

## Making your organization the 'it' place to work for IT

*Tech workers more important to organizations than ever*

BY DAVID FOOTE

With a backlog of projects in many information technology departments, organizations increasingly find they can't be complacent about the retention of IT workers.

A demand is building for multi-disciplined IT workers who blend technology expertise with specialized knowledge of specific industries and markets. That means employers are in many cases going after a smaller pool of qualified candidates and finding that it takes longer to find and hire them.

That might be all right under some circumstances, but many employers simply don't have the luxury of time in a competitive business environment that often resembles a pressure cooker. Employee loyalty (or the absence of turnover) is critical to customer satisfaction, according to a survey of 1,900 American and Canadian organizations over the past five years by Foote Partners LLC. Fortunately, turnover can be controlled.

IT retention is more critical now than in prior economic expansions, and harder to achieve. That's because IT departments have become instrumental in helping companies sell more products, promote brands and deliver better value to customers. There are now more IT professionals than ever who are capable of making a difference

in their employers' fortunes. They include not just the ones at or near the top, but those farther down the chain of command. That means an effective retention strategy has to reach farther into the organization, be scalable and surgical in focus and sustainable.

In short, it's becoming clear that the costs to an employer of losing its best people have increased dramatically and this presents a level of risk many organizations are simply not prepared to take. Reliable performers — and not just the top talent — are vulnerable to better offers and employers will have to fight hard to keep them happily employed and moving forward in their careers.

Nearly half of the respondents in a recent Foote Partners survey of 51,000 North American IT workers indicated they are actively or passively looking for another job. This is consistent with recent surveys from other analyst firms and from *Computerworld*, the Framingham, Mass.-headquartered IT publication.

The retention gap can be attributed to many things, but one central theme is workers aren't getting sufficient opportunities for career growth and advancement. They'd also like to make more money, but career progression trumps cash for many IT workers. This is more so now than seven years ago when the market for tech workers was on the upswing.

There's a gnawing fear among IT workers at all levels that if they stay with their current employer they can't, or won't, get where they want to be professionally. And it's justified. The abrupt layoffs of the last recession are still fresh in their minds and the prospect of more outsourcing and offshoring only reinforces the message that they can be replaced at a moment's notice.

While firms want to retain IT experts, many still grapple with turnover.

The chief reason for failure is that carefully conceived, co-ordinated and executed retention strategies combining pay, rewards, recognition, professional development and career advancement are few and far between. That's because even if there's a strong desire to develop and implement such strategies, most employers simply haven't been able to muster the kind of focus, consistency and stamina to make them work consistently. There's too much pressure on IT to generate top-line revenue, reduce costs and increase organizational agility and speed.

Competitive pay, perks, promotions, professional development, paid time-off, flexible schedules and work-life balance are all things that can lead to on-the-job contentment. But they don't necessarily inspire trust and loyalty, which are core issues in retention.

A lot goes into creating trust

and loyalty in an IT workforce. Fair compensation and benefits are a priority, but a stimulating work environment can be just as important. Smart employers hedge their bets by keeping jobs interesting and challenging and giving employees additional opportunities and challenges. Having the latest technologies to play with can be a powerful retention device, but that's not always possible. Above all, with IT workers, autonomy is often more highly valued than overall compensation. What they want is a certain amount of control over their work and careers.

Recognition programs that offer instant and immediate feedback are cheap and effective. All organizations should be developing programs that give high-performing workers the "psychic income" they crave in the form of tangible and intangible expressions of acknowledgment and appreciation. It is surprising how often this is undervalued or overlooked altogether.

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