



## Feature

### **Stop Turnover Before It Happens** **ASSOCIATIONS NOW, February 2010**

**By:** *Lynda McDaniel*

Your best employees might have one eye on the door, and once the recovery begins in earnest, they'll have plenty of new opportunities to choose from. Experts share advice on the steps you can take now to keep them. (And if your retention efforts fail, they also have tips on how to fill the void that great employees leave behind when they go.)

Remember the workplace annoyances of yesteryear? Loud phone calls emanating from the speakerphone in the cubicle next door. The pungent smell of burned microwave popcorn wafting across the corridor.

These irritants seem trivial today with so many cubicles sitting empty. Those still on the job are battling bigger worries: the stress of increased workloads, frozen salaries, and fears of downsizing.

For now, despite the stress, employees are staying put. During a recession, most staffers are reluctant to job hunt or even consider leaving a steady job. Once the economy picks up, though, pent-up frustrations and a grass-is-greener mindset could trigger a stampede rivaling bargain hunters on Black Friday. And to make matters worse, those most likely to find new jobs are often key players whose loss deals organizations another setback just as things are starting to improve.

### **Warning: Trouble Ahead**

Some warning signs that employees are planning to leave are obvious—Craigslist illuminated on the computer screen or a spate of sick days followed by nary a cough or snuffle. But others are more subtle. Lance Haun, vice president of outreach for MeritBuilder, says savvy employees know how to skate by till they're ready to leave.

"A bunch of people have laid themselves off. They haven't moved on, they've just checked out of the job," he says. "Performance takes a dip, and above-average employees now are only average. When the jobs come back, those people are the first out the door. Of course, all this happened in past recessions, but now that the workforce is so mobile, the effects are going to be amplified."

And watch out for employees who seem disengaged, says Deb Keary, HR director for the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM): "We get emotionally attached to a workplace and our coworkers. When employees draw back, that may be a signal that they're preparing themselves to leave."

## **Open Communication**

What can we do to prepare for—and better yet, prevent—this post-recession turnover? Caitlin Williams, Ph.D., encourages managers and supervisors to pay attention to what she calls the "working worried."

"After layoffs, some organizations actually believe they can maintain or increase productivity if they heap on more and more work," says Williams, a career development consultant and coach who also teaches in the master's program in counselor education at San Jose State University. "That may work in the short run, but those employees are going to burn out. They're exhausted and heart weary about what's going on. Eventually, they will jump ship if they don't have a sense that they're valued where they are. Managers and supervisors need to be trained to offer more recognition."

One of the best ways to address the woes of these "working worried" is the most straightforward: Honor their reality and give them an appropriate way to express their stress and sorrow. Acknowledge what they're saying and avoid brushing it off or telling them things will get better. (Or worse, reminding them they're lucky to have a job!)

"We're in a strategically challenging time. Organizations may need to do different things rather than do things differently," says Jamie Notter, vice president of organizational effectiveness at Management Solutions Plus. "For example, you might need to spend more time smoothing relationships within the company. Your volunteers may be mad that someone left. You can't just throw a new person in and tell them, 'Here's your new liaison.' It's more personal to them. You need to put some effort into working things out."

To counter the grass-is-greener mindset, help employees understand how much our world has changed. Focus on what is right at their current job—or what can be remedied—and how they're likely to encounter issues wherever they go.

"Many workers still assume there is a 'normal' we're going back to where everything just rolls along like before," Williams says. "But organizations and employees have to understand that there's a new version of normal we are only now crafting, one that requires resilience and adaptability. Organizations need to engage employees in new ways. [See sidebar below.] Employees need to determine whether or not their organization is somewhere they want to stay. If they don't consider their situation carefully and jump ship on a whim, they may go from the frying pan into the fire."

## Necessity Yields Invention

On a brighter note, recessions, like any back-against-the-wall situation, can foster innovation and improved practices, such as instituting a succession plan. SHRM's Keary finds too many organizations don't have one, and she urges them to get busy.

"A succession plan is an excellent tool to keep organizations from being blindsided when employees leave," she says. "Understand who key employees are. Who is critical to keep?" she says. "Make sure people coming up behind them know what their job is and what the people they'll replace do. If you don't have a plan, start now. It's not too late—yet. Once the economy improves, it will be." [See sidebar below main article.]

Sometimes a departure is even a good thing. Organizations can replace employees with people more suited to the positions. They can also change job descriptions to better represent current needs. "Add responsibilities to the portfolio of that position," Keary says. "It's not that the former employee wasn't good, but maybe today it works better if that person speaks a second language. You wouldn't fire him [the original employee] because of that, but now that he's left, you can add competencies."

In addition, when people leave, advancement opportunities within the organization increase. Talented employees who haven't had the chance to hold key positions can move up. And if highly qualified workers throughout the industry start to leave, associations can pick up new employees who may better fill a need or who may blossom in a new environment.

"Take advantage of the rotation of talent," MeritBuilder's Haun says. "Whenever we have a bump in turnover, we see the availability of quality candidates go up too. But the real win-win is finding the right fit within your organization. That's a lot easier right now. Once the economy picks up, turnover will too."

## Picking Up the Pieces

When key employees do leave, organizations need to act fast to keep things running as smoothly as possible. Steps to make the transition easier include:

- Make an immediate counteroffer; don't wait till the last day of the notice period. Tell resigning employees how valuable they are and have a conversation about what they're concerned about at the organization.
- Appoint someone as an acting replacement while you look.
- Retain as much of a departing staffer's contextual knowledge as possible, beyond the files and computer documents. Undertake what Notter describes as an "archaeological expedition" to capture more than just data, but real knowledge and understanding.
- Ask for three weeks notice instead of the standard two weeks. Departing employees may not be able to oblige, but it's worth a try.

Keeping employees engaged—and less likely to bolt once the economy improves—requires a supportive and open work environment. Even during tough times, creative organizations can find ways to offer rewards, new experiences, and development opportunities.

"We're not talking about bonus checks but recognition for what they bring to the job," Williams says. "Little things make a difference—thanks for speaking up, thanks for pitching in and helping. Organizations can help employees get more specific about what they want and what they're good at. It may be that opportunities exist right there, and their employees don't have to go looking for them elsewhere. Often, managers and their employees haven't had the time to talk about these things. Now is the time."

## Employee Engagement Tips

Employees leave jobs for a variety of reasons: their work lacks meaning, their skills seem wasted, opportunities to advance are scarce to nonexistent. Add in the nomadic career paths of younger generations, and the employee exodus following the end of this recession could be one of the busiest ever.

Your association isn't necessarily doomed to lose its best people, however. Smart (and inexpensive) steps now can help slow that revolving door.

**Offer opportunities.** "Keep interest levels high by allowing employees to work in different departments/locations, or give them opportunities to identify and pursue new competencies that will help them and their organization to grow.

"Create opportunities for developing soft skills, such as speaking to groups, planning events, or serving as an informal leader. They may not have an executive title, but by letting them practice and strengthen skills, they'll feel more connected to the organization.

"Encourage task flexibility. Help employees learn new skills on the job."—Caitlin Williams, career development coach

**Flex your schedule.** "Offer time flexibility. This tension tamer helps change the chemistry at work: Employees are happier doing their job when they can balance it with other responsibilities in their lives. For example, give them time off to attend their kid's game or see a school play."—Jamie Notter, vice president of organizational effectiveness, Management Solutions Plus

**Speak out.** "Provide feedback. Feedback needs to be timely, balanced, and specific. Offer positive reinforcement for jobs well done and improvement-oriented feedback for what could be better. And be specific. Tell them why they did a great job and what they should keep doing."—Lisa Crawford, president and founder of leadership-development consultancy the Crawford Group

**Recognize excellence.** "Give recognition. It doesn't cost a dime, it shows you care, reinforces a positive message, and cuts turnover. Simple things such as thanking them for speaking up about an issue, pitching in to help, or having a good attitude can make a difference. Overworked managers may feel too busy to do this, but it will pay off in the long run. For example, when a job at a competitor comes up, employees are more likely to think that things have progressed at the organization and stay put."—Lance Haun, vice president of outreach, MeritBuilder

**Maintain relationships.** "Establish an 'alumni association' of former colleagues. Too often managers forget about former colleagues or even downplay their past contribution. This has a negative impact on the motivation of the remaining people, who often have developed good relationships with their former colleagues. It might

also indicate that team-building efforts actually lack sincerity. Besides avoiding these types of negative effects, actively nurturing relationships with former colleagues might also be beneficial for the organization in the future."—Andris Strazds, lecturer at the Stockholm School of Economics

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