

Make your top talent want to stay *Career planning helps balance the allure of 'fast companies'*

Mary-Frances Fox

I have been watching the marketing talent wars in my work with executives, managers, up-and-comers and creatives. The "threat" is particularly strong from the digital sectors. This year, every departing brand manager I met with chose to opt out of packaged goods and into a telecom or database marketing "fast company."

Companies of all kinds can play a significant role in getting their people excited about staying. The red-hot career destinations in information technology, financial services and e-commerce now go beyond traditional staff training and development to provide career planning advice as a meaningful perk for professionals whose skills are in demand. A U.S. survey of IT companies by William Mercer Inc. of New York found career development opportunities were an incentive to stay for 83% of workers, while incentive pay only influenced 66%.

Good people will go wherever they can express their talent best. Studies show that four key factors influence employees' job satisfaction:

- knowing that the job helps build their personal "brand identity"
- understanding that there are specific opportunities for an excellent future with the company
- having upper management's ear
- being in a workplace that respects and encourages people to derive meaning out of both their work and their lifestyle

Add to this new set of employee expectations the booming job market, and it's obvious why talent supply is rapidly becoming a key management issue. So progressive employers are providing the information and advice employees need to understand their own talents and plan their career growth, rather than leaving their staff to make key decisions based on the allure of Internet job boards or the advice of friends or career self-help books. These programs can be delivered in-house or by career management consultants who provide informed assessment, strategy, motivation and decision support without being recruiters.

For an employer, it's like forming one-to-one marketing relationships tuned to the needs of its valued people. It's a win for the company, since the real cost of turnover—0.33 to 1.5 times salary—involves hiring costs, lost productivity and lost account knowledge. Taking the time to find out what would make employees want to stay pays off. Information technology consultants LGS Group of Toronto, for example, cut turnover in half by providing career advice to its technology consulting staff.

And the upside is enormous for companies that leverage their talent resources. Some of the benefits of providing career management advice are:

Captures ability and passion. When creativity is key to a business, the importance of an energized workforce is clear. Employees with solid career plans are motivated, productive, current and on top of their game.

Cements the bond with employees: In general, employees say they appreciate demonstrations of their companies' loyalty. The new loyalty is you-have-a-job-here-as-long-as-we-need-the-things-you-do-well. So career advice is a significant way of showing commitment to people navigating in that uncertain environment.

Positions the company as an employer of choice: Top-level candidates like the fact that the employer is interested in their career and will help them leverage their abilities over time. The approach includes discussions on life balance, a key concern for the nexus generation and women. Career coaching personalizes and strengthens the employment relationship so other firms pale by comparison. It's clear that career management programs are now one reason why top candidates are selecting one company over another.

Reverses burnout and avoids firings: Poor performers invariably find that individual career coaching resets the switch on their relationship to work. And in cases of problem behavior, remedial coaching uncovers the causes and teaches the improved interpersonal skills that make the difference.

Jump-starts teambuilding: The results of career coaching can be broadened by having work groups share in a facilitated forum what each member has learned about what motivates them.

Eases the succession planning and performance review workload: Career management programs provide a continuous channel for real information about a workforce that can lighten the traditional human resources workload.

Career management programs have three main elements:

Career profiling: Employees learn about who they are (beyond their job description) by identifying the kinds of business -problems they most like to solve and the conditions they need to make their peak contributions. This unique insight alone can quell the urge to jump to the next big-money position if it doesn't really fit.

Career management education: Participants sharpen their know-how about landing better opportunities, within the company or elsewhere. Becoming career strategists rather than job-holders, they raise the bar on their professionalism. This actually makes staff easier to manage, because they become more resourceful and take responsibility for achieving their goals. I have found that most marketing professionals are no more adept than others at convincing decision makers why they should win an internal promotion or get hired in a new job. Employees who do gain this skill become aware of how they are perceived and what behavior and image changes they should make, or what knowledge they need to gain, to proactively create their future within the organization.

Talent management: Leading-edge companies are predetermining the skills and attitudes needed to achieve future business goals. This "talent management" process entails discussion of how the strengths of existing people can add value to the business plan, and any new skills the company will need. Discussion of future career possibilities become more open. Companies are orchestrating this in three ways: Seasoned managers who know the culture become helpful mentors regarding advancement in the organization. Some organizations have appointed resource managers who not only recruit but manage the ongoing careers of their professional staff. External career coaches are also used to add specialized talent assessments, interpersonal skill development and internal self-marketing strategies to the process. Most important, the talent supply issue provides a strong business reason for employers and employees to work together for mutual future growth.

Mary-Frances Fox is president of Work Creatively Career Advisors Inc. She can be reached at (416) 922-4476, (888) 315-0003 or mffox@workcreatively.ca.