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Recruiting to Retain: Four Questions to Ask Employees

Changes in the labor market mean retention isn't just for hiring managers

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With the ongoing drumbeat about a skills shortage and a shift in the balance of power from employers to employees, ERE spoke recently to retention expert Beverly Kaye about what recruiters can do to improve retention. Kaye co-authored the Wall Street Journal business best-seller *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay*.

ERE: Why now? Hasn't recruiting always partly been about retention?

Beverly Kaye: There are statistics out there about the fact that we're headed for a perfect storm. This includes not only a healthier economy, but a demographic shortfall the likes of which we've never known. There aren't enough Gen-Xers to fill the jobs. It's going to leave us with a six million person-to-job shortfall by 2010, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. That's a scary stat. There seems to be a skills shortage in math and science, especially engineering. Employees are logging in as the most dissatisfied as they've ever been.

ERE: Well, some polls show dissatisfaction, and others don't.

Kaye: Gallup, Towers Perrin, Mercer — all show employees are not engaged, not putting in the effort. Engagement is similar to satisfaction. All of these factors coming together say it's going to be tough to hold on to key talent and that top talent is going to have more choices.

ERE: Is retention a manager's job, or a recruiter's job?

Kaye: I think that anyone in the recruiting world who doesn't see retention as part of their responsibility is going to end up doing a disservice to their organization, to their department, to employees, and probably to themselves. If you don't see retention as part of your job, you will end up doing a disservice to those you recruit. I look at the retention landscape and realize how much tougher it's going to be to find great talent. Look how many choices good talent will have. Employees' decisions will depend on them asking themselves, "Do I want to work at staying here?" It depends on who their recruiter is and how aligned their recruiter is with the hiring manager.

ERE: Tell us more about what that means — "how aligned their recruiter is."

Kaye: What can we do as a team to make sure this person stays? I need to get this message as a new hire — not only that the recruiter wants me, but that my hiring manager is going to do everything he or she can to see that I stay, to see that I am productive, that I get what I want. It has an effect on my willingness, when I hit my first bump, to say, "This organization is worth it." Or, to say, "Who needs this? I'll look somewhere else."

ERE: What specifically can a recruiter do to ensure people stay at jobs?

Kaye: The ideal recruiter, who's retention-focused, will talk to the manager in depth about the candidate, will talk about the candidate's needs for challenge, passion, balance, and learning. They'll talk about what the candidate sees as his long-term goals — as much as the recruiter can gain from the interview process. And the secret is for the recruiter to stay in touch with the hiring manager from time to time to say, "How is so-and-so doing? Have you had conversations with this person? Are you getting what you need and do you think they're getting what they need, and how do you know?"

ERE: Are a lot of these conversations really happening?

Kaye: I've seen it in some organizations. The recruiting function is tasked with retention as well as recruiting. Not that retention is [solely] their responsibility, and if people don't stay, it's their problem, but they're tasked with a certain amount of follow-up with this prized candidate who comes in. For some recruiters, they see it as what they owe the whole recruiting process. But in other organizations, the recruiter isn't tasked with that role at all. It's just, "I have X number of jobs. I get them in and check the box."

ERE: What are some specific questions a recruiter could ask an employee to help ensure their tenure will be longer, should they be hired?

Kaye: [For current employees], we talk about the importance of "stay" interviews. I think the recruiter needs to ask candidates some of the same key "stay" interview questions. One, what are some of the key factors that would keep you here if you got the job? Two, what might entice you away? Three, what would keep your energy up? Four, if we would underutilize your skill set, what skills would you least want us to underuse?

Find out what in this job would attract them and then make sure you glue it in. The recruiter really needs to focus on those things that the hiring manager needs to know to keep this person and get over the six-month hump. You're looking for the right fit. I want to know as a hiring manager, What is it that makes this person tick? What is it that will make this person stay for the long haul? What is it that I can do that I could mess up that would make them think twice about staying?

ERE: Are in-house recruiters more concerned about retention, and third-party recruiters less so?

Kaye: I have several friends who are CEOs of headhunter companies. They also have to do what they can to see what people stay. Many of them have in their contracts that if the person leaves within a year, they have to recruit all over again--

although they're not inside the organization, and it's much harder. The third party has to come at it more as a coach to the new recruit. When the employee says, "I've had it — I'm out of there," the third-party recruiter should say, "Here's who to talk to, here's what to say, don't give up yet."

ERE: Just to make sure they're not acting in haste.

Kaye: Anything that looks like a greener pasture you better check out because it might be AstroTurf. Too many of us jump ship too quickly. Before employees look to leave, they need to look at their social equity, their financial equity, their influence equity, and their skill equity. These are all forms of equity you build upon in your job. If I were to make a move, what would it be like to rebuild each particular equity? They look only at the financial. They don't look at how long it will take them to build the friendships they built there. How long it will take them to learn the ropes, to be able to negotiate the organization. How long it will take them to be deploying their skill sets in the organization. They jump without realizing what they're giving up.

For third-party recruiters who have to ensure that the person stays, who stay in touch with their new recruits — this is a way for them to talk to employees about what they're giving up.

ERE: What happens when the recruiter cares about retention, but realizes the candidate may not get what they want at the job?

Kaye: In our "Love 'Em or Lose 'Em" book [where chapters begin with consecutive letters of the alphabet], the "J" chapter is for jerk. If you know you're hiring for a manager who's going to be a really tough guy to work for, what do you say to a candidate on the other side of the table? Do you coach, do you warn, do you check in on the candidate? Some recruiters say no, that they leave it alone. Others, absolutely — they end up warning the new recruit, and they end up coaching the manager that this is the way a new recruit needs to be handled, and they keep their eyes on it.

Beverly Kaye is the founder and CEO of Career Systems International and one of the nation's leading authorities on career issues in the workplace. Her career development, talent retention and mentoring programs have been implemented by her training and consulting team at American Express, AT&T, Citigroup, DaimlerChrysler, Hartford Life, Lockheed Martin, Marriott International, Microsoft, Sears, Sprint, Starbucks, Wells Fargo, and Xerox.

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