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Unhappy Employees

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Survey after survey shows that people aren't staying with their employers because of job satisfaction, but rather because alternative opportunities are lacking. When the economy turns around, many of these unhappy workers will become job seekers.

EMPLOYEES RESPOND

A recent survey from The Conference Board finds only 45 percent of employees are satisfied with their work, the lowest percentage in the 22 years the organization has been conducting job satisfaction surveys.

However, a survey conducted by Right Management, the talent and career arm of Manpower, suggests an even greater likelihood of high turnover. Sixty (60) percent of employees say they intend to leave their jobs when the economy improves in 2010; 21 percent say they may leave and are networking; 6 percent say it's not likely they'll leave, but they have updated their resumes; and a mere 13 percent say they plan to stay in their current jobs.

Of course simply because people say they intend to leave doesn't necessarily mean they will. Nevertheless, when a survey reflects such a high level of dissatisfaction, it should serve as a wake-up call for employers.

Melvin Scales, senior vice president for global solutions at Right Management, acknowledges the number of workers who say they intend to leave is high, but he also calls attention to the 13 percent of employees with plans to stay. "Who are they? Are they intending to retire in a couple of years? One doesn't know," he says. Other issues besides retirement may factor into a decision to remain with a current employer. Scales cites how employees might live near family, indicating they may have family issues with aging parents or a child with special needs. In other words, the 13 percent of employees, or at least a portion of them, could be dissatisfied with their jobs as well but have chosen to stay.

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Another point worth considering is the contribution of employees within the different levels of satisfaction. For example, are there top performers among the 13 percent with plans to stay or are A-level employees mostly in the 60 percent category?

Regardless of the breakdown, findings suggest many employees are not only looking for other opportunities, they are poised to act when the job market rebounds. "Employers should expect that there's going to be movement of course with opportunities. That's just the way it goes," Scales says.

Still, employers have been in the driver's seat for quite a while, and as a result may have become complacent. When the job market improves, those employers that aren't prepared for the shift will likely face significant retention issues.

MAINTAINING AND RETAINING

So how can employers counterbalance the findings of surveys from Right Management, The Conference Board, and others?

Employers should focus on retention, Scales tells *HRWire*, by giving employees what they seek. "Provide those individuals an opportunity to be as fully engaged as possible," he says.

In order to do this, Scales recommends having heart-to-heart discussions with employees where career opportunities and development opportunities within the organization are discussed. He also recommends giving employees stretch assignments. Employers may want to add to their mentoring programs and formal training programs as well.

"People want to progress," Scales says. Therefore, organizations must provide employees with opportunities to strengthen their skills and further their career development.

The effort, in turn, will result in greater employee engagement. "When you have engagement, you have talent retention," says Scales.

HR ADVANTAGES

Although retention may be viewed as the ultimate objective, particularly in light of rampant job dissatisfaction, there are other benefits to furthering employee engagement.

It gives HR an opportunity to strengthen employees' commitment to the organization and those core values the company says it has in place, Scales tells *HRWire*.

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As part of the overall focus on greater engagement and job satisfaction, Scales encourages HR and other management professionals to let employees know what's expected of them at work. For people who are assessing their careers, a lack of ambiguity about their current circumstances can influence decision-making.

The process of sharing expectations with employees has another benefit. "What that does is give the organization a clearer view of how they can meet the customer's needs," says Scales.

And make no mistake: Letting employees know that management is paying attention makes an impact.

Scales tells *HRWire* about a series of experiments and the results, which have come to be known as the Hawthorne effect. Researchers found that if the lights were turned up in a manufacturing facility, production went up. But if the lights were turned down, production also increased. The conclusion is that employees knew people were paying attention to them and performed better.

RECOGNITION COUNTS

No matter who you are, if people are paying attention, it sends a message that you recognize and respect them, Scales says.

In fact, while people want to be liked and admired, they prefer being disliked to being ignored, according to Scales. "Ignoring people is the total disrespect; it is the ultimate: neither paid attention to or disliked," he says.

With this in mind, Scales offers advice to employers: "There are six words that I really believe leaders need to say often: 'I really appreciate what you do.' It's the greatest retention tool in the world."

He cautions, however, that the statement has to be delivered in a way that's sincere and consistent.

At the same time, those words should be supported by actions. Management should do things that will provide employees with an ability to meet the demands of their lifestyles, Scales says. He gives the example of an employee who lives 50 miles from the facility, and what it can mean to that person to work from home one day each week.

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Job sharing and flexible scheduling, which have also been around for years, should get a fresh look in light of so much dissatisfaction. “It’s now time to pay attention to them again,” Scales says. “Retention is going to be the number one issue for human resources for a long time.”

Despite the so-called jobless recovery, companies should not assume they have a captive audience. There has been employment activity throughout the recession, and the job market will eventually improve.

With this in mind, Scales offers HR advice: If you’re going to do something, now is the time to do it. The worst time to do it is when you need employees.

“Have a plan in place to retain what you have and have a plan to attract what you need so you can take advantage of the recovery when it occurs,” he says.