

Improving Your Employee Retention

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PROVIDENCE, RI—It can be enormously expensive to lose call center employees during their first year of service. That's because of the high hiring and training costs when an employee has to be replaced. Indeed, says Brandon Melton, Senior Vice President of Human Resources at Lifespan, a five hospital system in Providence, Rhode Island, in his organization it costs more than \$42,000 to replace a nurse.

So, what can call centers do to improve their retention of new employees? A lot of the problem, Melton says, lies not in what comes after the person has been hired, but before. "We're not selecting the right people in the first place," he says. "There needs to be a right fit selection process. Instead of asking people if they have good relationship skills, they should be asked for examples of good relationships and ones where they weren't so good. If they can't think of any that weren't so good, then you'd have to wonder if they're being truthful." This school of thought, he adds, is called behavior event interviewing and can paint a more accurate picture of the applicant.

Then, once the hire is made, call centers need to do better in on-boarding the new employee. Orientation and hand holding is not something that should take place just in the first three or even four months, but rather may last 12 to 18 months, he says.

When employees leave in the first year, it may be because they don't like their supervisor or a coworker or co-workers. It's important for the call center manager to meet proactively with new hires where this can be discussed. Perhaps there can be a transfer within the call center, or perhaps that person should be transferred out of the call center, but remain with the organization rather than jumping to the competitor across the street.

Or maybe, for example, it's the supervisor who has to go. "If you hear complaints from five employees in a row about a supervisor, you've got to wonder," he says.

On-boarding, Melton says, should just not be the manager's responsibility; it should be everyone in the call center's responsibility to help that new employee integrate into the culture. Toward this end, though, he suggests assigning each new employee to one of the call center's best employees in a sort of buddy system.

You want that to happen rather than the new employee being courted by another employee in the call center who may not be a good role model and who is trying to swing the new person to their point of view, he says.

Ultimately, Melton suggests that managers may want to meet with new employees in a more official capacity at the six and 12 month period. And, at the three month and 9 month periods having someone from HR meet with the person to see how everything is going also makes a lot of sense, he says.

But, inevitably, there will be some loss in that first year. What is acceptable? At Lifespan, throughout the entire health system, what is not acceptable is the organization's 22 percent loss in the first 12 month statistic for a year recently completed, he says. Overall, the health system's total employee turnover for the year was 11 percent. He can't point to a specific number first year attrition should be but says it should be something lower than 22 percent and higher than 11 percent.

Longer Term Retention

One of the things call center managers can do to enhance longer term retention is to have employees asked what will keep them in the call center for the next two years. The questioner should not be the call center manager, as some of the responses might be less than honest. That is, he says, what if someone is currently looking for a job elsewhere; the employee is not going to tell their current manager about that.

“It should be either someone in training and development or an outside consultant,” he says.

At Lifespan, there is a retention planning self-assessment in place for managers to take that can give an indication of where the manager is strong and where he or she is weak in moving through steps to retain employees. Melton passed out an example of this self-assessment to a session at the 17th Annual Conference of Physician Referral and Health Information Call Centers this past June in Atlanta. There are sections dealing with On-Boarding, Coaching and Performance Management, Employee Involvement & Participation, Selection Processes & Criteria, Communication, Training & Skills Development and Reward & Recognition. He is willing to share this tool to any call center manager who is interested. He can be contacted at bmelton@lifespan.org. •