

Retaining Your New Talent: Starting Off Right

By Scott J. Cameron, IPMA-CP

Government agencies at all levels are facing constraints in their ability to hire new employees. In such a tough climate, it is especially important that the precious few new employees who are hired actually decide to remain on board for an acceptable period of time. Unfortunately, attrition at most agencies is greatest during the first two years of employment, and poor onboarding practices are a principal reason for that phenomenon.



Risks and Costs of Attrition

Failure to retain newly hired employees poses many risks and costs for the hiring organization. First, the agency will bear the expense of repeating the hiring process. Those costs have been variously estimated at between \$3,500 and \$25,000, and that is for a minimum wage employee! Since government workers are typically more highly skilled, the cost of replacing them is greater and more prolonged. Some of these estimates run as high as 400 percent of the employee's annual salary for highly specialized and executive-level employees.

Second, the agency mission will be at increased risk while the vacancy is open, since literally fewer hands will be available to perform the work. With many agency programs already having absorbed budget and staffing cuts, there is a risk that losing the next person will be the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back. The program may cross a threshold that leaves it unable to perform particular responsibilities for citizens.

Third, there is a contagion effect; once one employee decides to leave, others start wondering if they should consider departing as well. They ask themselves what the outgoing employee knows that

they don't, and may start exploring their own options.

Finally, there is the very real risk in the current budgetary climate that the unused salary funding associated with the recently departed employee may be scooped up by the agency budget office and redirected to another part of the organization. In such a situation, the organization has essentially experienced a budget cut on the heels of losing valued talent.

Why New Hires Leave

Attrition is greatest at two points in one's career with an organization: within the first two years of being hired, and within several years after becoming eligible for retirement. We do expect people to retire, but we certainly don't expect to lose them shortly after being hired. Why do people leave soon after being hired?

According to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, research suggests that new employees decide within the first 30 days of joining an agency whether or not they feel comfortable there; 90 percent decide within the first six months whether they will stay.

While Pricewaterhouse Cooper's 2001-2012 Human Capital Effectiveness Report indicates that voluntary job separation rates are actually down in this under-performing economy, high-performing employees are even more likely to be actively looking for better opportunities. How an agency manages the first six months of the new employee's work experience is therefore important to retaining new employees, and crucial for retaining the agency's best new talent.

Too often, the new hire is placed in the hands of the HR department for a short, new employee orientation that focuses primarily on paperwork that needs to be filled out. After the orientation, the new hires are sent off to their new workplace, where they may or may not have a computer waiting for them upon their arrival. The overworked supervisor

makes no real effort to bond with the new hire, who may not know anyone else in the office, and the new hire may spend their first few days on the job reading agency manuals. Is it at all surprising that new hire attrition is high?

Best Practices in Onboarding

In contrast, best practices in onboarding create a very different experience:

- The new hire gets a welcome letter from the agency shortly after the job offer is accepted. The welcome letter expresses excitement that the new employee is joining the agency, indicates how, long before the first day of work, the new hire can fill out most of the necessary paperwork online, and lays out a schedule for what the new employee can expect during the first week on the job, including identification of points of contact.
- The HR department, IT and the hiring official coordinate closely on planning the employee's first week on the job to ensure smooth handoffs of the employee from HR to the supervisor, as well as that a computer is ready and waiting for the new hire, and there are no "dead zones" where the new hire is sitting around with nothing to do for hours on end.
- The HR department runs an employee orientation that is light on paperwork and heavy on acculturating the new employee to the organization. Such an orientation may include uplifting videos about the agency mission, discussion groups featuring the organization's superstars, a chance to briefly meet the agency or department head face-to-face, and other sessions designed to help the new employee navigate around the organization when they feel the least comfortable about what they are doing. The idea is to reassure the new hire that they made the right job choice.
- The immediate supervisor takes the

employee to lunch on the first day to start building the interpersonal bond between supervisor and subordinate.

- The new employee gets a peer mentor—preferably a highly motivated individual hired two or three years before who exudes a positive attitude and enthusiasm for the agency. The new employee will view this person as a role model, creating a mental image of what they might be like and what they might be doing in two or three years.
- The new employee gets “adopted” by a well-respected agency veteran, whose mission it is to gradually impart the culture of the agency to the new hand, and help them understand the agency’s informal way of doing things. This is the person the new employee can feel comfortable asking questions of, since in some cases new hires might hesitate to ask a boss for fear of appearing ignorant.
- Provide the new employee with a high-level roadmap of the projects that will consume most of the new hire’s time in the first few months on the job so the new hire has a clear sense of direction.

Framing the New Hire’s Future Vision

Within the first 30 days of joining the agency, the new employee should have an individual performance plan for the first year at the agency. The plan should be developed jointly with the employee and discussed in some detail. The performance plan helps the new employee understand the supervisor’s and the agency’s expectations, which can eliminate much of the uncertainty and potential anxiety around the new hire’s first year in a new professional environment. It also provides a very useful tool for the supervisor and the new employee to gauge the employee’s progress in the job.

While it is a best practice to provide frequent and informal feedback to all employees on their performance throughout the year, the supervisor should be aware that it is particularly important to provide regular and detailed

performance feedback to an employee who is new to the agency. In the best case, this frequent and informal feedback over the first year will help the employee adapt quickly and successfully to the new work environment. They will become productive and happy and contribute to the work unit’s morale. In the worst case, the performance plan provides a legally defensible basis for the supervisor to separate an employee who, despite everyone’s hopes and expectations to the contrary, turns out to be a bad fit for the job.

The supervisor should also sit down with the employee during the first month on the job to discuss the new hire’s Individual Development Plan (IDP). The IDP sketches out a three- to five-year professional roadmap for the new employee. It flags both useful formal training and on-the-job learning opportunities. New hires—particularly ones straight out of college or graduate school—are accustomed to a structured approach to planning their future, and want to have a working model of what their early career in the agency will involve. More importantly for employee retention, the creation of an IDP implicitly says to the new employee, “We care about you as a person and your future, and we are thinking about how we can help you succeed here over time.” This is a very powerful reassuring, heart-warming message to send a new employee.

Supervisor as Lynchpin

In the final analysis, the new hire’s experience with the supervisor will largely determine whether they are happy and engaged, or start looking for a new job within their first year at the agency. The Gallup organization’s research suggests that 50 percent of work satisfaction is determined by the relationship with the first-level supervisor. That relationship largely determines how long the employee will stay with the agency. While the human resources department can handle the new hire orientation process and provide structure around a year-long onboarding process, the ultimate success or failure of the onboarding rests squarely on the supervisor’s shoulders. The supervisor has the greatest degree of impact on

whether the employee feels engaged. The supervisor can succeed by:

- Being accessible.
- Clearly communicating goals and strategies to the new hire.
- Providing necessary tools and a supportive work environment that empower the new hire to succeed.
- Creating opportunities for meaningful work that helps the new hire learn and grow.
- Providing regular feedback to the new hire in helpful, non-stressful ways.

The human resources department and agency executive leadership share a responsibility to screen and select supervisors who will be accomplished at onboarding new hires. They also must provide structure, training, and executive coaching if it appears that a supervisor is struggling in the onboarding of employees.

Supervisors and HR must always bear in mind that successfully onboarding a new employee takes about a year. It is a deliberate process that must be carefully orchestrated. The benefits are that proper onboarding dramatically reduces attrition, saves money, generates employee enthusiasm and engagement that translate into higher productivity and a more pleasant work environment for all, and ultimately leads to a higher level of mission accomplishment. It is well worth the effort of supervisors, human resources, and agency leadership to collectively ensure it is done well.

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