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Reengaging Employees in a Post-Recession World

The economic downturn prompted many employers to make cuts that they might not contemplate in better times—from staff reductions to pay cuts to scaled back benefits. Although those moves helped many businesses ride out the recession, a recent study reveals that some decisions also negatively impacted employee engagement, and that many employees intend to look for employment elsewhere this year.

IMPACT OF CUTS

Sixty percent of the 900 North American workers participating in a Right Management survey indicated that they intend to leave their current employer as the economy improves this year. “That is a large number,” says Deborah Schroeder-Saulnier, senior vice president of Global Solutions with Right Management (www.right.com), the talent and career management expert within Manpower®. As for the remaining respondents, the survey found:

- 21% are networking and contemplating new job opportunities;
- 6% do not anticipate leaving their current employer but have updated their résumé; and
- 13% plan to stay in their current job.

“The study provides a barometer of employee engagement in the workplace with results that might alarm and surprise many employers,” says Douglas J. Matthews, president and chief operating officer of Right Management. “Employees are clearly expressing their pent-up frustration with how they have been treated through the downturn. While employers may have taken the necessary steps to streamline operations to remain viable, it appears many employees may have felt neglected in the process. The result is a disengaged and disgruntled workforce.”



IMPLICATIONS FOR HR

There are several steps that employers can take to reengage and retain workers as the economy improves, according to Schroeder-Saulnier. She says HR should work closely with management to identify any shifts in the strategic direction of the business, to understand how that shift will impact employees' roles, and to ensure that any necessary changes are "communicated in a way that employees can understand what's going on in the business."

"Communication is going to be key, and that communication is kind of a thread that holds and connects individuals to the business," she says, noting that effective communication can build employee trust and confidence in the business.

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However, communication must be two-way, Schroeder-Saulnier notes. That is, supervisors and managers need to listen to employee concerns and answer their questions (even if that sometimes means acknowledging that they do not have all of the answers yet) and emphasize that everyone is working together to help the organization move forward. "If it's just one-way conversations, it's really not going to be full and effective communication."

Providing career development opportunities, especially with high potential employees, and creating a "healthy work environment" are also important ways to reengage employees, says Schroeder-Saulnier. She suggests finding affordable ways to help employees grow (e.g., mentoring), looking at the workloads and pressures placed on individuals, being flexible about how and when employees can accomplish their work, and promoting work-life balance.

Those recommendations are sound best practices in good times and in bad, but Schroeder-Saulnier says that there is an even greater need to address them as the economy improves and employers seek to retain talent.