



Don't fall victim to a false sense of security when it comes to the need to recruit and retain talent today. Despite an unemployment-rich marketplace, you need to take action now to ensure your top talent doesn't jump ship at the first signs of economic recovery.

The Importance of Talent in an Economic Downturn

Many employers today feel secure in the stability of their workforce. Unemployment is high, while opportunities are few. Competition among candidates for what little career mobility may exist is intense. There is little reason for companies to dedicate resources towards talent management and retention in this economic environment, right? Wrong!

False Security

When the job market is weak, employers can feel falsely secure, believing that the lack of abundant job opportunities will keep talent in place. Not so. As a recent Spherion study indicates, today's employees, regardless of the economic climate, feel secure in their abilities to earn a living, within or outside of the organization.

This brief hiatus from relatively low unemployment rates is just that – a hiatus. The reality of talent shortages will quickly become apparent at even the earliest signs of economic recovery. Dramatic demographic shifts will continue to make skilled workers a scarce and precious resource in the coming years.

If one views the recovery of the U.S. economy as inevitable, there is no doubt that the single most discriminating factor for business success will be an organization's talent level. Therefore, employers must continue to create opportunities for growth, achievement and recognition for employees, regardless of the cycle.

Readdress the Basics

Savvy employers have not mistaken a slowing economy for a long-term talent surplus. Smart organizations are staying focused on rallying the troops and ensuring that employee commitment, satisfaction, and ultimately, employee productivity remain strong. It not only helps businesses today but also protects them from losing talent, stability and momentum when the recovery begins.

When it comes to retaining valuable talent, there's no magic bullet. Prudent employers focus on the basics – creating a fair, equitable work environment that enables contribution, growth and recognition for work well done.

Focus on Strengths, Not Weaknesses

Remind managers within the organization about the importance of their role as teacher and mentor. At a time when companies are in high need of a productive, high-energy workforce, identifying and cultivating the strengths of each employee will pay off.

Consider:

- Creating a workplace where workers are unlimited in their capacity for training and development of their strengths and skills.
- Carving out roles to tap into an individual worker's strengths or opportunities for stretch assignments.

- Documenting your company “wisdom” – formally document in either print form, or online via a webcast, etc., the unwritten rules for how decisions are made and how people succeed in the organization. Use it to inform workers about the “ins and outs” of how to move ahead in the organization. For example, it may be well-known to some workers that a project won’t be approved unless it can be shown to directly impact customer service. Document and share these “unspoken” rules of success.
- Pairing high performers who can provide this “wisdom” with less experienced performers on special assignments or projects that will allow them to flex new muscles.

Reward High Performers

Employees in general see a lack of growth opportunities in their organizations, whether that is in training, promotional opportunities, pay or career advancement. In fact, according to the Spherion Emerging Workforce Study, only 24 percent of workers are satisfied with their growth and earnings potential. Now is the time for employers to carefully examine and bolster any weaknesses in these areas that could elevate employee turnover in the future.

Provide employees with positive feedback on their performance and the development they require to further advance their careers. Offer pathways to higher compensation – when the economic recovery begins – which are clear and understandable. Reward high-performing workers with exciting opportunities to think creatively in the workplace or take on assignments that expand their skills.

Also consider:

- Holding individual “career meetings” – not performance reviews – at least once a year with employees. No talk of current roles, only future application of one’s skill set, both inside and outside the current department or division.
- Ask employees who receive customer complaints to help redesign products and product service standards.
- Have the CEO personally recognize employee efforts that support the company mission.

Bolster Communications with Employees

Particularly during a time of economic unrest, employees need to understand how their role is relevant to the company’s success and what the organization is doing to weather this storm. Successful businesses will create a company culture that goes beyond the fundamentals of open communication, teamwork and positive morale.

Employees need to see that organizational *actions* match *words*. They want to understand the rationale behind company decisions and have clarity when it comes to the company’s financial and competitive standing.

Consider:

- Encouraging senior managers to break the pecking order and communicate with staff two levels down on relevant projects.
- Inviting staff outside of direct report groups to participate in staff meetings.
- Setting goals for managers to interact with employees on a regular basis.

Avoid Complacency

Managers face tough decisions daily on the allocation of time and resources during a down economy, but complacency in the areas impacting retention could be very costly. With labor being the largest portion of a company’s operating expenses, and the workforce growing smaller, less experienced and more ethnically diverse, human resource strategies play a critical role in post-recession success.

