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Reasons Employees Leave Go Deeper Than Paycheck

By Kathy Gurchiek

Money is not the real reason people choose to leave their jobs.

Along the way they become disengaged and disillusioned, Leigh Branham, SPHR, told HR professionals attending the session, "The 7 Hidden Reasons Employees Leave: Recognize the Subtle Signs and Act Before It's Too Late," at the SHRM Annual Conference.

He is the author of several books, including one on which his concurrent session was based. Both book and session incorporated data from surveys the Saratoga Institute conducted with 19,700 employees.

"This session is not about turnover, but what happens before turnover [occurs]. This is about disengagement," the founder and principal of the Overlook Park, Kan.-based [Keeping the People Inc.](#) said.

"We can't afford to have a bunch of disengaged employees walking around, never mind turnover," especially as the war for talent gears up, he said, noting that the 1980s mind-set that turnover is an acceptable cost of doing business is no longer true.

Whether disengagement leads to leaving the employer or "warm seat retention," the result is costly as productivity and morale suffer, customer service is disrupted and replacements must be recruited and trained, he said.

While he said there are no silver bullets, he did offer what he called "perfectly good lead bullets" for the seven hidden reasons employees leave:

Reason 1: The job or workplace is not what the employee expected.

Forty percent of turnover is in the first six months of a new job, he said, but it can be prevented by giving every job candidate a realistic job preview. Some organizations require candidates to watch a video showing a typical day in the position they are interviewing for, and some require candidates to shadow an employee for a day or take a battery of tests to determine if they are the right fit for the job, Branham said.

Reason 2: The job doesn't fit the employee's talents and interests.

Hiring in a hurry is the biggest pitfall of hiring, he said. Instead, hire for fit and match the candidate's talents with the employer's needs.

Reason 3: The employee receives little or no feedback or coaching.

Give timely, specific and constructive feedback and coaching, but bear in mind the differences in worker demographics, Branham said.

Traditionalists—those born before 1945—see a lack of feedback as an indication nothing is wrong, he said, while baby boomers typically want feedback annually, backed up with a lot of documentation. Gen Xers will ask for feedback, and millennials want it instantly, whenever they want it, and to have it easily accessible.

This means, for example, that a boomer manager will need to readjust his or her thinking about giving feedback and coaching to Gen X or millennial employees. However, those employees must also take responsibility for asking for feedback and coaching, Branham said.

Reason 4: The employee has no hope for career growth.

Typical scenarios include the perception that growth with the employer is limited; that the selection process for moving up is unfair or inefficient; that the employer does not promote from within; that promotion decisions are unfair or rely on favoritism; and that training is insufficient.

“Give people the tools they need to drive their own career bus,” Branham said, while pointing out the generational differences that influence employee views about training to move up.

Traditionalists tend to believe that others can learn the hard way, as they did. Boomers think that too much training will lead to employees leaving for better opportunities, while Gen Xers think that the more workers learn the more workers are likely to stay, and millennials see continuous learning as a way of life.

As with feedback, managers should keep the needs of the different generations in mind, and employees need to take responsibility for inquiring about career growth opportunities.

Reason 5: The employee feels devalued and unrecognized.

Often this is attributable to poor pay practices, missing tools and resources, treating employees like children, not showing appreciation toward employees, or not listening to them. Instead, approach employees and ask for their input, listen to what they say, and respond to it.

Reason 6: The employee feels overworked and stressed.

This can be attributable to expecting the worker to do more with fewer resources; benefits that are not tailored to the workforce; expecting workers to sacrifice family and personal life in favor of the employer; or working in an environment of abuse, harassment and insensitivity.

Tailor “a culture of giving” to employee needs, Branham said. Don’t overlook the value of soft benefits that afford workers more work/life balance.

Again, keep generational differences in mind. Traditionalists say “support me in shifting the balance”; boomers say “help me balance everyone else and find meaning myself”; Gen Xers say “give me balance now, not when I’m 65”; and millennials say “work isn’t everything; I need flexibility so I can balance all my activities.”

Reason 7: The employee has no trust or confidence in his or her leaders.

It can be the difference between the mind-set “give ’em an inch and they’ll take a mile” and “give and they will give back,” Branham said. Good leaders put the employees first, nurture them so they give great service, and adopt a servant mentality.

The CEO of an airline that helps distribute the snacks when he flies or helps clean the plane after passengers have disembarked is the kind of leader, Branham said, that employees will follow anywhere.