

HDP CONNECTIONS

The Newsletter for Help Desk Professionals

Just Ask: Strategies for Engaging and Retaining Help Desk Professionals

by Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans

Help Desk leaders want their talent to stay. And not just stay, but be satisfied, engaged, and highly productive. Help Desk professionals, at all levels (agents as well as team leaders), want just a little more – of something. Team leaders and employees alike can get more of what they want by remembering to Ask.

Help Desk & Call Center Turnover...An On-Going Challenge!

Turnover in the call centers, as a whole, despite a tough economy, continues to alarm organizational leaders worldwide. The truth of the matter is ... it can only get worst. Consider the facts:

- There are seven million call center employees staffing the more than 70,000 call centers nationwide.
- Call centers have typically experienced an annual growth rate of up to 20%. The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts call center employment will grow faster than average through 2012.
- The Bureau of Labor Statistics is predicting a shortage of 10 million workers to support the U.S. workforce by 2010.
- Call centers nationwide report a 33 percent turnover rate.
 - The highest level of turnover reported is a whopping 58% in the credit card call centers.
- According to a recent study on hiring costs at 54 Fortune 1000 companies, hiring the call center representative often costs nearly 26 times the average salary.

So it looks like we're going to need more people to meet help desk demands, but the statistics are telling us they aren't going to be enough people to go around.

To put the cost of turnover in perspective, consider a call center with 1,000 employees and a turnover rate of 30%. Turnover is costing that organization a conservative \$24,000 per day or \$6 million a year.

Career Systems International has a "Turnover Calculator" to help you calculate what your turnover is costing your unit or your organization. Access it at www.careersystemsintl.com/turnovercalcform.htm.

There's a new problem that has spread through the workplace over the past few years ... employees are not happy!

- Gallup has reported that only 20% of today's workforce is loyal and productive; 55% are not engaged (only putting in time) and 19% are actively disengaged.
- Gallup has estimated that loss in productivity, attributed to a disengaged workforce, is costing the U.S. market \$300 billion or more a year.
- CNN, and others, are reporting that up to eight in ten employees will be ready to jump ship as the economy is revived and opportunities open up again.

So, what are the answers to this dilemma? On one hand, the solutions are as complex and diversified as the problems (e.g. lack of training, limited flexibility, repetitive work, changing responsibilities and expectations, pressure, little rewards, inexperienced leaders). Organizational leaders, educators and human resources specialists currently spend countless hours and big bucks on these knotty issues --- and they will no doubt spend more time and money in the coming years.

On the other hand – at least some of the solutions may be simpler than we think. If both team leaders and agents step up to the plate and do their parts, they can increase job satisfaction, engagement and ultimately, retention. A key aspect of doing their respective parts is to ASK.

Team Leaders – Just Ask

Too often we find out what our talented agents wanted during the exit interview. And by then, it's usually too late. Don't wait until they have one foot out the door. Take action now. Conduct stay interviews with all of the agents on your help desk team.

Start by telling your good people (high flyers and solid citizens alike) how important they are to you and the organization. Then ask them what will keep them. Or ask them what they want to learn next or what kind of new challenge

they'd like. If you don't already have a list of your favorite questions, try some of these, excerpted from *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay*, Kaye and Jordan-Evans, 2002:

- What will keep you here? What might entice you away?
- What is most energizing about your work?
- Are we fully utilizing your talent? Are we inhibiting your success?
- What can I do to make your job more satisfying?
- What makes for a great day?
- Do we support your career goals? How could we do better?
- Do you get enough recognition? What kind would you like?

Imagine the answers you might get to these questions. Think how much more you'll know about your treasured agents. And, if you get a response you dread – such as, “I'll stay for a ten percent raise,” don't panic. Be honest, explain the constraints you face, but show you care enough to hear them out and to do something about the request. Say something like, “You're worth that and more to me and to this team. I will see what can be done and by when. Let's meet again next Friday to discuss what I've learned. Meanwhile, what else do you want?” We guarantee you there will be at least something they want that you can give.

And – A Word About Pay

Five decades of research matches what we've learned about pay. Here's how it works. Compensation had better be fair, competitive and sufficient to live on, or your good people will start looking around for more. In other words, it can be a strong dissatisfier. But here's the rub. Even if you pay more than your competition, you won't keep people who are burned out, bored, see no career options or work for a jerk. Or if you keep them physically, you'll lose them psychologically. You know, they quit and stay. Either kind of loss is expensive. After asking, you'll know that one talented agent wants to modify her shift while another is pursuing a team leader role. You can customize your strategies to fit every agent's needs.

We've asked over 16,000 people what keeps them at work. The top five responses are: exciting, challenging work; a chance to learn and grow; great people to work with; fair pay; and a good boss.

Go to www.keepem.com to participate in the *What Kept You?* survey and get a complimentary report.

Calling all Agents – Just Ask

Now, let's look at the employee side of the engagement equation. When we ask call center professionals if they love their work, we often hear, "I love it – except for –

- The overload I feel, or
- The lack of flexibility in my schedule, or
- The lack of respect from my boss, or
- The paperwork and bureaucracy, or
- The lack of learning – or challenge – or on-the-job training

Workplace satisfaction is a two-way street. Yes, it demands effort from your team leader and from the leaders of your organization. But it also demands initiative and effort from you.

Ask. If you don't, you're less likely to get what you want. It seems so simple. Yet for some reason, people hold back. They expect their bosses to read their minds. Some just *settle for less* and bring half their hearts (or brains) to work. Others decide it's easier to leave than to ask. Most people eventually realize that no matter where or with whom they work, at times they will want a little more of *something*. And the best way to get that something is to ask.

How ready are you to hold an honest, possibly courageous conversation with your boss, a colleague, a senior leader? How willing are you to *ASK* for what you really want?

First, you have to be clear about what you really want. Get to the bottom of it. Use some of these questions, excerpted from *Love It, Don't Leave It: 26 Ways To Get What You Want at Work*, Kaye and Jordan-Evans, 2003.

Interview Yourself:

- What about my job makes me jump out of bed in the morning?
- What makes me hit the snooze button?
- If I were to win the lottery and resign, what would I miss the most?
- What would be the one change in my current role that would make me want to stay for a long time?
- If I had a magic wand, what would be the one thing I would change about my boss, team, department or organization?
- If I had to go back to a position in my past and stay for an extended period of time, which one would it be and why?

Now, think about who can deliver what you want. Consider these people:

- Those with information you need
- Good listeners and advice givers
- Decision makers (your boss?)

Consider how and when you will approach them. Consider their preferences:

- Should you request the conversation by email, voice mail, or face-to-face?
- Is it best to meet with them early in the morning or after their shift? Monday or later in the week?

How will you open the conversation? Consider these guidelines:

- Get to the point. Thank them for their time and tell them you have a request to make.
- Lay it out and be specific. What do you need from them? Advice? Feedback? A new challenge?

Now, create a list of the barriers to asking. Barriers come in all shapes and sizes. Here are some of the most common:

- **Fear.** Is *FEAR* in the way of asking? Fear of what? The answer? The person? Something else?
It's simple. To get more of what you really want at work, face your fear, plan your approach, and *go for it*.
Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear, not absence of fear. — Mark Twain
- Your boss's (or other decision makers') **mindsets, constraints, or concerns.** Those you ask are often bound by rules, policies, guidelines, and cultural norms. And, they're concerned about fairness. Anticipate the problems and potential barriers to your request and present ideas for solving them. Seek solutions that work for you, them, and the team.
- **Lack of WIIFT** (*What's In It For Them?*) Before you go to the request-granter, stop and identify the WIIFT. Ask yourself, "What's in it for that person to grant my request? How will she benefit? Is my request a 'piece of cake' or really difficult to grant?" WIIFT in hand, now you're ready to ask.

AND IF THE ANSWER IS "NO?"

Despite your careful planning and strategic thinking, you'll no doubt encounter a "No" now and then. Listen to the reasons for the "No." Then —

- Ask again (in a different way or at a different time), or

- Ask how you can help make it work (brainstorm possibilities), or
- Ask someone else (can someone else help with your request?), or
- Ask what's possible, if not this, or
- Ask when it might be possible, if not now, or
- Ask what you can do to improve the way you're asking.

Don't give up.

The best advice I ever got was from a salesman. He said every NO he received got him closer to the inevitable YES.

And when they say yes, thank them...with words and in continued great performance.

People tell us that in hindsight, they wish they had asked for what they wanted. Or they wish they'd asked in a more effective way, so a decision maker could have worked with them to make it happen. Don't expect others to take the first step. Don't make them guess, because most often, they'll guess wrong. Be clear. Be prepared. Be collaborative and then ***ask for what you want***.

If you don't ask for what you want, you'll simply have to take what you get.

Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans are the co-authors of the best seller *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay*. Their new book, *Love It, Don't Leave It: 26 Ways to Get What You Want at Work* was voted Fast Company's January Book of the Month. Both books are published by Berrett-Koehler. For a free download of the first three chapters visit www.LoveltDontLeavelt.com.

Beverly Kaye is founder and CEO of Career Systems International, Scranton, PA, a leader in the design and delivery of Talent Management workshops and other engaging solutions. The flexible, multi-modality offerings, based on the concepts of *Love 'Em* (Retention Workshop for Managers) and *Love It* (*SatisfactionPower*[™]) provide team leaders and agents with a complementary model, practical strategies and an action plan to help increase retention, engagement, and workplace satisfaction – for their team and for themselves.

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