

Recruit for Retention

The most successful employee-retention programs begin with recruiting and hiring the individual who best matches the position and best fits into the company's culture.

The average Chemical Process Industries (CPI) engineer or manager spends about five to seven years with one company and then moves on, and typically has five to seven, or more, employers throughout his or her career. As companies reorganize, merge and downsize, employee loyalty is reaching record lows. Employers that want to keep good employees need to focus not only on employee retention programs. Just as importantly, they must develop strategies to recruit the best possible individuals to fill specific positions and keep them. This article offers suggestions on how to make the hiring process part of an employee retention strategy.

Traditional retention strategies.

Certainly, CPI firms need to tune up their existing retention strategies, addressing the basic laws of human nature and every employee's need to feel appreciated and useful.



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Stay bonuses, offered to a large number of employees when a company is undergoing a reorganization or a corporate relocation, can be effective. In other situations, especially for key managers, stock options with pay-off dates tied to important long-term objectives can work, with Management by Objectives (MBOs)

Used as a benchmark for middle-level managers as well as for extremely valuable or rare (i.e. hard to replace) employees.

Other retention strategies can be as simple as paying employees their annual bonuses in March or April of the following year. If the employee leaves the company any time before the payoff in March or April, he or she forfeits the whole year's bonus.

For a nominal investment per employee, a proactive employee-retention program can help a company hold on to its strongest and most valuable employees. This will save hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars in employee turnover and retraining costs. The CPI must first develop employee retention strategies. Then they must turn their attention toward improving their hiring processes to better qualify the right candidates to fill currently open positions.

A New Retention Strategy - the hiring process

The hiring process has proven to be one of the most important elements in an employee retention program. For consistently great hires, the company's hiring managers, human resources managers and outside recruiter (if one is used) need to work together from the very start. Doing this will ensure that the employees' basic needs are met, which will lead to happier and more productive employees who are content with their current positions. By following basic laws of human nature in recruiting and hiring, you ultimately provide a better workplace for the employees and a more productive and loyal workforce for the company. That can prove to be a very effective retention strategy in itself.

Start the hiring process by outlining the description of the position according to the needs and interests of the potential candidate, as follows:

1. Focus on the position at hand by describing what the key accountabilities are - not just by listing the "must have" requirements.
2. Define the position by showing who (or what department) the position interacts with.
3. Describe the key challenges of the position.
4. Explain the corporate culture both at the corporate headquarters, as well as at the actual location where the position is based.
5. Describe the background of the person to whom the position reports and this person's management style.
6. Describe the makeup and backgrounds of the position's peers and subordinates (if any).

7. Outline the opportunity for advancement from this position over the next three years to five years.

8. Describe the community where the position is located. Provide cost of living and cost of housing data for the area.

Answering these questions honestly and comprehensively up-front makes all the difference in the world to the candidate, as candidates ask themselves, "Is this the right opportunity for me, and will I be happy here?"

Then, before posting or publishing the position description, get additional input from other key people in the organization who will be involved in the interview process, as well as to anyone in the organization with whom the person in this position would interact. These people can offer much good information, as they have a totally different perspective on the needs of this position than you.

Also, make sure each objective listed in the description (see sample). Once the job is defined and the objectives clearly spelled out, the position description can be published and the resume screening process can begin.

As resumes come in, they can be screened against what a person will actually do, instead of simply a candidate's background and experience. The top few prospects based on their resumes can move on to the next steps in the hiring process: The telephone and face-to-face interviews.

The Behavior-based interview

In order to find a qualified candidate who fits into the organization and is likely to be around for a long time, you must be very thorough in the interview process. Knowing that every individual has unique qualifications (not to mention varying levels of interviewing skills), a very consistent interview process is required to identify the most qualified person.

One of the best ways to ensure a consistent interview process is to conduct the interviews according to a behavior-based methodology. This involves looking at how a prospective employee actually behaved when faced with real-

world, work-related situations or problems. Behavioral assessments provide a more predictable outcome when used for screening candidates.

An R&D leader at a major chemical manufacturer said that although his company usually conducts traditional, straightforward interviews, he believes that special positions require the more-specific, behavioral-based assessment. When they need to recruit specifically for a certain skill or experience, they use an executive recruiter, who helps them develop the position description and a list of questions designed to identify how well the candidate fits the open position before they are even interviewed.

This approach benefits the prospective employee, as well. Being asked specific questions about likely work situations gives him or her a much better idea of what the job will really entail. One marketing vice president noted that this type of interview process made him more confident about his qualifications when joining his current employer. Other companies would simply ask "Tell me about yourself." or "Do you have experience with our products or markets?" which made it hard for him to feel like he would have any real impact. But the behavior-based interview process was much more focused. The company had a specific background in mind that they thought would balance out the group and the questions planned to identify the appropriate behaviors that would improve the likelihood of the fit.

Asking the right kinds of questions

The structured interview, or behavioral interviewing, is a very subjective process. By using validated assessments, a company adds an element of objectivity. This should be the primary focus of the interview. Of course, dress, appearance, personality, background and experience are important factors. It is still crucial to keep the question. "Can this person follow and complete these specific objectives?" at the forefront of your mind during the interview stage of the hiring process.

By outlining the ideal candidate (benchmarking) and then comparing each candidate to one another, you will see who can most improve the organization's performance. For the sake of continuity, and to make the interview process much easier, ask every candidate the same questions. An excellent tool to aid in screening and qualifying candidates is to use a custom-developed application for the position. Turn the specifications, needs and wants as outlined in the position description into questions.

Email this list of questions to the candidates who have been screened as viable prospects through a resume review and/or phone interview. Ask them to invest some time in filling out the application, as it will aid both you and the candidate in having a more in-depth face-to-face interview. Tell the candidate that it needs to be completed as quickly as possible, and before the next step takes place.

Make sure the candidate understands that many of the questions in the application are key issues that you intend to cover in greater depth during the interview. Having the prospect answer them in writing before the interview takes place allows the discussion during the actual interview to be much more meaningful. It eliminates wasted time spent during the interview gathering information, and it allows you to get straight to evaluating key strengths and weaknesses.

Ask open-ended questions that require an answer beyond yes or no. Such questions produce the most revealing and accurate answers. Examples include: "Who have you worked with?" "What could you...?" "When would you ...?" "Where did you...?" and "How does...?"

Don't forget the most overlooked - and perhaps most important - question when interviewing with retention in mind: "Why would you be happy doing this job?" Record all responses accurately for subsequent comparisons and candidate evaluations.

If more than one person will be interviewing the candidates, make sure they are all of like mind regarding the entire interviewing process. Only then will the information be uniformly accurate and produce meaningful results.

After the interviewing process is complete, select the top two or three candidates and evaluate what their references reveal.

Are they who they say they are?

Additional techniques can tell if a candidate is who he or she says they are, or who they appear to be in an interview. Talk to former coworkers and customers. Always check the prospect's former work-supervisor references, even if you expect to get no more than "Yes, the employee worked here." By probing, you can often get them talking, and you may be surprised at how much they will tell you as they warm up to your call. Many times, the behaviors you're searching for can be confirmed through reference checks - by asking former managers or coworkers how an applicant actually addressed real-world work situations.

Reference calls are a crucial part of the hiring process and will definitely help you recruit for retention. To expedite the entire hiring process, reference checking should be started at the very beginning whenever possible.

When calling the candidate's past employers, it's important to ask the pointed question. "Can this candidate perform these specific skills?" This question also eliminates the former employer's or coworker's personal opinion of the candidate because they are only being asked whether or not that person could perform the job they had when reporting to this supervisor. You'll get a more accurate candidate evaluation using this method.

After the reference checks are all completed, you are ready to make an offer to the candidate that has proven to be the best fit for your organization.

There are many ways to continually improve employment retention in your organization. The hiring process is an important one. By adjusting your focus to retention from the start of the hiring process, you will save not only money but also significant personal investment in the time required.

Although the day of the faithful, life-long employee seems to have become a thing of the past, companies that turn their focus to employee retention - especially during the crucial hiring process - may find themselves in need of gold watch catalog once again.