



**ENGAGING AND
NOW RETAINING
A CORE TALENT
BUSINESS INITIATIVE**

BY BEVERLY KAYE & SHARON JORDAN-EVANS

Published by ASTD Press (2011) in *The Executives' Guide to Integrated Talent Management*, edited by Kevin Oakes and Pat Galagan

Never before have organizations paid more attention to talent—in the United States and worldwide. Keeping it. Poaching it. Developing it. Engaging it. Talent is no longer just a numbers game; it's about survival. It's about winning market share, investors, new clients, big contracts. Companies depend on their top performers to innovate and provide services that differentiate them from their fierce competitors. They rely on their human assets in order to thrive. Even in the wake of layoffs or high unemployment, many corporations and industries continue the search for skilled talent to fill key roles at all organizational levels.

Executives, line managers and the learning and development professionals who support them, loudly agree that engaging and retaining talent is a core business initiative. In fact, it has been elevated in many enterprises to the top tier of objectives, on a par with generating revenues and managing costs. It is crucial that learning and development professionals effectively integrate engagement/retention initiatives with other key HR functions and processes. For example, recruiters would ideally have retention goals for all new recruits and would work closely with hiring managers to insure that talent so carefully selected sticks around for a while. Similarly, performance goals should include retention/engagement objectives, and leadership curriculums should include manager education in the art of engaging and retaining talent.

So we agree that engaging and keeping the best people matters. The question then is how to do that. We've studied that question for several decades, researching what employees want most from their work and their workplaces, and what employers are doing to deliver on those wants.

Here is some of what we've learned.

Why They Stay

We've asked over 17,000 people why they stayed in an organization for "a while" (yes, it's a relative term). Our findings confirm what many others have learned about the most common reasons employees remain at a company (and what will help retain them). The items come up again and again throughout every industry and at every level. The differences between functions, levels, genders, and ages are minor. Here are the top 10 responses listed in order of frequency of response.



1. Exciting work and challenge
2. Career growth, learning, and development
3. Working with great people
4. Fair pay
5. Supportive management/good boss
6. Being recognized, valued, and respected
7. Benefits
8. Meaningful work and making a difference
9. Pride in the organization, its mission, and its product
10. Great work environment and culture

So, there it is – the answer to the mystery of retention. Deliver these things and you'll keep them all! Or will you? The research results can be misunderstood, even misused. Why? Because people differ. While most of us (98 percent of respondents) will select at least one of the top three stay factors on the list, we will also name a factor not named by our colleagues. One person desperately wants flexibility, another wants fun, and yet another craves stability. But how could we have known?

We can only know, and then deliver, by asking.

Start with a Stay Interview (with every employee you hope to keep)

Why are we so willing to conduct exit interviews, but seldom take the time or summon the courage to conduct stay interviews with the people we can least afford to lose?

Imagine this. Your boss calls you in and says this to you, "I probably haven't told you this often enough, but you are important to this team and to me. I can't imagine losing you. I know we've been through a rough time lately and I want you to know how much I appreciate all you've done and the way you've done it. I'd like you to know that I want you to hang in here. I'd like to know what you want next. What do you want to learn? What career goals are you thinking about? What can I do to help you reach those goals? I'd like to know what will keep you here. And I'd like to know what could entice you away."

Has a boss ever held that kind of interview with you? When we ask audience members that question, very few hands go up. When we ask those few people how it felt, we hear, "Good, great, I felt important and valued." One guy in the audience said, "It felt a little late – it was in the exit interview." Everyone laughed at the irony – we often find out what our treasured talented people really want as they exit our organizations.

Why don't managers (including you) conduct stay interviews? Usually they don't ask because of fear.

Some managers don't hold stay interviews because they fear they won't be able to deliver on employees' requests. That is particularly true during economic down-turns and associated belt-tightening. If you think you can't deliver on employees' requests take these four steps:

1. Tell them (again) how much you value them, e.g. "You're worth that to me and more."
2. Tell the truth about the obstacles you face, e.g. pay freeze, project closing down.
3. Show you care enough about them to look into it, e.g. "I hear your request. Let me look into it and let's meet again next Friday to talk about possibilities (if not now, then when?; if not this, then what?)."
4. Ask, "What else?" Research shows clearly that people want more from work than just a paycheck. When you ask the question "What else?" we guarantee there will be at least one thing your talented employees want that you can give.

Stay interviews are not difficult to conduct and they yield priceless information. In fact, they might be the most important strategy of the several we describe here. Not only will asking make your talented people feel valued, but their answers will provide the information you need to customize strategies to keep each of them engaged and on your team.

Note: Some managers need support or encouragement in conducting stay interviews. Train them, have them role play, coach them as they try out this valuable approach to learning what their employees want and need.

Which of these matters most to you? Go to www.keepem.com and take the What Keeps You Survey. You'll see how your answers match all others'.

Engagement and Retention in the DNA

One manager told us that his company has successfully woven retention and engagement deeply into the fabric of the organization. The CEO said he expects it to be in the very DNA of the company. It's not a "flavor of the month" initiative or an event to focus on when time permits. Instead, every manager at every level is expected to spend quality time retaining talent.

Managers need help achieving this "DNA proposition" and here is where they turn to their learning and development professionals for the thought-leadership and design of integrated (cross silo) approaches that achieve both the talent-management and business goals. These savvy HR pros link arm and arm with managers at all levels in an earnest attempt to engage the hearts

STEP 01 | **APPOINT A STEERING COMMITTEE.** Although HRD and other senior leaders sometimes feel they must manage the retention battle by themselves, it's vital to get help from a mixed group of managers and employees who can study turnover issues and work together. Ideally, this steering committee would include professionals from every HR function (e.g. recruiting, performance management, rewards, succession planning, learning and development). The interchange between these HR silo representatives will bring breadth and depth to the design of the initiatives.

Publishing a retention steering committee charter in a company newspaper or distributing it to division heads and asking for recommendations might be all you need to do. The committee can turn the charter into a more tailored mission statement. In fact, those two items form an excellent agenda for the first meeting.

and minds of good people from the moment they enter the recruitment cycle until long after they leave the company. It's a cradle to grave proposition, including activities during:

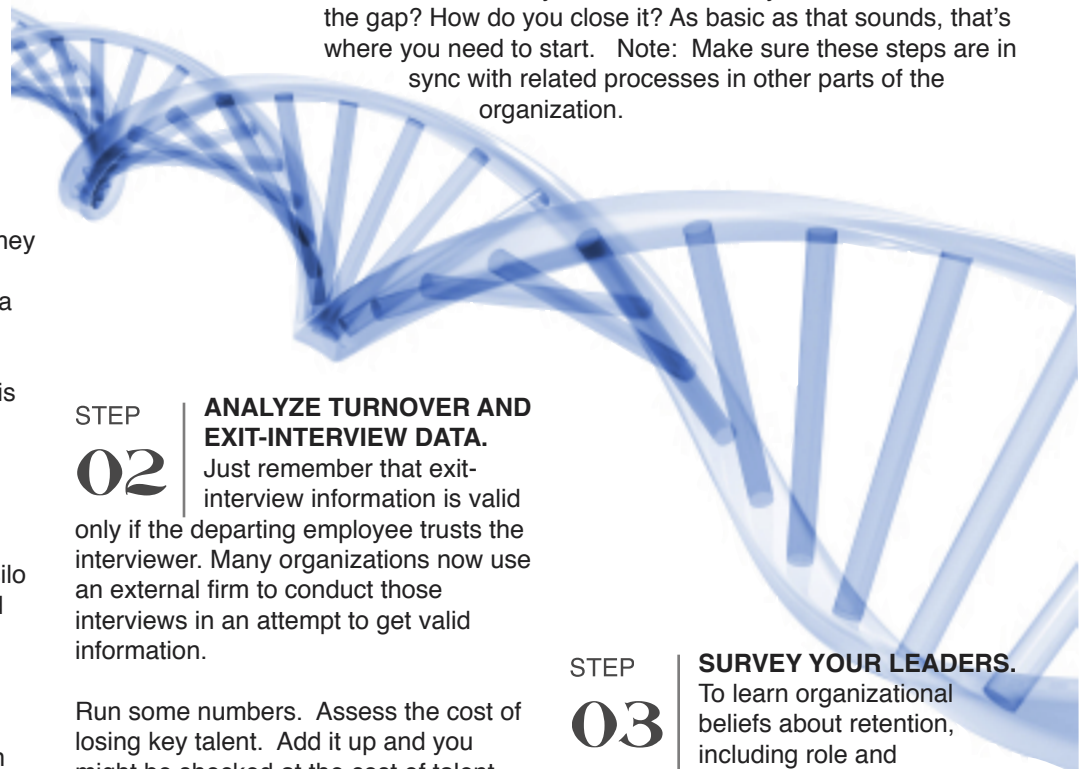
- **Recruitment.** Not only is it important to find the most talented applicants, but it's equally important to be viewed as the employer of choice with a strong employee value proposition. Think about the USP (unique selling proposition) of your organization and use that information to attract top talent.
- **Orientation.** Also called "on-boarding," orientation is step one toward retention of your new talent. It should extend beyond the traditional day-long or week-long timeframe and should involve many members of the new employee's team.
- **Career Development and Growth.** Our research confirms what many others have found. Talented people want to learn and grow. Some want to be promoted or at least identify career options ahead. Ask what they want to learn this year and then find a mentor, a class, a book, a coach to help them learn it.
- **Re-recruiting.** Companies must consistently re-recruit their existing talent. Help them match their skills to new opportunities in the organization. Thank them for their efforts and outcomes and spotlight their success. If you're not recruiting your best people, you're the only one who isn't.

If you're interested in building a culture where engagement and retention are in the DNA, you may have some work to do. Here are some concrete steps for getting there. First consider: What do you want? What do you have? Where is the gap? How do you close it? As basic as that sounds, that's where you need to start. Note: Make sure these steps are in sync with related processes in other parts of the organization.

STEP 02 | **ANALYZE TURNOVER AND EXIT-INTERVIEW DATA.** Just remember that exit-interview information is valid only if the departing employee trusts the interviewer. Many organizations now use an external firm to conduct those interviews in an attempt to get valid information.

Run some numbers. Assess the cost of losing key talent. Add it up and you might be shocked at the cost of talent lost.

STEP 03 | **SURVEY YOUR LEADERS.** To learn organizational beliefs about retention, including role and accountability, ask managers at all levels. Then, compare what mid-level managers think to what supervisors or senior leaders think. Who's really in charge of engaging and retaining talent?



STEP

04

CONDUCT A “FUTURE PULL” SESSION.

Leap ahead one year and imagine that your senior team is

celebrating an ideal future state of talent retention. Brainstorm and write down the projections. For example,

- “We’ve retained 95 percent of our top talent.”
- “We’re known as having a retention culture.”
- “Good people are banging on our doors.”
- “Customer retention rates have increased 10 percent in one year.”
- “We’re on the cover of Forbes Magazine.”

Encourage the senior managers to create a long list of descriptors. Then, lead the team in an analysis to identify the current organizational realities related to retention. Be sure to include numbers and costs wherever possible—such as, “We lose 15 percent of our talent a year,” “We’re constantly orienting and training replacements,” or “An employee who left last year took a key customer, and we lost a \$50,000 contract.” The gaps between future and current states become quite clear.

Help the team identify obstacles to achieving the desired future state, such as managers ill-equipped to be retention managers, lack of a retention mindset by the organization, or no development or career management programs. Last, have the team brainstorm a long list of potential strategies for closing the gaps.

STEP

05

CONDUCT FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS.

You might use the Future Pull approach with focus groups representing multiple levels and functions in the organization. The goal is to get input from numerous and diverse stakeholders.

You might ask these questions in either one-on-one interviews or focus groups:

- What do you feel is unique about your retention situation?
- What works for you, what works against you?
- What is your hunch about why people stay?
- Tell us a story about one person who left recently. How did it happen? What did it cost in money and other losses? Could anything

- have been done to prevent it?
- What keeps you?

STEP

06

COMPILE AND PRESENT DATA.

Use all of the information from your turnover and exit-interview assessments, the line

management belief surveys, the senior team meeting, and all focus groups and interviews. Give the senior team feedback, and present recommendations for the next steps.

While conducting your diagnosis and beginning to design retention strategies, you may want to consider putting some ongoing support structures in place. Two such structures are a retention champion and a retention task force. Either of those will help you make your retention process more sustainable.

STEP

07

TAP A RETENTION/ENGAGEMENT CHAMPION.

As the retention dilemma grows, it’s

important to craft a new job position and place someone in charge of designing ongoing retention strategies. This retention champion (typically a learning function professional) would have the primary and ongoing goal of addressing retention issues and implementing a variety of solutions, depending on the needs of various client groups. The more this person can interface with other, cross-silo, professionals such as recruiters, coaches, and trainers, the better. And the more access he or she has to line managers as well as individual contributors, the more effective in the retention champion will be.

An organization might appoint rotating retention champions in all departments or a retention tribunal made up of three key champions representing the retention issues of individual contributors, supervisors, and mid-level managers.

STEP

08

PREPARE MANAGERS TO BECOME OWNERS.

The learning and development leader is vital in

this step. Managers often have the will to engage and retain their talented performers but not the skill.

Start by asking, “Who’s in charge?” Until you see line managers as the owners of the retention/engagement issue, they won’t see themselves that way. They’ll continue to point the finger at senior management and at you. They’ll continue to abdicate their role and accountability for the talent that wanders out the door, costing the company thousands or millions of dollars every year.

Acknowledge that anyone who manages someone is ultimately responsible for hanging onto that critical organizational asset. How do you do that? Show managers the research about what keeps people. They’ll quickly notice that many of the items are within their influence or control. They’ll see that it’s not just about money. Show them the numbers—what it costs to lose one talented member of their team. If anything sparks interest in line managers, it’s finding a way to improve the bottom line.

Managers need help evaluating their strengths and weaknesses vis-a-vis retention and engagement. They also need skill training, practical strategies and often a “tune-up” and reminders to do simple things, such as showing respect, listening, and rewarding their talent. Remind them: If they don’t have time for those things, how will they find the time to recruit, interview, select, orient and train their talented employees’ replacements? Learning professionals must design solutions that build managerial skills for (1) focusing on development, (2) building relationships and (3) creating an environment that is conducive to innovation and creativity.



STEP

09

PREPARE EMPLOYEES TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR OWN ENGAGEMENT.

Most learning and development professionals recognize that individual contributors can and must step up to the plate and move the needle on their own workplace satisfaction. Help those crucial workers carefully consider what they want and need in order to stay committed and engaged at work. The more the engagement conversation is a two-way collaboration, the more effective and lasting the solution.

STEP

10

BUILD EVALUATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS. As with any good organizational process or program, it's essential to stop along the way and evaluate how things are going. Is the task force working? What about the sponsorship of the senior team? Is the retention champion the right role or the right person? If any answer is no, it's time to go back to the drawing board.

What about accountability? Are your line managers held responsible for selecting and keeping talented people on their teams? If they lost a \$10,000 piece of equipment, wouldn't they have to answer to someone? Hold them accountable for losing people assets worth that much and more. We know of a CEO who charged \$30,000 to a manager's operating budget because he needlessly allowed a talented person to leave. Now, that's what we call holding someone accountable.

We're not suggesting that managers be punished when their people are promoted or move on to learn something new. It's inevitable to lose some talented employees, especially as they pursue their career dreams. But we do recommend that managers be held accountable for being good retention managers and for creating a retention culture—an environment where people feel motivated, cared about, and rewarded.

In Good Times and Bad

Effective talent management, with a focus on engagement and retention of the best people, has indeed become a core business initiative. Why? Because it is abundantly clear that organizational success in any economy depends on excellent leadership, superior knowledge, and ongoing learning. We know now that the organizations best able to capture, engage, develop and retain talent will flourish and succeed over the long term. And a carefully crafted, sustainable talent management process insures that success.

For the past decade we've watched managers use a talent-focused approach to building loyal, committed, productive teams. All that in an era when some said (incorrectly) that loyalty is dead. Their employees cannot be enticed away by a 10 percent raise or a gym or a massage on Fridays. They LOVE their jobs, their teams, their bosses and yes, their companies. And because of that, their companies win.

In contrast, we've seen managers lose talent the moment the economy lights come back on. These not-so-successful managers matched their engagement and retention efforts to economic highs and lows. In the good times, when jobs were plentiful and talented people had choice, managers offered perks, praise and promotions.

In bad times, these leaders developed a cavalier attitude about their employees. Many felt -- and some actually said -- "Quit whining -- be glad you have a job." They piled on the work, removed the praise, and froze the pay. Their best people readied their resumes, logged on to Monster.com, and waited for the first chance to jump ship. And the managers were stunned when it happened.

Dr. Phil, television's popular psychologist, would say to those managers, "So how did that work for you?" Not so well.

An effective approach to engaging and retaining talent is not something you turn on and off, syncing to the latest economic blip and the corresponding concern about keeping talent. It works best when it's an integrated part of your talent management practices; when it's authentic and perennial; when you clearly believe in it, invest in it and demonstrate it daily in your actions with the people you want on your team.

Beverly Kaye is founder and CEO of Career Systems International, and Sharon Jordan-Evans is CEO of the Jordan Evans Group. They are co-authors of Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay and Love It, Don't Leave It.