

The middle-age career crisis

HR should pay special attention to 40-year-olds with 15 years' tenure

BY DAPHNE WOOLF

At some point in their careers, all employees will struggle with their level of engagement on the job. While external factors such as mergers, corporate reorganization or missed promotions can have widely differing impacts on individuals, it's possible to manage these circumstances both before and after the event. The tricky factor in employee engagement is the personal stuff.

It's not just the individual's spouse, kids, home and health that affect employee engagement. Resilience to change, sense of humour, the ability to handle pressure and long-term expectations all have a huge impact on an employee's enthusiasm and productivity at work. These and other qualities are elusive, and often subtle, and must be addressed to keep employees engaged.

With most employees it's tough to predict the moment when personal issues will start to seriously interfere with engagement — let alone finding a solution. With one particular demographic, however, employers can safely and consistently predict the crisis: 40-year-olds with 15 years' experience working for the same company. Addressing their particular circumstances can make the difference between having a maximally effective workforce or not.

Predicting the middle-age engagement crisis

These 40-something employees are at the halfway mark in their career. They have roughly 20 years of experience behind them and 20 years of work ahead of them. When they consider doing what they are doing now for another 20 years, they may lose their drive. In some cases, they may even despair.

What drove them to succeed

during the first 15 years of work may not be the same thing that drives them today. Their definition of success may be different now.

They are probably not the same person they were 15 years ago when they started with the company. They may have acquired a family, new hobbies or interests, additional responsibilities, a change of values or a nagging feeling they are missing something.

The risks of ignoring 40-somethings

Don't underestimate the impact of low engagement among 40-year-olds with 15 years of service. Whether they stay or leave, it can have serious implications for the company:

- they could leave the company, taking their experience and intellectual capital with them;
- they could become mediocre performers lacking the passion and drive seen in highly engaged employees;
- they may serve as negative role models to younger staff — including rising stars — who, in some cases, may look to them as their manager, trainer, performance appraiser or mentor.

Being proactive about a solution

Here is the good news: Employers can predict this challenge by identifying who is in this demographic and therefore vulnerable to becoming disengaged. Of course, this demographic is a moving target. The group will need to be re-identified at least annually.

Once employers know who these employees are, be proactive. Here are some steps to follow:

Don't make assumptions about what drives them or how they feel. Find out directly from them how they perceive their career — past, present and future. Some of them may be perfectly happy and engaged. Others may not.

Bring them together. Treat them as special. In isolation they develop their own stories and ideas about the world of work around them. By bringing them together they will share ideas with each other and the employer. Allow them to collectively brainstorm on solutions that will challenge and excite them over the next 20 years.

Introduce new and customized career options based on what they tell you. Let them know you offer alternative career paths that capitalize on their experience and potential. At the same time, allow them to move into a whole new area of functionality if they prefer. Position a new career alternative as a separate, distinct and new "career phase."

Don't use Band-Aid solutions. A new career option may require a substantial investment in training and development. Keep in mind the training and development would not be just for the 40-year-old who is undergoing a change, but would also be required for the designated individual selected to succeed him in his current function.

3 steps to success

To effectively re-engage employees in this demographic, there are several unmistakable keys to success:

- If employers have more than three employees who are 40 with 15 years' of service, establish small group discussions rather than addressing each employee one-on-one. This lets them feel "selected" rather than "targeted." It builds camaraderie and establishes a support structure among them. They feel less alone with their common issues.
- Listen to them openly and in an environment of trust through the involvement of a confidential and objective third party. A third party ensures honest input and sends the message the employer is committed to their engagement and it

takes employees seriously. The third party will also ask employees key questions without making assumptions, and will probe discreetly into what it hears.

• The potential career change for 40-somethings has to be substantial. Employers need to breathe new life into their career and give them a sense that their role is truly moving into an exciting and distinct new phase. It cannot be viewed as simply "more work to do." Employers must be prepared to free them from their current role and responsibilities and give them top-down support in their new position. The side benefit of this for younger employees is career growth and opportunity.

Re-energized employees are a critical asset

In developing a solution for this group, evaluate the return on investment. The rewards of reigniting these individuals, bringing them together as a force and re-training them to take on new and vital functions should offset the risk of doing nothing and having them potentially become disengaged in their current roles or quit.

More likely, employers will be pleasantly surprised with the results of their efforts. After all, employees who are in the 40-year range with 15 years of service can and should be a company's strongest asset. Unlike enthusiastic rookies, they have developed wisdom, know-how and productivity skills that are invaluable and can be further refined through time and experience.

If employers follow a proactive approach to address their needs and give them the support to find a solution, they may turn around and help solve a nagging problem, jump-start a lagging project or achieve a monstrous sales target. Forty-somethings are known to reserve a considerable cache of youthful energy, insight and creativity that is just waiting for the right spark.

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