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## Keeping Employees Engaged

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By Glenn Haussman



Employee turnover in the lodging industry is notoriously difficult problem to overcome. At some properties it seems as if there are more employees filing in and out of the hotel than guests. But stemming the turnover tide is no easy feat. Not only is unemployment at virtually zero, but line level employees are notoriously quick to vanish.

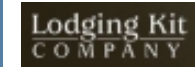
Most insidious is that employee turnover is also one of the biggest profit killers. There's the time spent trying to rehire individuals, hours and hours of training time for each newly hired staffer, and the ramp up speed of employees needing to master the skills of any given position they are assigned.

So keeping employees happy is something many hospitality executives treat as a paramount priority – especially since turnover at some properties can be more than 100 percent on an annualized basis.

At the Grande Lakes Orlando, VP and Managing Director Steve Contos said the resort has single digit turnover in 2007. And getting to that level and maintaining ultra low turnover levels takes a lot of work even before the employee is hired.



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“We are proud of our low turnover rate. We take a lot of time to make sure [potential employees] are the right fit for us and for them as well,” said Contos, who noted that applicants that are highly experienced do not always fit into their corporate culture.

Grande Lakes Orlando is a resort development with two luxury properties, a Ritz-Carlton and a JW Marriott. And in the Orlando market – which has more hotel rooms in the United States than anywhere but Las Vegas – is an ultra competitive employee environment. Contos said unemployment in the region is just three percent, a ludicrously low number.

To keep employees engaged, and therefore happy, Contos said it’s important to provide adequate training, which is then constantly reinforced throughout the employee’s tenure. Additionally, he said it’s important to pay a competitive wage and provide employees with the proper resources and told they need to do their job. More important, he said, is putting a strong emphasis on daily communications such as a daily department meetings.

Finally, Contos said without strong leadership nothing else matters. “People don’t leave companies, they leave leaders. We emphasize that you treat people right. Treat them like you want to be treated and be fair with them.

Dawn Roberts, General Manager of the Courtyard by Marriott in Greensburg, PA said it’s the hourly associates that are the backbone of the hotel operation, and it’s essential to take care of those employees. She also said it’s important to check references, talk to them and get to know them before they’re hired.

“Take care of your people. They can work anywhere for what you are paying. You try to make a difference to keep them loyal by finding out a little bit about them and making that connection with them,” said Roberts.

One program Roberts put into place that is keeping employees happy is the inclusion of English as a Second Language class. Not only are non-English speaking staffers encouraged to take the free course, but so are their family and friends. It’s been a major success for the property and even created the platform for one housekeeper to achieve a supervisor position.

“It was a win for both sides. She is now able to communicate better and it’s helped turn her life around. If you are living in the United States you have to speak English well to succeed,” said Roberts.

Meanwhile, additional lessons can be learned from other businesses too. At Laura



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Davidson Public Relations, owner Laura Davidson said they rarely lose employees to other agencies. To keep them she creates an atmosphere where employees know they come first. "For me it is easier to get new business than to get new employees," said Davidson, who said she learned a lot about managing people directly from hoteliers.

To maintain employee moral high, Davidson utilizes an outside firm that visits the company seasonally. The company provides team building and training and also crates a forum for employees to share what they feel is working and what is not. It's a place where change is nurtured and feedback – both positive and negative – is truly welcome.

There are several individuals in the company employees can go to should that person feel uncomfortable talking to Davidson. But to make it work, she said the company has to be truly open to feedback.

"When employees believe communication is part of the culture, they will want to work with you. It's important to hear them out and be flexible," said Davidson.



**Glenn Haussman**, Hotel Interactive's Editor In Chief, has been specializing in the hospitality industry for more than 10 years. He often speaks at lodging industry events, is quoted frequently as an expert source by newspapers and is an adjunct professor at New York University.

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