The Secret to Keeping IT Workers

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In the advertising specialty industry, many a prized asset walks out the door each night, only to return in the morning. I am referring to your employees, of course. Among your most valued employees are those working in information technology.

IT employees play increasingly critical roles in business. Once relegated to support functions, they are now deeply enmeshed in marketing (Do you Tweet? Do you have a website? Do you take orders over the Internet?), finance (Do you use computers to maintain your books, send money to vendors and accept payments from customers?), supply chain (When was the last time you mailed or phoned in an order?) and manufacturing (How many of your machines operate via computer?), among other functions.

Lose a valued IT employee and you run the risk of losing a piece of your business, or negatively affecting your efficiency. Plus, replacing that employee can be expensive. Studies have shown that the cost of replacing an employee is 70% to 200% of that employee's annual salary. If that employee goes to a direct competitor, the cost to you can be much more. Which is why retaining these employees should be a high priority.

What About Money?

Let's start by talking cold, hard cash. Yes, people want decent, competitive salaries. They can be motivated by money. And salaries and perks (vacation time, company cars, tuition reimbursement) are ways to show respect. But if you think the primary way to retain IT employees is to focus on financial incentives, you are mistaken.

Many a well-paid IT worker has walked when a boss has not met his or her non-financial needs. A recent survey of what IT workers wanted found that pay was not near the top of the list. Their highest six priorities were, in order of importance: being treated with respect, supportive and effective management, full health benefits, full tuition reimbursement, opportunities for advancement and opportunities for training specific to IT. A high base salary was number 11, pay for overtime hours worked was number 21 and pay for performance/bonuses was number 24.

Create Career Paths

If pay is not the primary focus of your retention strategy, what should be? Make sure your top performers can see how their careers will develop within your organization. Show them how they can grow professionally and how they can advance within your company. Career advancement is really important to most top-notch IT workers.

Let your IT folks know you are willing to make commitments to their advancement and that of the IT function. You need to be willing to pay for their training. Many surveys have shown that training – learning what is the latest and greatest – is particularly important to IT employees because they work in a rapidly changing environment. Keep your IT hardware and software reasonably up to date. If you still use Windows XP and most of the companies in your city (and this includes employers in other industries) have moved to Windows Vista or Windows 7, don't be surprised when your best IT people make a bee-line to these other companies. They do not want to be stuck at an employer unwilling to make sufficient investments in IT.

The need for training extends beyond technical topics to management. Retaining top IT staff requires training managers and supervisors in the skills required to lead their subordinates. Do employees feel respected? Do they know what's required

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of them? Are they motivated? Are they excited about their jobs? The skills of your IT managers are key to your ability to retain the best IT workers; make sure those management skills are well honed and kept up to date.

If you lack an employee recognition program, consider instituting one. Recognition can be done informally, as when the company's owner personally thanks an employee for a job well done. It could also be a formal recognition program, where employees, say, with five or 10 years of service are offered a choice of gifts. Have a Wall of Fame that shows the progression of your valued IT workers as they have moved up the organization. Show your appreciation early and often.

Nurture Good Talent
Offer challenging work. IT workers generally would rather be architects and engineers than bricklayers and painters. The talented among them can get bored quickly, and a bored IT person is one likely looking for other work.

When possible, promote from within because it shows your IT people they have a career path in your organization and that you value the people you have. If you consistently are unable to find good people within your IT organization who are worth promoting, your IT staff is weak.

Here's a cliché, but a valuable retention tip nonetheless: Have good communications. Virtually no employee likes the uncertainty of wondering whether or not they will have a job next week. If your business is struggling, be honest with your employees. And, of course, do not just communicate losses, but your wins, as well. Communicate, and then communicate more. Bottom line: Keep your employees in the loop.

Lighten Up
Loosen up. IT workers may be nerds and geeks, but they usually like to have fun.

After all, people like them create all the enormously popular computer games and Hollywood special effects and wiz-bang gizmos like the iPad and Wii. Keep the work atmosphere friendly, non-threatening and relaxed. The major Silicon Valley heavyweights, like Google, Apple, Facebook and many others, provide plenty of fun perks for their employees. Do the same with your IT employees, though, of course, on a much smaller – and much less expensive – scale. Give employees leeway to decorate their workspaces. Host a monthly pizza-and-Coke lunch. Give a cool gizmo as birthday presents.

Still have IT employees walking out the door? Conduct exist interviews when they leave. Find out why they decided to take another job. Ask them what they liked best and least about working for your company. Do not be defensive. This is a moment for you to listen. Learn from those you failed to retain and you will be much better at retaining IT employees in the future. 🌎🌏