

Talking Technology

Sound advice for how to retain your employees

By Steve Burns, Capital News contributor

Over the past few months I have had the privilege of conducting independent retention interviews of technology employees in the Okanagan and across North America.



The purpose of the interviews was to assist the companies in the retention of their current employees – before retention became a problem.

The companies wanted to keep in touch with what their employees were really thinking. They were willing to hear the good, the bad and the ugly.

The principles applied during the interview process and the interview findings can be applied to any company.

There are several key ingredients required for “retention interviews” to be successful, Firstly, it has been my experience that the interviews need to be conducted by an independent, objective third party.

The companies involved have surveyed employees electronically and using internal personnel but they found these methods to be less effective than a sit down, face to face interview with an “outsider”.

Employees tend to trust the third party more easily than internal personnel.

Secondly, employers must communicate clearly to employees that all of the interviews are completely confidential – and keep their word. Employees must be completely free to tell the third party their deepest concerns, with complete immunity and without fear of repercussions.

Thirdly, the interview results must be summarized and recommendations made based upon both positive and negative feedback. Providing a balanced perspective of all viewpoints is important.

Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, management must be very serious and committed to following up on the suggestions for improvement that employees make.

In my experience, nothing is worse than a company obtaining frank and open feedback from employees and not acting on their concerns.

The results of inaction can be disastrous - the credibility of the management team is significantly damaged, employees become disillusioned and often leave the company. Sadly, in this circumstance, retention interviews often become exit interviews.

The companies that I have interviewed, along with their employees, have allowed me to summarize some of the key findings of the surveys.

They believe that there is some very useful information that may motivate you to perform your own survey.

Eliminate the sunshine tax

One of the most interesting findings was how low the competitive compensation issue was on the list of employee priorities.

Technology employees today expect that the company offers a competitive compensation and benefits package – it is a given.

In the Okanagan, the key frustration is that employees feel that management is still applying the “sunshine tax” concept to wages.

They do not believe that they should be underpaid simply because they choose to live in the Okanagan.

Employees also want their compensation and benefits package to be confirmed externally by annual external salary surveys, discussions with employees, etc.

What would your compensation and benefits package look like if you looked seriously at eliminating or at least significantly reducing the sunshine tax?

Employees really love what they do

Over 85per cent of technology employees surveyed really love what they do.

They enjoy their work and interacting with their co-workers.

They enjoy the challenge of their job and learning new skills.

The companies that they work for have created a “stretch culture” which allows them to learn new things and be challenged in their job every day.

Why do these technology employees really love what they do?

The reason is that many of these companies take this issue very seriously.

They want their employees to love what they do.

They have taken the time to analyze what the person is looking for in a job, what their natural talents and abilities are most suited for and have provided them with their "ideal job profile".

They use fairly simple tests to profile the person's natural abilities, the position that they are most suited for and determine the appropriate match.

The result – employees are drawing on their natural strengths and are free to be themselves.

How much more could your company be doing to help your employees really love what they do?

Looking for balanced lives

Technology employees realize that times are getting much tougher for technology companies.

They know that there has been a shift in the values of the marketplace from revenue growth to profitability.

This has created enormous pressure on employees to give more of themselves – more energy, more effort, more hours – less time for the things that they value most in their lives.

While the shift to profitability occurs, technology companies need to keep their eyes on the "Balance Meter" – the balance of life that employees want and deserve. The majority of the companies surveyed keep their hand on the pulse of this issue and respond quickly to employee concerns.

How well does your company help its employees achieve balance of life?

Listen to and inform your employees

Technology employees are really tired of senior management not informing them of what is going on.

They don't expect to be involved or consulted on every decision but they do not expect to be the last to know.

They want to be asked to get involved in something that is not directly their job.

They expect that their concerns will be listened to and acted upon.

Several of the companies had an internal communications plan that focused solely on keeping employees informed.

Through surveys, they asked employees what they would like to be involved in.

One company held quarterly meetings where senior management could not speak for one hour – they had to listen to employees – what a concept!

How well does your company inform, involve and listen to employees?

In summary, the information in this article may be very useful to you and your employees. I wonder what issues your employees would raise in an independent employee survey? You will never know until you ask!

Steve Burns, CA, CMC, CFP, is the President and CEO of the Burns Innovation Group Inc. If you would like your company profiled in the column, contact Steve at 763-4716 or e-mail at:

steve@burnsinnovation.com.