

Here today, gone tomorrow

Some thoughts on workforce turnover and how to address it



Like many non-profits—and organizations in other sectors, too—you may be concerned about your workforce walking out the door. Whether it's happening experiencing it already or you're worried about it in the future, attrition is never fun to contemplate. It's certainly unsettling and can be highly disruptive, potentially affecting performance, reputation, and morale, and it can even have financial impacts. So what can you do to cope with staff loss? Below are some thoughts that may help you manage interpret and manage turnover more effectively.

1. Understand not all attrition is a problem.

Some departures aren't bad—in fact, they may help your organization. Some people may be unmotivated, unreliable, have poor attitudes, or just don't have the right skills to deliver. Others have skills you can easily replace, perhaps even at a lower cost. In these situations, turnover may actually be desirable. It can improve outcomes, change the work environment for the better, and even save you money. You should focus retention efforts on the people you want to keep—high performers, positive influences, hard-to-fill positions, etc. It can certainly be hard to willingly let people go, or even encourage them to leave, especially when others need to pick up the slack until someone new comes on board. However, if members of your workforce are causing problems, it can be worth seeing them off—despite potential short-term staffing headaches.

2. Find out why good people are leaving.

When you have undesirable attrition, you need to take the time to find out why. After all, if you don't know the causes of turnover, it's difficult to address it. Data and exit analyses are two great ways to learn more about your why people are leaving. Data sheds light on the demographics of attrition (age, gender, etc.), enabling you to see trends that require closer examination. Exit analyses, primarily based on interviews and surveys, provide information on why people are departing. Together, the two methods can be quite powerful in pinpointing the reasons people are moving on. You can use this information to develop cohort-specific, targeted retention approaches that may help stem the tide.



3. Expect some turnover you just can't stop.

Explaining attrition doesn't always translate into the ability to stop it completely. Some people—for example, those focused solely on salary or career advancements neither of you think you can offer, or staff retiring, changing careers, or experiencing personal issues—are going to leave no matter what you do. You shouldn't feel compelled to target every single issue people identify in exit surveys or interviews. You should focus on the things over which they have control, and the people you want to keep. At the same time, however, take care not to undersell what you can offer. Challenges that may seem insurmountable may actually, with a little creativity, have effective solutions (see #4, below). There are a range of strategies that may combat compensation, career growth, and other demands, even if they won't appeal to everyone.

4. Institute targeted programs to retain key people.

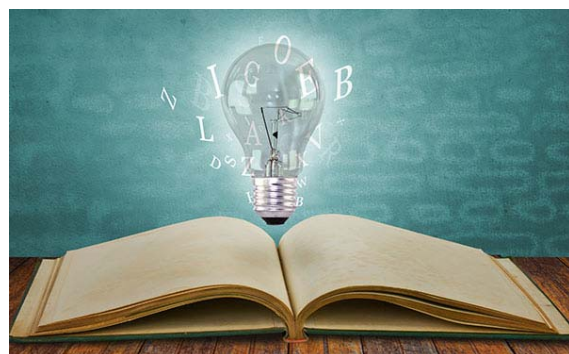
When organizations notice common issues affecting staff and volunteers they want to keep, they need to critically evaluate conditions and look for potential answers. Some problems—e.g., poor communication, feelings of disengagement, or lack



of professional development—may have easily identifiable corresponding actions. With other issues, such as limited advancement opportunities, low pay, or lack of visible impact, solutions may be less direct. Alternative approaches to address trends—for example, appeals to the mission, empowerment to impact outcomes, education programs, or non-monetary incentives (e.g., time off or employer-paid educational opportunities)—may be highly effective. Here, it is important to interpret true workforce motivators, and focus on the right types of people.

5. Keep and share institutional knowledge.

When key people do leave, you may hear things like, “She’s the only one who knows how to do it!” Staff often leave with their unique knowledge of the organization, the population(s) it serves, its processes, and other information. Their departures can leave organizations in a bind, so it’s important to retain and pass along this “institutional knowledge.” You should ensure key processes are fully documented and kept current. Ideally, knowledge management should be employed to capture and make accessible things like standard operating procedures, job aids, forms, best practices, and data. It’s also worth noting the importance of on-boarding and, where possible, overlapping end and start dates.



6. Be patient but proactive with replacements.

One of the most challenging things about attrition is replacing the people who leave, especially since their replacements likely to be one-for-one exchanges. Good selection—made possible in part by an accurate definition of minimum requirements and a sound evaluation of candidates—is critical, and it’s important to avoid the urge to “settle” just to get someone on board. Moreover, even the best hires may not have intimate organizational knowledge—these things take time. While you need to have realistic expectations for how quickly new hires will be able to meaningfully contribute, you can minimize “prep time” and expedite results with a proactive on-boarding program that goes beyond the basics. Knowledge management, as discussed in #5 above, can be extremely helpful both in augmenting on-boarding and supporting on-going performance.

7. Keep track of how you’re doing.

Measuring the effectiveness of attrition programs and replacement strategies is critical. For example, if the same attrition trends continue despite new “sales pitches,” improvements to the work environment, expansion of career opportunities, etc., something isn’t working. It may be, for example, that retention initiatives themselves don’t resonate, actual program content doesn’t meet workforce needs, or people just aren’t aware of the changes. Similarly, if new hires aren’t meeting expectations, or they’re not sticking around long term, you’re probably not recruiting, selecting, and/or preparing them well enough. You aren’t tracking data, however, you won’t recognize systemic problems, and you can’t adjust your approaches to affect the groups you most want to keep, and get effective replacements when retention doesn’t work.

Summary

Every organization faces the possibility of turnover. Some may actually be beneficial, and you can limit “bad attrition” if you know why staff leave and put programs in place that will resonate with the “right” people. When the inevitable happens and key employees move on, it’s possible to cope, if you hire well and prepare new hires effectively. In the end, the organizations that keep their best people while taking the worst case scenarios in stride will be the most successful over time.

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