



Retaining Employees and Preventing Burnout

By Kathleen Greer

The economy is rebounding and now many companies are competing for the same employees. The stakes are high and companies are willing to do more to attract and retain the best and brightest. What used to be strictly a challenge to the human resources department has now gained the attention of both CEOs and boards of directors. No company wants to fail because of a lack of technical talent.

Much has been written about ways to attract and retain employees during challenging times. Most of these writings have focused on referral, compensation, and stock option programs. But little has been written about the psychological health and wellness of the employee who decides to stay with his or her company. What makes someone stay put while they are being lured to new opportunities? What are the human issues that might make the difference when an exciting offer is put on the table? How might stress and burnout play a part in this equation?

In some industries, there is continual pressure to work long hours, and to work expediently and efficiently. With this pressure, comes the constant rush of adrenaline. Employees are juggling multiple projects with sequential deadlines. Just when one big project moves off the plate, two more appear overnight. The adrenaline keeps people going for a while, but most people have a stress limit. After the limit is reached, normal fatigue can turn into burnout, where judgment and creativity plummet.

Burnout can be described as physical and mental exhaustion. It comes after a prolonged period of pushing oneself beyond one's limits. Anyone can up the ante to meet a deadline on a project or get through a trial or product release. But when this pushing continues over a period of months or years, exhaustion sets in and several things occur. Normal stress symptoms such as muscle tension, stomachaches, memory difficulties, or sleep disturbances get worse and worse as the rapid pace continues. It may take the whole weekend to calm oneself down, only to find anxiety heightened by noon on Monday. Exhaustion leads people to re-evaluate their situation and some employees start fantasizing about quitting, simply because of the fatigue. What was a challenge, now becomes pure survival.

As employees become more aware of their own pain, there may also be a loss of work life balance. It is virtually impossible to maintain "a life," when one is working 60 to 70 hours a week. People give up their exercise routines, turn to junk food, or simply crash when they get home from work. Relationships suffer, fun is diminished, anger increases and employees start looking at options. When life gets out of balance, employees start to question everything that is sacred in their lives. They lose the edge at work, and face a sense of emptiness greater than they may have known before. That's when they start looking for escape.

Since the most coveted technical employees are fending off weekly phone calls from search firms and contract recruiters, it is not hard to imagine how burnout can contribute to turnover. Burned out employees are over tired and vulnerable in this frame of mind. They may jump at an



offer, just to buy time. They know that it takes time to ramp up on a new job, and this might give them a chance to rest. Or they may see a two-week break as a cure, where there will be no break in sight if they stay. The job offer that comes during this vulnerable time will seem like an acceptable escape value and cure for their burnout.

Though there is some reality in this line of thinking, it really takes two to three months to get over burnout. Many people make poor career decisions when they escape during burnout. Once they are feeling better, they regret that they left a good position. It is a confusing time because although burnout is normal, it can feel like a mental disorder. It is very tricky during this time to make good life decisions.

For people in the wrong career, or in need of a change, burnout can be a gift. It may be the final push that someone needs to make a change in his or her life.

Knowing that burnout is a natural hazard of working in high tech, fast-paced work environment is the first step. What can creative companies do to prevent burnout and help to retain people during times of stress?

- Recognize that all employees and managers are vulnerable to burnout when keeping long hours or pushing on projects. Don't underestimate the impact of stress on employee health and wellness.
- Don't assume that everyone is coping, just because you don't see signs of stress. Many people look good on the outside but are suffering on the inside.
- Be mindful of employees who are going through personal problems outside of work. Adding a divorce or a personal loss to high work stress is likely to push someone into burnout.
- Work on the corporate culture. A strong culture where people feel valued, challenged, and needed may make a big difference in whether someone stays or goes. Maintaining and building a fun culture is everyone's responsibility.
- Focus on good management. A good manager gives lots of feedback, shares information, and treats people with dignity and respect. An immature manager can drive people right out the door.
- Checking in about expectations on a regular basis, particularly with new employees, can prevent a premature termination.
- Consider flexible work options. Companies that offer flexibility in work hours are more successful at retaining top talent.
- Keep employees informed about changes in overall strategy, as well as changes in daily priorities. Most employees want to understand the big picture, and will do better work if they can tie their daily activities to the long-term goals of the company.



- Try to understand what motivates each person. Some people need more kudos than others. It is very hard to leave a company where it feels like a healthy family, where one is cared for, needed and appreciated.
- Maintain programs for fun and work life balance. Create a family atmosphere by creating opportunities for laughter and socialization. Look at best practices in the local area and find out what employees want for social interaction.
- Promote wellness and work life balance. Your first wellness dollars should go for a first rate EAP (Employee Assistance Program). In addition to stress counseling, a good EAP can help with childcare and summer camp searches, eldercare, legal questions, and financial quandaries.

What can employees do to help themselves to prevent burnout? (Side Bar)

- Notice any imbalances in your life before they become too difficult to fix.
- Pay attention to how your body is handling stress. Use your pain to help you remember to stretch or slow down.
- Take “mini” relaxation breaks during the day such as filling your water glass, stepping outside, or stretching your neck and shoulders.
- Simplify your personal life. Give unused items away, organize your home, and allow yourself to be less than perfect.
- Stock up on fruit, juice, and other healthy snacks that you can bring to work, or have waiting for you when you return home.
- Find some way to keep feelings from bottling up. Vent to someone, write in a journal, or find a safety valve in sports or leisure activities.
- Try to adjust your attitude. Are you being too much of a perfectionist, too negative, or too much of a doormat? Recognize old patterns and change them.
- Manage multiple priorities. Look for ways to minimize urgencies while meeting your customers’ needs. Learn to say no when there are other priorities.
- Avoid exhaustion and burnout by maximizing your sleep time. If sleep is an issue, talk over your situation with someone and develop a plan to improve sleep.
- Maintain a healthy perspective about what you are trying to accomplish, how long it may take, and what you need to do to keep healthy in the meantime.

It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that compensation is the sole reason people stay or leave a company. It has much more to do with self-actualization- having challenging work, feeling



respected, and making a difference. Companies would do much better in retention if they focused on culture building activities, good management practices, and attention to work life balance. No one will stay with a company, over the long run, where they feel they have to sell their soul.