

Growth Opportunities Are Key to Employee Retention

By Roger E. Herman

It's no secret that employees value professional and personal growth opportunities. Here are some of the ways that forward-thinking organizations are attracting and retaining the best and the brightest people.

Succession preparation, not succession planning

Succession planning has taken on new importance in recent years, with the focus expanding from the senior executive(s) to division directors, middle managers, supervisors and even key non-management positions. Additionally, the emphasis has moved to succession preparation. Training and education, including shadowing and actual experience, are now considered part of the succession process. If people are not ready to move into new roles when the positions become open—for whatever reason—the succession plan is more a dream than reality.

Professional growth and development include:

- Formal training and education seminars and classes
- Personal coaching by a supervisor or an external professional
- Mentoring
- Cross-training
- Stretch assignments

Good learning programs incorporate on-the-job experience that gets employees more engaged in their work, their results and their relationships with others. Emotional bonds are forged, while competencies are enriched.

Personal growth is also gaining popularity in the corporate environment. Developmental activities that don't necessarily relate to the work the employee is doing can still be very valuable in enabling the individual to be a better person—and a better employee. With the need for people to better manage their lives, often under challenging circumstances, personal strength and confidence can make a difference. Confident employees, with less stress inhibiting their performance, can do a much better job for the employer and for themselves.

Measuring the need

The need for training and development is typically measured on the basis of immediate situations. What are our current needs and how do we train people to meet them? Wise employers are also concentrating much more on future needs. Part of the process of strategic workforce planning is growing the capacity of the organization—the people—to perform key tasks in the future.

Long-term plans must include the markets the company will operate in, anticipated demands for products and services, capital requirements and—perhaps most importantly—what will be expected from the workforce. In addition to how many people will be needed, forward-looking employers will identify what skills and abilities their workers will need to fulfill the mission and goals. Comparing the future capacity needs with current capabilities will uncover the skills and knowledge gaps that must be filled. It is foolish to wait until the last minute to train people. The solution is to begin now to design and implement the learning process so people can grow the skills they will need to achieve established goals.

What the studies tell us

- A survey by TrueCareers, located in Reston, Virginia, reported that 61% of 500 workers surveyed said that continuing their education will help make them more attractive in the employment market. Workers expect employers to assume some responsibility for their professional growth. If they can't get what they need through their employer, they'll switch to another employer or find ways to acquire the knowledge and skills on their own.
- A study conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management revealed that 37% of 428 human resource professionals surveyed said that they had increased training to prepare for the skilled worker shortages forecast for 2010. That percentage is dangerously low, compared to where we should be in our thinking and our focused efforts. Incredibly, most employers still don't believe that we're on the threshold of the most severe shortage of skilled labor in history. Even fewer comprehend that the shortages already exist: while some whimper about a jobless recovery, thousands of employers are hunting hungrily for qualified employees. The longer they wait, the more training will be required—because the labor pool will be, on the whole, less qualified as competition for talent intensifies.
- Human Resource Executive magazine reported a study by New York-based Towers Perrin that looked at levels of engagement—the willingness and ability of workers to contribute to their employers' success. Nineteen percent of the 40,000 employees surveyed responded that they were "disengaged." Once these people run out the door, startled employers will find themselves crying "Wait, wait! We'll provide training." But it will be too little, too late.

Action steps for employers

- Employees can be engaged through the personal growth process. By participating in classroom training, they are investing in learning with co-workers. If they're being coached, employees are closely connected with their supervisor or another member of the corporate community who cares about them. Mentoring has the same effect. Learning together, investing in each other's development, creates a powerful emotional bond that supports collaboration and retention.
- Companies must employ more professional trainers and coaches to integrate learning with a personal engagement to the job and the employer. Trainer/coaches should follow up with learners and their superiors to be sure that the follow-through is achieved to link the training with the job and the employees' careers.
- Supervisors of trainees should be evaluated on their effectiveness in using training and development to improve performance and employee retention. Wise employers will invest a considerable amount of resources to upgrade the capacity, dedication, confidence and effectiveness of their supervisors, managers and executives. They have no choice. If this strengthening is not accomplished, those supervisors—and probably many of the people working for them—will leave for positions with greater opportunity to grow.

Training and education, the learning process so essential to the development of your workforce, is not an option. It's a necessity. Employers who ignore this aspect of running their business face corporate extinction.