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The mobile worker: Curse or blessing?

You might not like career development costs for employees whose allegiance is fleeting — but that's the labour market if you expect to attract top performers

By Paul Tremlett and Ginty Burns

There was a time when it wasn't unusual for people to stay with a company for their entire working lives. Job progression was clearly mapped out, and people were committed to their work and loyal to a company.

Those times have gone — downsizing in the 1980s changed trust levels and people realized they can't expect loyalty to an organization to be reciprocated.



Today, many people perform specialized or highly technical work with an expectation of hopping from job to job and company to company to keep themselves challenged. These are people whose skills and knowledge are often in great demand. The problem for employers is how to meet the needs of the organization while minimizing disruption.

Some managers complain about mobile workers' lack of commitment. However, people are committed, all the time. It's just a question of: committed to what? Many mobile workers are simply more committed, and loyal, to their profession or specialization than to a particular organization. And this isn't a bad thing. It means they want to do the best work they can, wherever it happens to be. They likely are also looking for professional challenge and growth, and will stay with a company that offers these for as long as the challenge is maintained.

Managers need to get as much benefit as possible from mobile workers' skills and experience, and do everything in their power to increase retention rates while accepting that these workers are unlikely to stay forever.

It's not enough for managers to build the cost of high turnover and knowledge loss into their budgets, throw up their hands and say, "That's just the way things are in this industry."

It's also not enough to attempt to retain mobile workers through "better" job titles and higher pay. Rather, managers need to drive commitment by building on mobile workers' passion for work. There are six key focus areas:

- Clearly defining roles, including making sure the work is challenging. Suggestions include larger projects as opposed to small chunks of project work, involvement in a full project cycle

as opposed to just a part of it, and signing and decision-making authority so as not to restrict creativity.

- Hiring people who are challenged by, and capable of, dealing with the role's level of work complexity.
- Delegating work effectively to maintain adequate challenge for direct reports, as opposed to keeping the "fun" work for oneself.
- Providing the coaching, education and training required for a person to excel in a role.
- Ensuring direct reports work well together as a team and knowledge transfer occurs where required.
- Determining when it's time for someone to move on from a role, either because the person is ready for something new (and potentially more complex), or she is not succeeding.

The mobile worker's manager is not the only one who needs to make an effort. The principle of three-tier management is useful for improving human resource planning generally, and providing mobile workers with benefits over and above what a direct manager can provide.

This principle states that each employee in an organization has a manager and a manager-once-removed (the manager's manager), and these levels make up a three-tier system. In such a system the employee's manager focuses on performance: getting the best out of the person in the current role. The manager-once-removed focuses on development: helping the employee reach her full potential.

Helping an employee reach full potential means ensuring she has developmental opportunities in her current role. But it may also mean helping that employee get different or more complex work within the company, or even another job outside the company if it is the best thing for the person's career. In other words, providing mentoring in the true sense.

This kind of care, which is not provided frequently enough today, entices mobile workers to stay longer in a company. It also encourages mobile workers to recommend that others join the organization they may be leaving.

When a three-tier system is working well, the following things happen:

- Each employee's manager and manager-once-removed have frequent conversations about how the employee is performing in her role, and where she might need to go next.
- Groups of managers-once-removed meet regularly to discuss roles and incumbents two levels down, giving a wide view of work opportunities across the company.
- Employees know that their manager provides coaching for their current roles, and their manager-once-removed will help with their career development.
- Managers-once-removed have at least two candidates (internal or external) lined up for key jobs one level down. If the organization is one that uses a large proportion of mobile workers, this may mean developing relationships outside the company to secure an adequate supply of skilled people.

Some may say, “But why invest in developing people who are only going to be with the company for a short time?” Mobile workers will nearly always do what’s best for themselves. They tend to go where they get the most rewarding work for the best financial return. Rather than fighting this reality, the plan should be to devise recruitment and development strategies that take advantage of this situation, keeping the best coming to your door first, staying as long as possible and recommending your organization to others when they leave.

By defining work that is leading-edge and challenging, using mobile workers’ capabilities and creativeness to the fullest extent everywhere in the organization, providing development opportunities for them as they work, and planning for when it’s over, managers can improve retention rates and ensure that what’s good for the mobile worker is also good for the organization.

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