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What Your Employees Want

How to meet employees' needs as this thing called life happens

Right now, most of your employees are seeking a new position ... outside your company. At least that is the finding of a recent study by Right Management. Out of 1,400 employees surveyed in North America in December of 2010, 84% planned to pursue new job opportunities in the next year. This was up from 60% the year before.

"Last year when I talked to folks in many different communities, they were just happy to have a job," says Kurt Johnson, vice president of client services at Right Management, a national talent and career management firm. "Many companies were going through furloughs, cutting back employee perks and freezing salaries, so what you had was the perfect storm for discontentment."

What drives people to stay with organizations may not be what you think. According to Johnson, most of Right Management's surveys and studies reveal that compensation is not as important as more intangible qualities such as respect (*see sidebar*).

Respect, however, looks different for many individuals. Much of this difference, according to local experts and entrepreneurs, is informed by an employee's stage in life. What may seem respectful in the workplace to a 22-year-old recent college graduate may seem completely irrelevant to the 46-year-old mother of four.

Mary Kausch, president at HR etc, says that understanding the prevailing attitudes and needs of employees as they enter different stages of life and promoting understanding between different age groups are key to growth in the bottom line. "It costs an organization too much to have turnover," she says. "When an employee does not feel respected by their supervisor and co-workers, they will not perform their best work. They will make mistakes."

Creating workplace awareness of prevailing attitudes people have over different life stages can help create a more understanding and productive work environment. Here is what your employees want but don't know how to ask for.

20s

Young and energetic, this group of employees offers the greatest potential when it comes to technology and new trends. Most grew up around blogging and social media. They will stay up late and log in to work over the weekend, but they also expect to have a life outside work. According to Jim Parker, president at The Mentor Connection, high self-esteem sets this group apart. "They grew up with reality television, so they have no trouble putting themselves out there," says Parker. "They also grew up being acknowledged for a job well done. So constructive feedback and criticism need to include what is done well."

Being Heard

Sharon Ayres, vice president of human resources at Moosylvania, a St. Louis-based advertising agency, makes sure the company's newest recruits have a seat at the table when it comes to big projects. "We



Mary Kausch chief people officer, HR etc!!!

HR etc!!

treat everybody like they could have the next great idea," she says. "We put junior people in the big pitch meetings, and we pick their brain and see what they think is cool. They receive respect - and from senior people on our team." The approach has proved to be effective for Moosylvania. Many of the company's senior employees started as interns seven years ago.

Collaboration and Fun

Most of the members of this group have just completed college, where they were surrounded by their contemporaries and were used to working together on projects. "Remember back to when you got your first job, and try to tap into that playful mind-set," says Kausch. "Work for this group is about collaboration, and they want to celebrate together as well."

Sensitivity to the need for fun is why employees at Moosylvania enjoy a work environment that includes video game consoles,

gym memberships and a collaborative atmosphere. “There are no walls in our space,” says Ayres. “If you want to put your headphones on and be focused, then you can. We allow employees to bring their dogs to work. And on Fridays we have a keg available in our lounge. We get a lot of work done, and people don’t want to leave.”

30s

Love, marriage and/or children have entered the lives of many in this age group – sometimes separately and sometimes as a package deal.

Caring for other people and developing their lives outside of work makes them great, empathetic employees, but it also means they will demand more in the way of health coverage, 401(k)s and other benefits. Holly Cunningham, president of Hollyberry Baking Co., has faced this transition with many of her employees. Because her business is small, it is difficult to compete on benefits, but Cunningham has found a way around it. “Because I can’t give many benefits, I try to be a resource to them and allow them to be open with me about personal goals,” she says. “I had a 30-something who wanted an investment property one year. By putting it on her goal sheet and coaching her through the process, she was able to purchase it the next year. That was not tied to what she was doing at work, but we treated it as though it were a work goal to connect work to her personal life.”

Let them be

Controlling these employees proves to be a daunting task. Since they have some professional experience under their belt, most experts recommend a more hands-off approach when it comes to time and structure. “Tell them what needs to be accomplished, and let them go,” says Kausch. “They can handle lots of change. The speed of change is phenomenal with this group. So build some consistent feedback mechanisms, and let them go.”

Parker echoes this sentiment. “Many in this group have become entrepreneurs,” he says. “So they have the confidence to innovate.”

Sharpening

According to Parker, individuals in this age group enjoy acknowledgement for a job well done, but they tend to be skeptical if the accolades seem saccharine. Ayres says a great way to “wet their whistle” is to offer them opportunities to network with colleagues on a larger scale. “We send

40s

As younger children, this group rebelled against their parents in almost every way, according to Parker. He should know, since he has a son in this age group. “This group knew they were going to have more education than their parents, and they became skeptical of their beliefs,” says Parker. “That has meant that they have a desire to be good parents while working instead of overworked and unable to be involved as a parent. And some have gone on to be very successful entrepreneurs.”

Flexibility

With a strong desire to be present and accessible at home, this group, more than others, needs flexibility. “Some of my employees in this group have teenagers, and others have kids in college,” says Cunningham. “We figure out the best scenario for each employee and are flexible with them. Time becomes super important. Sometimes I can’t give them a raise, but I can give vacation days. And I am pretty flexible when it comes to when they are in the office. So they have soft advantages in working for us.”

Cunningham’s approach is in line with what Parker has to say about employees in their 40s. “Family and work balance is critical to the 40-year-olds,” he says. “They need a structure that supports that. Don’t count the hours they work; count what they get done.”

Keep it fresh

Kausch says that some in this age group may suffer from what she calls “Boomer Burnout.” “This group needs you to shake it up a bit,” she says. “Give them some new meaning, and let them run with a new project. They have been in the work force long enough that they are hungry for what is next. And they are at an age when mortality is becoming a reality, so they are looking for new meaning.”

50s & 60s

This is the no-excuses group. Working 60 hours per week is how individuals in this age range have been successful, and for some of them, their hard work is a source of pride. “A lot of people in this group are workaholics,” says Parker. “This is truer of people in their later 50s and into their 60s. They have been loyal and worked hard, and that is how they have defined themselves.”

Put their energy to good use

Members of this group are used to working hard, so make sure they have meaningful tasks to accomplish; otherwise they may feel tossed aside. “If they have taken care of themselves, then they can run circles around younger workers with their energy and dedication,” says Kausch. “Some are looking at 30 or more years’ worth of work in one place. Make sure this person gets their time to refresh, but also make good use of their experience.”

Along with all of the idealism and hard work comes a certain amount of ego. So individuals in this group tend to be the ones who will point out and make noise when they are not being heard. “Don’t do things that would imply that they don’t matter anymore,” says Parker. “They need to be appreciated for the experience they bring to the table.”

Connect the dots

Most of those in this age group now find themselves in management or leadership positions, so it is incumbent upon them (however seemingly painful) to be the ones to bridge the gap between themselves and the younger age groups. Parker suggests that business owners encourage them to do so. “This is where they have to take responsibility to reach out to the 20-year-olds,” he says. “When you combine street smarts with technology and fresh thinking, you create the potential for something great. The key to this whole thing is how significant it would be if they will reach out first. It means a bigger bottom line and less turnover.” Both Kausch and Parker recommend getting some executive coaching or creating facilitated discussions with the intent of bridging the age gap. “Ask questions like, ‘How do we blend your experience with the latest knowledge from academia?’” Kausch says. “Get them talking about things that they both value, and give people feedback on their performance as it relates to bridging that gap.” ■