

Use Tech For That Personal Touch

By **Melanie Rembrandt**
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You've spent large amounts of time and money working with headhunters, searching the Internet, reviewing résumés and interviewing candidates to find the perfect new hire. Now, what can you do to retain that employee cost-effectively?

Retention Strategies

To have a successful work environment that motivates people to perform well in today's economy, you need to communicate with employees on a regular basis and respond quickly to their comments, questions and suggestions. By utilizing your relationship management skills, you can reduce turnover rates, build trust and even improve productivity levels.

"If you believe that relationships are key for long-term success, then you have to talk to customers and employees to remain in business," states Theresa Welbourne, Ph.D., a professor of organizational behavior and human resources management at the University of Michigan Business School, Ann Arbor, Mich., and CEO of eePulse Inc., an enterprise-wide relationship management application service provider in Ann Arbor, Mich. "Many employers are so afraid of what their employees will say that they don't ask, but you have to ask to collect systematic, representative and real-time data, and you need to be committed to respond to something," says Welbourne.

After years of extensive research, studying organizational behavior and companies going through change, Welbourne realized that traditional methods of data collection didn't work in today's fast-paced work environment. "Relationship management requires ongoing communications, paying attention to things that are short-term tactical issues and teaching managers how to communicate to build trust," says Welbourne. "A key ingredient of high-impact relationship management is constant, real-time communication with the people who are important to your success."

To obtain current data, Welbourne turned

to technology. She combined measurement and communication to create an innovative e-mail survey process that measures the pulse or energy levels of employees on a regular basis. Northwest Memorial Hospital (NMH), Chicago, used her process in an effort to train employees and find out its specific issues in real-time. More than 33 percent of NMH employees answered the weekly e-mail questions on a confidential basis. Managers were able to provide quick feedback, discover potential problems before they escalated and form task forces regarding specific issues.

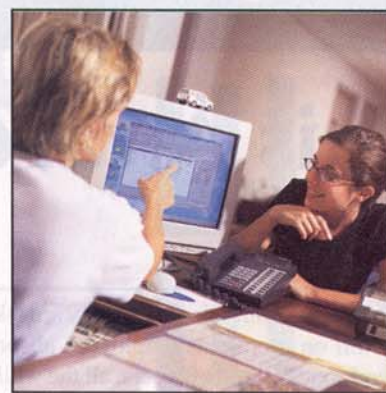
"The ability to collect people data in real-time has saved NMH at least several hundred thousand dollars this year alone," says Dean Manheimer, senior vice president of human resources management, NMH. "Focus groups have helped us immensely in the past, but they simply can't be done in a way that's both timely and representative of the entire employee population."

"It's important to listen to your employees and take advantage of technology to provide them with the latest knowledge, training and communications tools they need to do their jobs and feel like part of the team."

—Greg Hammerman
Techstreet

Gregg Hammerman, president of Techstreet, Ann Arbor, Mich., a provider of information resources and management tools for technical professionals, also listened to his employees to successfully improve retention rates and productivity levels. When he discovered that his staff felt anxious about their work levels, he implemented an Oracle database system that gives customers online assistance and significantly reduces incoming calls.

Employees are no longer overworked and they feel valuable to the company. "Relationship management has worked for us in making both our employees and customers happy, and it's also helped our bottom-line cost effectively."



Like Techstreet, TerraSeer, Ann Arbor, Mich., software tools and consulting provider for the spatial analysis market, also places an importance on communication to retain employees. "I believe that trust and the environment are the key factors in retaining employees, and it's not necessary to have a lot of money to do so," says MaryAnn Labant, vice president of marketing, TerraSeer. "E-mail provides a wonderful open-door communications tool where employees can be honest and straightforward with their employers, and I can see our company using other technology tools in the future to enhance communications as we grow and our retention methods change."

Both Techstreet and TerraSeer are technology companies that have successfully survived the economic downturn and maintain extremely low turnover rates. Their relationship-management skills have helped to ease employee anxieties and build a trusting work environment with open-door communications policies that work.

To build relationships that will help increase your company's retention rates and create an energized, more productive work environment, give employees a way to voice their concerns. Then listen to their comments and respond quickly.

"When you ask employees about their workplace, they give you feedback," says Welbourne. "If you're unwilling to respond, productivity suffers, and when productivity suffers, customer service, sales and performance suffer." ♦

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