

## **Go on, make the staff happy: half the battle of employee retention knows why they stay**

Result: As many as two out of three employees around the country will be minting resumes and shooting them out as soon as they are certain better times have hit, according to a study last fall by the Society for Human Resource Management.

Whether Baton Rouge will be party to this national staffing shuffle isn't clear, though. Local executives have known for a long time that Baton Rouge runs on its own economic watch. While the rest of the country is dancing to "We're in the Money," Baton Rouge might be singing "Stormy Weather."

Still, many local organizations--even those in the soggy petrochemical sector--are turning their attention to what makes employees stick around, come hell or high natural gas prices.

"Young people today are job-hopping," says John Reed, a retired ExxonMobil executive who is now a training consultant teaching business at the University of Phoenix, an online university with a local campus that caters to professionals. "If the company is no longer going to keep them cradle to grave, they have got to take care of themselves."

It's not just about making people feel good. Taking care of staff feeds the bottom line, too. The company that can keep staff around is better able to concentrate on serving customers and clients while the competition is enmeshed in hiring and training new employees.

In fact, in times of trouble--and possibly layoffs--it becomes even more important to think about whether your people love coming to work or count the minutes until 4:56, when they can run out the door.

"You still have to be lean, but you have to get meaner," Reed says. And, oddly enough, getting meaner involves nurturing employees.

Here is a breakdown of what keeps staff happy and a few hints on how to provide it to them, no matter what shape the economy is in:

### **Opportunity to grow**

"Every year, when we look at employee surveys, we find that employees, number one, are looking for a chance to develop," says Bill Phillips, president of Success Labs, formerly Career Assessment Services, in Baton Rouge. "It's not about the money they get paid. It's about learning marketable skills."

Many employees want to advance within their own companies. Reed says most of his MBA students at the University of Phoenix plan to give their employers first shot at promoting them after they gain their credentials, even if their companies haven't played an active role in helping them get to the next level.

"A lot of people who come to the University of Phoenix have hit a glass ceiling," he says.

Even in the turnover-happy food and beverage industry, which is experiencing a boom around Baton Rouge, giving staff a sense of opportunity is vital.

"I tell the wait staff that if you'll treat your area (of the restaurant) as your enterprise, you can make that what you want," says Miriam Juban, co-owner and operator of Juban's restaurant and president of the Louisiana Restaurant Association.

Even though most of its staff is part-time college students, Juban's goes so far as to offer 401(k)s to give them a chance to get a head start on saving for the future.

Around the country, companies are making a more concerted effort to hire staff internally. Not only does it save the company recruiting costs, but it also gives employees something to shoot for.

### **A sense of belonging**

For years, technical employees at petrochemical companies learned their jobs in a vacuum. Now the emphasis at ExxonMobil is making staff at every level keenly aware of the role they play in the company as a whole. A training program called Exxon University is actually designed to give the company's process operators, who run plant equipment, a look at the big picture.

"They learn the theory behind the process they are operating," says area training supervisor Nelsene Peters. "Then they talk about what is happening upstream that could impact their unit, and what is happening downstream."

Getting those employees to think beyond their traditional "turn-the-knob" roles and to venture into problem solving and critical thinking gives them a more satisfying stake in the company.

Greg Walker, CEO of Gulf States Health Services, says that showing the whole staff, from receptionists to chiefs, how they participate in the overall success of the company has helped Gulf States stay competitive despite nurse-poaching advances from larger health care firms. Walker expects to add 300 employees to his staff of 600 by year's end.

Walker, whose company runs rehabilitation hospitals, says a key to holding on to his employees is making everyone, from receptionists to nurses to the medical records personnel, feel connected to the care of the patients.

"I am competing with companies who can give cars if they sign a three-year deal," he says. "People want to know they are contributing in some way. Since you spend half of your time at work, you want to know you are contributing."

### **Nurturing bosses**

"Fifty to 60 percent of your job satisfaction comes from your boss," Phillips of Success Labs says. "People will stick with a good boss."

Good bosses, Phillips says, nurture employees, keeping an eye out for moves that will help them become more successful and steering them away from bad choices. They include staff in decisions and even relate to the personal challenges that employees face.

And giving employees the flexibility in work hours to pursue outside interests can make up for crushing workloads.

"You have to care about whether or not you're burning them out, and make up for it by saying, 'Yeah, you have to do more this week, but next week you'll get a three-day weekend,'" Phillips says.

Miriam and Carole Juban go so far as to mother their staffs, Miriam Juban says. It works. "With young people, I find that if you listen, sometimes, that's really helpful. They really just want to tell you something."