

How to Motivate and Retain Your High-Tech Employees During Uncertain Economic Times

by Mike Foster

Downsizing, reduced employee loyalty, the absence of job security, and increased competition for high-tech talent—these are all reasons why the challenge of keeping good high-tech employees is greater today than ever before. As high-tech employees in organizations across the board enhance their skills and relocate from one company to another, managers are realizing that motivating and retaining key technical employees is much different today than it was just five years ago.

Have you ever asked an expert programmer for a current project status only to get brushed off? Do you ever feel that your systems analyst fails to keep you involved and that he or she just wants to be left alone? Do your technician do things “their way” instead of the company’s way? If so, then you may be heading for a mass exodus of your high-tech employees. Now is the time to act so you can motivate and retain them for the long term.

The fact is that technical employee turnover impacts your company more than you realize. In addition to the costs associated with recruiting and training new high-tech employees, you also must consider the effects turnover has on your customers. If your customers are getting assigned to new technicians every year, their trust in the company will begin to diminish. Additionally, if a customer has developed a strong relationship with the technician, he or she may follow that employee to the new company. Even though your high-tech employees are not usually responsible for bringing in new business, their actions play a direct role in customer retention.

When working with technical employees, many managers quickly realize that technical workers often think and react differently than other employees, such as administrative or sales staff. As a result, managers are unsure of how to relate to their technical employees. They soon discover that the incentives that motivate employees in other departments don’t necessarily work with their technical people. Therefore, managers need to learn new techniques for keeping their technical employees on the payroll. Below are the top incentives that can help you motivate your current technical staff

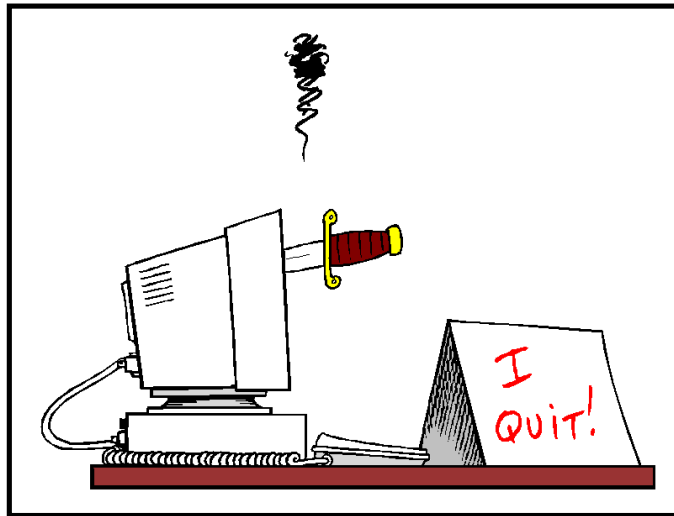
and encourage them to keep their skills within your organization.

1. Provide adequate equipment

Most high-tech employees live for new devices and gadgets. The thought of computer memory upgrades and faster processors excites them. While most people think of technical devices as tools to get the job done, your high-tech employees view these marvels as their primary focus and their link to productivity. With that in mind, the best way to keep your technical employees happy and eager to work for your company is to give them the fastest computer with the largest monitor, the most memory, and the fastest hard drive you can find.

Then repeat this step every three months.

Technical workers are highly motivated by having the fastest speed computer on the market. The more advanced their equipment is, the more willing they’ll be to do the work that’s necessary. But before you remark that the expense of a new computer for each high-tech employee is out of your budget, consider this: Even if you are buying an extravagant



machine, the cost to replace your technicians’ computers every three months would be, at most, \$4000 per computer. That equals \$12,000 per year, per technical employee. However, that’s a small price to pay when you consider that a good technical person should easily be bringing in \$100,000 or more to your organization, not necessarily in cash flow, but in savings. What’s \$12,000 if you get to keep an excellent employee who’s bringing in over \$100,000 to your organization each year? When you add the costs associated with recruiting and training a new technical employee, the cost of a new computer every three months is an even smaller price to pay.

2. Provide rewards

Rewarding your technical employees goes a long way to keeping them motivated. In addition to the common rewards, such as comp time and bonuses,

consider giving not-so-common rewards, such as a home PC or paying for the employee's at home Internet access.

Since you'll be giving your technical employees a new computer every three months, allow them to take their current work computer home for personal use. At the next three-month mark, they can return the original PC back to the office, which can then be given to another employee whose computer may be much older. In many instances, if the high-tech employee knows he or she will be getting a faster computer for home use, the employee will gladly reformat the "old" computer for the new user. An added benefit of this perpetual hand-me-down concept is that as other employees receive newer equipment, they'll be more productive and more motivated as well.

In addition to a home-use computer, pay for your high-tech employees' home dial-up connection or DSL line. In most areas, the cost for this is only \$20-\$50 per month—an extremely small price to pay for a motivated employee. And since most technical workers socialize with other technicians, the public recognition you'll get as being a progressive, leading-edge employer will be priceless. When other skilled technical workers learn of the perks you provide, they'll be doing all they can to be a part of your organization.

3. Give them an opportunity to learn new skills

Too many companies are fearful of providing continuing education to their technical employees. They mistakenly believe that if they send their high-tech employees to school to learn new skills, the employees will master the new skill at the company's expense and then leave to work for another organization. While this may happen in rare instances, if your employees are motivated to work for you in the first place, they'll be eager to put these new skills to use in your organization. Even more important, when you neglect to keep your high-tech employees abreast of the latest technology, you risk losing your market share. As the business world becomes more competitive, successful companies will have employees with the most up-to-date skills and knowledge. That's why continually training and educating your employees is a must.

However, on the same note, if you send your employees for additional training, be sure the new skill is something they will use in your company. Having them learn new programs, systems, or technology they'll never use will only make them anxious to find a way they can use it, and this may mean leaving your organization. If your employees approach you about taking a course for a program you know they'll never use in their current position, acknowledge that training is

a good idea and then offer to send them to some training that will benefit them on the job they are doing for you now. By doing so, you'll be keeping your employees happy while guiding them to the most essential training opportunities.

4. Challenge your technical employees

If you don't give your technical employees enough work to keep them stimulated, they're going to lose interest in your company and leave. Likewise, if you give them too much work and stretch their capabilities too far, they'll become frustrated and quit. The key is to create a balance that pushes them to do more yet doesn't overburden them.

One way to create this balance is to give your high-tech employees choices about their work. For example, suppose your company needs to do a system upgrade within a specified time period. Instead of telling your programmers the project needs to be done by December 31, tell them about the project and ask when they think they can have it done. In most instances, their self-imposed deadline date will meet or beat your expectations. They'll see it as a personal challenge rather than a mandate from corporate. This kind of challenge typically stimulates technical employees and brings out the best in them.

As today's economic climate continues to fluctuate, businesses need the most skilled technical employees to stay competitive. So in order to keep your high-tech employees motivated and turnover low, equipment, rewards, education, and challenge are the concepts to master. When you take the time to provide these little extras for your technical staff, they'll reciprocate by remaining valuable members of your team.

About the Author:

Mike Foster is a frequent presenter of keynote speeches, seminars, and workshops. His message about how to use technology to increase profits and productivity is welcomed by small business owners and Fortune 10 executives alike. He has a 20-year background in computer technology including 12 years owning his own technology firm. For more information about Foster's programs, call 800-657-7107 or visit www.fosterinstitute.com or www.internetmisuse.com.