

Holding On To Your Staff

Hanging On

By Bob Papper

With little in the way of money to reward valued employees, managers must work harder to keep them in place, by creating an environment of feedback, training and respect.

Look around your newsroom. Odds are, half of your employees are either looking for a new job or thinking about it.

That's one of the findings of a recent survey of nearly 6,000 workers across all industries. Towers Perrin, one of the largest human resources consulting companies in the world, found that 60 percent of all employees don't think there's any appropriate, minimum amount of time to stay in one job.

When the study was done in May 2001-in the midst of the recession-12 percent of employed workers were actively looking for jobs and another 44 percent were passively looking: checking the Internet, talking with friends at other companies, and so forth. That's more than half of all employees in the job market, with younger workers even more likely to be looking. And that's in a down economy. "If the economy were better, in theory, those figures would go up," says Chris Michalak, Towers Perrin talent management practices leader.

So there are two key questions: What can you do to get through the current economic downturn, and how can you avoid what could be the unusually high movement and turnover that many experts expect with the recovery? Managers need to understand what attracts employees, what engages and retains those employees, and what drives them away.

How Bad Has It Been?

"We didn't give raises last year," says Jacque Harms, news director at KNOP-TV in North Platte, NE. "In fact, I eliminated one position (by attrition)." The latest RTNDA/Ball State University Annual Survey found broadcast news salaries largely unchanged in 2001 compared with 2000. Even with modest inflation of 1.6 percent, that means plenty of people actually saw their real wages (after inflation) go down.

"The few people I could actually hire or people whose contracts were renewed certainly did not see any significant increases," says Jim Tortora, news director at WIXT-TV in Syracuse, NY.

The survey also suggests that companies shaved total payroll spending through a mix-and-match of layoffs, hiring freezes, salary freezes or minimal raises, and the hiring of less-experienced, less-costly replacements for vacancies that could be filled.

"I'm sure that in the aggregate, our salary line is even to, if not a little bit under, a year ago," says Dan Salamone, director of news and operations at

KRQE-TV in Albuquerque, NM.

Rick Iler, director of news operations at KARK-TV in Little Rock, AR, says he has hired new people at lower salaries than in the past: "I would say anywhere from 5 to 10 percent [lower]."

"The pay raises this year were slim to none for most of the people on the programming staff," says Jim Pasinski, news director at WESB-AM in Bradford, PA.

The Role of Money

"Research shows that people don't stay in jobs because of money," says Karen Bloom, of Bloom, Gross & Associates, an executive search firm in Chicago. "It's never the top thing on the list."

Unless it's too low, of course. Money does figure into attracting and keeping people. If you're not paying a competitive salary, odds are you won't be in the game—at least not with the people you want.

Over the past few years, Dave Ketelhohn, news director at KFBB-TV in Great Falls, MT, says he has had to upgrade salaries in order to attract and keep people. "Starting reporters had been in the \$14,000 to \$16,000 range," says Ketelhohn. "Now they're up to about \$20,000."

"I lost one person, out of the business. He loved the work but he needed to make more money," says James Warner, news director at KATC-TV in Lafayette, LA. "I think I'll be facing more and more battles like that."

"[Radio news] is becoming more and more the kind of job that's not attractive for somebody who's trying to support themselves and a family," says Tony Jordan, news director at WEUP-AM/FM in Huntsville, AL.

But that's the news director and employee point of view. Businesses see things differently, according to John Cotton, management chair at the College of Business Administration at Marquette University in Milwaukee. He's one of the country's leading experts on employee turnover and retention. "There's a corporate advantage to turnover," notes Cotton. "It's a lot cheaper to pay somebody coming right out of college than somebody who has been around for 10 years."

Attracting Good People

Tortora says his station used to recruit, in part because it paid more than the competition. Now that the money has largely evened out, he says the station emphasizes reputation, quality and work environment.

That can be a successful approach, according to Towers Perrin's Michalak. His firm's studies (and others) show that you need to get two things right to be in the game: base pay and health care benefits. After that, the next three items employees value vary by age: opportunities for advancement, which cut across all demographic groups; work/life balance was important to all age groups, although less so to the 55+ crowd; and competitive retirement benefits tied with pay raises linked to individual performance. Not surprisingly, the retirement benefits scored with older workers. Younger groups voted for

learning and development.

"People expect a lot more out of their jobs than they used to," says Cotton. "People are much more concerned about how interesting, how involved they are with their jobs, issues of family and balance. Work/life balance is becoming much more important than it used to be."

Engaging and Keeping Your People

John Rinckenbaugh, news director at KVLV-TV in Fargo, ND, tries to nurture and mentor his young staff. "When they're unhappy or there are problems, you take their concerns to heart and try to help them," says Rinckenbaugh. "When it's time to move on, I try to help them. It's really important, especially when you can't pay. It helps to balance things out."

After you recruit, you need to have employees doing everything in their power to help you and the company succeed. That's engagement. Towers Perrin found that the top five areas that engage employees are:

- Reputation in the job market as a good employer. "People want to work for a winner," says Michalak.
- Teamwork, meaning "I like the people I work with."
- Strong communication, or clarifying what the company expects and what the employees can expect in return.
- Recognition for talented employees. The good news here is that it doesn't have to be money.
- Skills development.

"You have to continue to praise their work," says Harms. "Tell them, 'Thank you,' and, 'I appreciate you.' Often I think we don't do that enough. Sometimes that's worth more than money."

Actually, research says it usually is worth more than money. Harms also tries to pass on to her staff little freebies that the station gets from movie companies and syndicators-anything to make "thank you" a little more tangible.

Sharon Alseth, managing news editor at WIBC Radio in Indianapolis and Network Indiana, says she uses things like occasional Pacers tickets and meal trades to reward staff members.

"People stay places where they think they're valued," says Bloom. "A lot of it is how I feel about what I do every day in my job and how I'm made to feel, and how I'm rewarded-not only from a money standpoint, but...recognition for the work I do."

"I have never believed that salary is the motivator," says Salamone. He says companies should pay people a "fair wage," and then let them work. "We give them general parameters of what we're trying to accomplish," says Salamone. "We try to make sure everybody understands what the mission is, but then we

say, 'Listen, you guys go do it. And have fun doing it.'"

That sense of empowerment can be very successful, says Cotton. He suggests getting employees involved in making more decisions about their own jobs. "Then people can control things that may be unimportant to their boss but are important to them," notes Cotton. And use praise. "We don't do a very good job in recognizing when people do a very good job," says Cotton. "People get pushed away as much for that as anything else."

So, if your employees are engaged, will you keep them? Not necessarily, says Michalak, although if they're not engaged, you certainly won't. Beyond engagement is retention, and you retain people by offering opportunities for growth-and not frustrating and confusing them with mixed messages about work and goals.

Driving Your People Away

Cotton says a "critical event"-something that makes them start re-evaluating everything in their job-is usually the beginning of the end for an employee.

"The minute a person's mind is devoted to how to get out of that job or how to manage that bad boss, their productivity goes way down," notes Bloom.

So what motivates people to leave? Overwhelmingly, studies say it's usually a problem in an employee's relationship with his or her immediate supervisor or manager. The reverse isn't true, however. "A bad manager causes you to leave," notes Michalak, "but that doesn't mean a good manager causes you to stay."

"Then there are other, more intrinsic sorts of things," adds Bloom. Such as not feeling "a sense that you're contributing to your organization, that you're being acknowledged and rewarded, that you feel that the work you're doing is of value."

"If you've got higher turnover in your organization, obviously you're not doing a good job," says Cotton. But managers frequently don't want to face that, and employee fear and avoidance of confrontation contributes too. "Instead of saying, 'My boss is a jerk, I hate his guts, I can't stand this place anymore,' they say, 'Well, I got a better paying job elsewhere,'" notes Cotton. That way, no one's to blame, and everybody feels better.

Cotton says that of all industries, radio and television should value their people as their "major competitive advantage."

He suggests two questions for broadcast news managers to ponder: Do you keep better track of your equipment than you do of your people? Do you have a better knowledge of how good your equipment is and how much you pay for it and how long it's been there than of your people?

The answers, Cotton says, reveal how managers really feel about their people resources-and how well they're likely to do in keeping and developing them.

-Bob Papper is a professor of telecommunications at Ball State University.