

It's no secret that there's a war for talent being waged in the workplace and the job market today, and the competition for qualified employees is intense. What does seem to be an unknown—to many employers—is what they should be doing to retain their hard-won employees to avoid losing them to competitors.

Retaining Your Top Talent: Tips for Seizing the Competitive Advantage

Throughout a decade of workplace surveys, Spherion has discovered specific needs among employees that employers can tap in designing effective retention programs. Our ongoing Emerging Workforce® Study reveals a disconnect between what workers want and what employers think they want. After the basics of compensation, benefits, and growth/earnings potential are met, what employees say they want most are time and flexibility. Yet these were last on the list of retention drivers identified by employers.

Our research also reveals that two-thirds of workers (68%) are not satisfied with their ability to maintain a balance between their work and personal lives. They are working too hard or too much and their personal time is suffering.

Programs employees want most

Given the evidence, employers who are interested in retaining their top talent should consider providing perks that address the need for time and flexibility. Among the most popular are:

- Flexible work hours—such as four 10-hour days with a 3-day weekend, part-time work, shift-work, or other creative scheduling. Our survey shows that 59% of the workforce wants flextime options.
- Telecommuting. Our survey revealed that 48% want to be able to work from home.
- Paid time off for community service. Almost one third of workers (32%) named this as a top priority.
- Ability to take unpaid leaves or sabbaticals. This was named by 23% as a priority.

Other options include onsite daycare and fitness facilities, cafeterias or bistros, dry cleaning outlets, car wash services and ATMs. Some companies offer onsite pharmacies, company nurses, medical hotlines, and smoking cessation and diet programs (which have the added advantage of fostering employee health).

In large metro areas, company-paid parking subsidies, subway and bus passes can offer high perceived value. Other effective programs include retention bonuses for top contributors, and coaching and mentoring programs to develop your best talent.

Advantages for employers

When you think about the cost of turnover—which ranges from an average of \$7,000 per individual hourly wage earner up to \$80,000 for a middle manager or technical professional—investing in preventive measures such as these can pay huge dividends.

Our research reveals that 96% of workers say that employers who help them meet family and personal obligations through options like flextime, job-sharing and telecommuting are much more attractive to them than employers who do not offer those options. The employers who offer such programs will be able to attract and retain workers more effectively than those who do not.

These tools can result in higher employee satisfaction and improved retention. According to our surveys, employers who understand and meet their employees' needs can expect that 85% of their workers will have greater job satisfaction, 56% increased trust and 43% increased loyalty to their employer.

How employers can identify best programs

There are a number of steps employers can take toward improved employee retention. The key is to be flexible and committed.

Research. Start by reading the extensive research already conducted. Speak to peers in other companies to learn what they have done, and consult workforce management experts.

Survey. While best to survey your entire employee population, if that just isn't feasible, conduct employee roundtables or focus groups in representative functions and locations. One approach is to create a list of possible perks your company could provide, and have each employee choose their top two or three from the list. Then implement the top two or three overall.

Experiment. Don't be afraid of trial and error. Try some of the programs employees say they want, and then go back and see if they've been effective. Or, find out if their needs have changed and they want other accommodations.

Adjust. Be prepared to flex every couple of years if some programs don't create the results you're looking for. Be sure to survey your workforce both before and after in order to compare responses and measure results.

Now, it's no secret that improving employee retention by implementing programs that address employees' prevailing needs is not difficult to do—and can produce very positive results when done properly.