

THE FIVE FIRSTS OF EMPLOYEE RETENTION

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First impressions are lasting. Many employees are not. Some were probably not a good fit for the job in the first place, but some productive, dependable, hard-to-replace employees bolt too. And contrary to what they may tell you, they didn't really leave for more money.

"More money" is just a polite way of saying they were unhappy and went looking elsewhere for what we all want from our jobs - a sense of accomplishment, some personal recognition, and the "can do" teamwork environment that makes us look forward to getting out of bed in the morning.

So what happens between the new hire's enthusiastic acceptance of a job offer and the day they leave? In a nutshell, the person's manager most likely spent most of each day doing two things: dealing with unexpected problems and dealing with difficult employees (and the problems they create). When management gives all their attention to these two types of problems, it leaves the dependable, self-directed people to fend for themselves because they can. In this situation, it doesn't take long for top performers to begin to feel unappreciated and frustrated by the lack of attention.

The good news is that keeping your best people on board doesn't have to take a lot of time. All it really takes are small doses of quality time that make the most of first impressions:

1. **The First Hour on the Job:** Use the first hour to make the best first impression possible on every new employee. This is not the time for completing paperwork or going over safety rules. This is the time to make introductions and to make the person feel welcome and comfortable. It's the time to explain why the job is important and how job performance will affect customers and co-workers alike. This is the time to encourage your new hire to ask questions and then give them the answers they need to feel they'll fit in. Ask if they have any particular concerns or worries. Take the time to share a little of your company's history so the new person feels like "part of the family."
2. **End of the First Day:** Your new employee is reeling from a day filled with the unfamiliar --- a new environment, new people, new policies and procedures, and new responsibilities. This is the time to spend the last 15 minutes of that first day debriefing, answering questions, and ensuring the new hire leaves with a positive impression. Once home, it is inevitable the employee will be asked: "How was your day?" Your goal is for the answer to be: "Great! It seems like a great place to work."

3. **End of the First Week:** At the end of the first week, it's time to get with the new employee to find out how the week went. This meeting is also an opportune time to:
 - Find out why they left their last job and why they took the job with your organization. (This informal market research also helps reinforce in their minds that they made the right "buying decision.")
 - Ask for new employee referrals by saying: "There must have been some other great people over at the company you just left. Of everyone you worked with over there, who would you like to see working here?" Find out why they think that person would be good and what they think it would take to get them to change jobs.
4. **First Paycheck:** Even though you may have a direct deposit payroll system, try to arrange to present the first paycheck to the new employee in person. Whether you hand them the actual check or the deposit slip, do it in one of these two ways:
 - If the new employee has been great, this is the time to tell him or her what a pleasure it has been to have them on board (be specific about what they have accomplished) and tell them they have really earned their check. (Thank you doesn't cut it; be specific.)
 - If the person has not lived up to expectations, now is the time to tell them that you wanted to personally hand them their first paycheck, but you feel they have only earned 75% of it and the specific reasons why. This is an easy conversation the first pay period, but it gets more difficult the longer they are with you. Do it up front and save yourself some grief.
5. **First Year Anniversary:** One of the other keys to keeping great employees is to create times of fun and camaraderie. Look for reasons to celebrate. One of the obvious reasons to celebrate is an employment anniversary. Some places have one celebration each month that includes birthdays and employment anniversaries. In others, both anniversaries and birthdays are acknowledged by a card and small gift (a gift certificate, an afternoon off, movie passes, etc.). It's not so important what specifically is done, it's the acknowledgement and encouragement that count.

First impressions really are lasting, but too many employers still hold to the old world view that it is up to their employees to impress them. While that's still true, it would be to your advantage if it were reciprocal. Get out in front of the curve and take these first five opportunities to impress every new employee with the respect, acknowledgement, and appreciation that will keep them motivated and on your team.

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