

Building Employee Job Satisfaction

Max Messmer

As the economy gains momentum and businesses begin expanding once again, employers are recognizing the increasing importance of retaining their top performers. The key to keeping these valued employees is maintaining a high level of job satisfaction.

As human resources professionals, you play an integral role in ensuring the appeal of your firm's work environment. The practices, policies, and programs that your group establishes are the foundation for efforts throughout the organization to maintain high morale and retain staff.

Most people do not leave their employers for one reason alone. Many issues generally shape an individual's perceptions about his or her position and the company as a whole. Building job satisfaction therefore requires a multipronged approach. Following are strategies that are designed to improve employee motivation and, ultimately, retention rates.

OFFER BALANCE

According to a recent survey commissioned by Robert Half International of 1,400 chief financial officers (CFOs), the employee benefit workers value most is flexible schedules. It is no secret that workloads are rising at many firms and that long hours often are the norm. At the same time, a growing number of professionals must meet mounting per-

sonal obligations, including caring for children and elderly relatives. For this "sandwich generation" of employees, increased control of their time enables them to balance competing demands, which can boost their morale and loyalty to the company.

Flexible schedules can include telecommuting and work-from-home options, or it can simply mean that an employee can come in early and leave a little early on occasion.

In addition to benefiting employees, flexible schedules can also be an asset for companies. Staggered work hours, for example, can extend the span of time in which employees are available to assist customers. As HR managers, you can play a role in promoting these practices with senior management and recommending policies that allow such scheduling.

Work-life balance is stressed at Vision Service Plan (VSP), based in Rancho Cordova, California. VSP was recently ranked the No. 10 Best Company to Work For by *Fortune* magazine and the No. 3 Best Place to Work in Information Technology by *Computerworld* magazine. "A true respect for the individuals that make up our team is one of the qualities I think sets VSP apart from other employers," said VSP's president and CEO, Roger Valine. "We support our employees' need for a healthy balance between their work and their lives."

PROVIDE INTELLECTUAL CHALLENGE

Most people will have a variety of managers and assignments over the course of their careers, but the skills and experience they gain over the years will remain with them. Those who are encouraged to share new ideas have greater job satisfaction. In addition, the chance to accept diverse assignments enables workers to hone their technical and interpersonal skills, continually upgrading their knowledge base.

Through management training and other communication, you should counsel department leaders to allow staff members to develop different approaches to everyday tasks. Interesting work keeps employees engaged, which is the key to retention.

Having opportunities for professional development and growth is not only a central concern of many employees, but it also benefits employers by creating a more skilled

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workforce. Ask managers at your firm to facilitate course enrollment, conference attendance, and other industry-related activities for their staff members. If your organization has a limited training budget, consider bringing in guest speakers to talk to certain groups at brown-bag lunches. Sending a few employees to outside seminars and having them train others in what they learned can also keep expenses in check.

Do not limit training and education programs strictly to technical topics. For instance, accountants need to know more than just the latest financial regulations to be successful in their roles. Enhancing broader

skills such as interpersonal communication, public speaking, and time management can also maximize employee contributions to your organization and give staff a greater sense of fulfillment.

AVOID MICROMANAGEMENT

The chance to take ownership of their work is a powerful motivating factor for many people. Managers at your firm should be encouraged to demonstrate faith in their employees' abilities and allow them to come up with their own solutions whenever practical.

The Great Places to Work Institute, which produces Best Companies lists for many organizations, reports that autonomy is a key component of satisfaction at work. As an employee at a top-ranked firm noted: "My job allows me the latitude to make decisions and implement them in order to get the job done. At the end of the day, I can look back and see what I have been able to accomplish with a great feeling of satisfaction."

PROVIDE ONGOING FEEDBACK

As HR leaders, you know how common it is to hold annual performance appraisals; this is standard at most companies. These reviews are valuable to managers and employees alike. In fact, in a recent survey that our firm commissioned of 612 workers age 18 or older employed in professional environments, 77 percent of respondents said they consider performance reviews to be at least somewhat beneficial, with 40 percent seeing them as very beneficial.

Although receiving input once a year is useful, employees need feedback on a more regular basis to stay motivated and invested in their jobs. Otherwise, they may be blind-

sided by negative comments when they meet with their supervisors. Advise managers at your organization to supplement formal performance reviews covering long-term career goals with frequent meetings to discuss with staff what they are and are not doing well. This will help employees stay on track with their job requirements and professional objectives year-round.

DEVELOP CAREER PATHS

Career-advancement opportunities are another important contributor to satisfaction at work. When our company recently asked 150 executives why good employees quit their jobs, the number-one reason was limited opportunities for advancement. The best employees are ambitious and may not stay in a position long if it lacks growth potential.

Encourage managers at your firm to show their staff members how they can achieve their career objectives within the organization. Managers should work with employees to develop customized plans for reaching their goals and provide access to resources such as training programs that will help them get there. If offering promotions is not an immediate option, supervisors at your company should consider assigning employees to projects that will prepare them to assume greater responsibilities in the future.

PAY EMPLOYEES WELL

Money is not everything, but it is, of course, one of the primary reasons people work. Though some employees report that an attractive workplace is even more important than money, your company cannot expect to retain top performers unless you also pay competitively. If staff members are under-

compensated, you risk sending the message that they are not valuable to your organization's success. Salary levels should be reassessed on a regular basis to make sure they are at least on a par with salaries for similar positions in other companies.

Stress the importance of a competitive compensation structure with senior management to get their buy-in. Identify resources that will help department leaders to stay in

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touch with prevailing salaries from year to year. Remind them that the most talented employees will always be in demand, so it is ideal to pay at least a little more than your competitors.

OFFER ATTRACTIVE BENEFITS

Medical coverage is usually considered a basic; however, your firm's employees might be asking for greater details about health benefits than in years past. Make sure to announce clearly any coming increases in deductibles and copays due to escalating premiums. Make sure staff know that although your firm is doing its best to offset rising health-care costs for its employees, much of this is beyond your control as an employer. If your business has been able to keep employee health-care out-of-pocket expenses in check, advising managers to emphasize this fact with staff can give workers another reason to feel good about the company.

To truly stand out as an employer and to maintain high morale and retention rates, however, you will need to go beyond the basics and take additional steps to support

your staff members. In *Working Mother* magazine's latest annual report of the 100 Best Companies for Working Mothers, 99 percent of the firms cited said they offer elder-care referral services, compared with 21 percent nationwide; 94 percent provided child-care referral services, versus 19 percent nationwide. Take-home meals, therapeutic massage, and dependent-care flexible spending accounts were other common benefits that the top-ranked organizations offered.

Retirement savings plans also are critical, particularly considering the large group of baby boomers expected to leave the workforce in the near future. Workers today realize that they must take a more proactive role in planning for retirement and are placing

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increasing pressure on their employers to provide a wide array of retirement investment options. When our company asked 1,400 CFOs which benefits workers value most, these programs came in second only to flexible schedules.

RECOGNIZE ACHIEVEMENTS

Praise is a powerful motivator. People who feel they are appreciated tend to do better work and are less inclined to leave for other opportunities.

When someone exceeds expectations, instruct managers to acknowledge the contribution publicly, such as offering praise during a staff meeting or mentioning the accomplishment in a memo. The recognition not only motivates the employee, but it also highlights the type of behavior your company

would like others to emulate. To reward teams, consider off-site activities or lunches. You may even want to implement a formal companywide recognition program to applaud top performers in such areas as customer service and innovation.

Also stress to supervisors at your firm the importance of acknowledging individuals who stand out as team players because they have accepted added responsibilities or increased workloads. Their contributions can be just as valuable as those of employees who exceed specific performance expectations.

PROMOTE OPEN COMMUNICATION

Another contributor to job satisfaction is open and honest communication; 52 percent of executives and 30 percent of workers said so when surveyed recently by Robert Half International about factors that negatively affect the workplace mood. Many leaders concede that they need to improve their interactions with staff members. In another survey, managers cited lack of communication as the biggest mistake they have ever made as supervisors.

Respect is key to the communication process. As one satisfied worker told the Great Places to Work Institute: "I know that when I have a concern or difference of opinion with my supervisor, I can count on him to give me unbiased feedback and a different perspective. Whether he agrees with me or not, I know that he will give honest opinions and offer as many solutions as possible."

Candid communication is particularly important during times of change, such as mergers, restructuring, or expansion. Company guidelines that your group establishes during these situations should encourage supervisors to share as much information as

they can about upcoming events. You should let employees know what is planned, why it is taking place, and how it affects them—and that you encourage questions and expressions of concern. If people are blindsided by the news and provided with no outlet for responding, they may become resentful and distrustful. Also, when staff members are given minimal information, they may jump to erroneous conclusions, often fearing the worst in new situations.

The way managers at your firm choose to communicate is also critical. E-mail has become a leading form of communication, but it is not the ideal choice in many situations. Point out to leaders that when informing employees of news that directly affects their work—such as notable changes in departmental practices or the appointment of a new supervisor—it is best to do so in person. This gives managers the opportunity to clarify complex or sensitive issues and answer questions. They can then follow up the interaction with an e-mail or memo reiterating key points.

ALLOW INVOLVEMENT IN DECISION MAKING

Employees at all levels want to play a role in developing the strategies that affect their work. Those who are given this opportunity are more invested in the outcome of their projects because they have a greater connection to the initiatives at hand.

Brainstorming sessions are an excellent method of soliciting input. Since the goal of these meetings is to generate as many ideas as possible, help managers understand the importance of avoiding overly judgmental or critical comments. A relaxed environment will encourage everyone to participate.

Weekly staff meetings are another useful way to promote involvement in key decisions.

However, advise leaders that they shouldn't rely too heavily on these discussions. Some people may readily speak up during these meetings, but others may prefer to share their comments individually.

SET REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

The level of stress associated with a position also can greatly affect job satisfaction. Even your firm's best employees cannot "give 110 percent" all the time; they will burn out, leading to poor morale and turnover. So, advise managers to reevaluate expectations periodically to make sure current workloads are realistic. Although it is acceptable to challenge staff members, they should not be

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Encourage supervisors to support staff interests whenever possible. Sometimes a critical project may require building a diverse team quickly, but before asking employees to multitask, leaders should think about whether the extra activity is in line with individual skills and career goals. People who willingly take on additional work will be more successful at the tasks at hand than those who do so reluctantly.

BE CONSISTENT

To maintain high job satisfaction among employees, managers need to be sure that their words and actions are consistent. If supervisors at your company ask staff members for their suggestions as to what types of employees they

should hire in the near term, for example, they must give serious consideration to the input they receive. Although managers are not obligated to implement every recommendation, advise them to follow through on the best ideas, or else employees may believe their opinions were never truly valued.

At training sessions and in company policy books, encourage managers at your organization to communicate performance standards consistently. Completing a project behind schedule should not generate a public reprimand for a team one month and be forgivable for another group a few weeks later. Employees need a clear idea of expectations and should know that supervisors will apply standards in a fair and predictable manner.

MAKE YOURSELF AVAILABLE

No matter how busy managers become, you should encourage them to maintain an open-

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door policy, except during private conversations. It is critical to make employees feel comfortable enough to turn to their supervisors for guidance. Staff members who feel at ease when communicating with supervisors are more likely to remain loyal to their department and organization.

MANAGE UNDERPERFORMERS EFFECTIVELY

Most employees truly want to succeed in their positions and value all feedback—even criticism, if it is articulated appropriately. Instruct managers to discuss their concerns with employees privately. Sometimes there

are reasons not readily apparent that cause someone to fail to meet standards. For instance, personal problems or a conflict with a colleague may be contributing to delays with projects. Supervisors at your firm should collaborate with each person to develop a strategy for improvement.

Make sure procedures manuals at your organization require managers to take some form of action when employees are not meeting minimal performance requirements. Neglecting these responsibilities can create resentment and dissatisfaction in staff members who must work with underperforming employees.

OFFER MENTORING PROGRAMS

The level of professional development support your company provides can also influence job satisfaction and retention. Access to mentoring programs can help new and junior employees become more effective in their roles. These programs also allow mentors to develop their leadership skills.

You do not have to set up a formal program to achieve results—you just need to select participants carefully and make sure they understand the goals. Do you want mentors to focus on acclimating new employees to your company's corporate culture? Or is the primary objective to build an employee's knowledge in a particular area? You may find it valuable to match "protégés" with several mentors over a period of a year so they can gain a wide range of insights.

PROVIDE ADEQUATE STAFFING

Few HR managers today are fortunate enough to report that their companies are sufficiently staffed. After years of difficult

business conditions, many firms have only recently started to add personnel once again. Understaffing can quickly reach a point at which it is counterproductive and leads to employee burnout. When people constantly have to cover responsibilities outside of their typical duties, job satisfaction can erode quickly if no relief is in sight.

If your company does not have the budget or ongoing need for more full-time staff, consider bringing in temporary or project professionals to help during peak workloads. If you are with a large organization, make sure all managers recognize that this option is available to them. It can help them reduce stress

levels, which can boost morale and lead to greater productivity.

Companies with high levels of employee satisfaction realize the importance of incorporating employee-friendly policies into the corporate culture. They take their staff members' concerns and interests seriously and solicit input regularly to ensure that they are addressing the most important issues. Morale is not something that can be improved at the flick of a switch. However, by developing an approach that takes into account the unique needs of your workforce and gaining buy-in from senior management and department leaders, you can make lasting improvements in employee job-satisfaction levels.

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