervisor, it's critical that you support your organization's leaders by providing leadership training.

Training leaders in the areas of communication, teambuilding, performance feedback, recognition, and motivation helps to ensure that they retain engaged, committed employees.

Teamwide customer service training. Employee loyalty and customer loyalty go hand in hand. Untrained, uncaring employees don't provide service that consistently meets or exceeds customer expectations—and they reflect poorly on your organization. The competitive business world provides customers with many choices, and customers will exercise their right to take their business to your competitor.

We once asked a CEO why he did not provide training to his managers and employees. His response, "You train them and then they just leave and take the education to a competitor." As we walked out of that CEO's office, the vice president of HR said, "His training

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philosophy is to keep all the untrained employees right here."

Sexual harassment training. The society of 2005 is litigious; it's both costly and painful to respond to a sexual harassment lawsuit. Companies intent on retaining great employees work hard to ensure that all employees are aware of both their rights and responsibilities in the workforce. Proactively training in how to create a harassment-free work environment is a small price to pay when compared to the cost of an employee-filed lawsuit.

While many organizations have the option to provide training in this area, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger recently signed into effect AB 1825, which requires all California employers of 50 or more employees to conduct two hours of anti-harassment training for all supervisory personnel once every two years.

Technical training. How much and how fast can you deliver the technical training needed to ensure the success of your organization? Workers recently joining the workforce have often been raised on the newest and fastest tools, gadgets, and widgets. To maintain their interest, it's imperative that your organization stay current in providing updated resources and training to ensure that employee skill sets stay current with the marketplace.

Is your organization providing the right training experiences for managers, supervisors, and employees? The training opportunities your company offers are critical to both your success when recruiting talented team members and your ability to retain them once they've signed on to work with you.

Train to avoid the brain drain

The facts are clear: Employee loyalty to organizations is decreasing. A shortage of qualified employees will soon cover the workplace landscape, and your most talented employees will have the greatest number of new job options when the market strengthens. What are you doing to create the workplace where once employees enter, they remain fully engaged, committing their time, talent, and enthusiasm to ensure the success of the organization?

Research clearly indicates that training and development opportunities rank as one of the most important predictors of retention. By offering training programs, employers not only keep their employees' skill sets current, but also they demonstrate that they care. Employees who feel valued are more likely to be more fully engaged—committed to your organization's success—and less likely to stray.

Training should be a no brainer. You can have the best business model and the latest technology, but if you don't provide the training today's employees demand, you may not have enough employees to enact your business model.

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