

Copier Careers White Paper

“New think” keeps your best employees

When four research organizations formed the ARPANET in 1968, no one could have forecast how far the birth of the Internet would reach into the corporate world. Not only did it make most jobs information-based by 1993, it has also changed forever how any neighborhood business competes for business and top employees.

Thinning insulation from such outside competition has an up side, though – the Internet and information technology can play a role in providing for employee incentives, particularly in a networked copier industry. And information technology skills are becoming more of a bartering tool for any employee than even such old stand-bys as length of time on a job. In today’s economy, information technology skills are always a “blue chip” item.

Retaining the best employees is “always a struggle – particularly today with the connected employee,” said Tom Arney, Director of Service for the Northwest Group of Quality Business Systems, Woodinville, Wash.

Those watching the technology-based revolution say it is dismantling traditional pay scales with new terms such as “person-based pay,” or paying on the basis of skills rather than the traditional pay scale based on the value of the job to the organization. Throw in some Fortune 500 Corporations giving shiny BMWs and signing bonuses, and Vice Presidents and top managers can be lured to other firms. Plus the labor structure is now making it so autonomy and self-reliance may have more value to the employee.

How can a CEO of a copier company keep the best employees in this environment?

The easy answer, “paying well,” doesn’t keep the exit turnstile from rotating. The U.S. Department of Labor has estimated the average worker changes jobs every five and one-half years or 10 times in a working lifetime and changes careers three times. Other statistics also show using a parachute to jump to other jobs makes economic sense – why stay at a place with a 5 percent COLA per year when jumping results in a 20 percent increase?

The copier companies are “early adapters” in technology and if a world market re-adjusts the traditional pay scales to “person-based,” the savvy company CEO has responded. Information systems skills as a commodity in this global market have been awarded in a manner similar to “person based” pay. Most copier companies compensate service technicians who complete A+ training or Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer training. Techs who demonstrate considerable skills at working with systems in the new copier-printer networked environment are likewise compensated accordingly.

When headhunters come calling

The good manager is easy to spot in any company. He or she is the one who brings innovative, doable ideas to any meeting, who has allegiance from co-workers and supervisees, and who will be long remembered by those who work with him/her long after they leave the company. It may be made easier by a company shake-up.

These “star” employees are also the first contacts on the list of headhunters, made easier with Internet technology that places the world at anyone’s fingertips. And a certain percentage will leave, which may be healthy to the organization. Some managers reach a point where they no longer fit in. But research has also shown that even job nomads want to find a place to stay in the workplace and will do so, with proper incentives.

So how do you go about building employee commitment? Here are a few tips from professional groups that specialize in such questions, plus tips from managers in the copier industry:

Salary and perks are relevant, but training needs to be part of a retention plan. “If you pay them well and you continually train them in some manner,” said Ken Harouff, Document Solutions Manager for Machabee Office Environments, Reno, Nevada, “you’re never going to lose good employees.” While stock options and retirement plans are in the mix, don’t forget others – the option to change a job title, for example.

Harouff cautions that any such a pay process involves negotiation. “When you involve someone in negotiations for their own plan, they tend to stick around longer,” Harouff said.

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Use innovative ways to reward and challenge employees. Arney keeps his star performers motivated with a bonus program. Techs are split into groups according to types of machine, with specific goals for all groups. Using averages comprised of statistics drawn from Arney’s experience as a manager, super performers can be identified and awarded.

BMW’s may be out of reach, but the concept is not. The employee who gets into that new BMW thinks of the value of working for that company each time he drives. It’s not too hard to think of items that might also remind the “star” how valuable he/she is to the company each time it’s used – notebook computers or PDAs, for example.

Keep alternative work “perks” fair. Maybe there are alternatives such as telecommuting and special hours that an employee would like. Harouff said flexible hours can “ruin the environment” as others have resentment toward those who are so blessed.

While there is research that shows alternatives such as telecommuting increase production by 10 percent or more, most companies implement such programs only after a time period of deliberate study and experimentation, and with an eye on the overall company impact.

The deserving should be awarded actively – not reactively. An organization has to give management and supervisory slots to the deserving. Expect a certain amount of turnover, say human resource experts, and try to refrain from “reactive” raises if the person gets an offer somewhere else.

Consider “new think” advancement based on skills. Most copier companies follow the traditional plan for advancement, but any company should consider advancement and appropriate reward for a series of identifiable and marketable skills – a “learning-based” work environment.

Training builds the company and loyalty. People expect training, said Arney. Provide training as an incentive, increasing the manager’s value. Yes, there is a risk the person may leave with such skills, but some companies have agreements with incentives high enough to prevent such ship jumping.

Ever notice how “fired up” many employees are after attending a conference relevant to his/her job? Conferences do motivate employees with vigor and excitement. CEOs who send their people to such seminars and training usually reap benefits when the employee’s motivation sparks the copier company to increase business.

Keeping the best can fire up business

The July 2004 U.S. Department of Labor figures showed jobs down 1.1 million since 2001, unemployment at 5.6 percent and turnover rates at about 3 percent since 2001. And the past decade’s roller-coaster economy has taught corporate America a lesson, according to Harouff, “They have to keep the belt tight when the economy is good,” he said.

It is true the copier industry was the first into the recession and will probably be the last out, according to Arney. But Arney says with upped page counts and more service calls, he hasn’t seen any increase in employee turnover. In fact, Quality Business Systems, an affiliate of Global Imaging, Tampa, Fla. has picked up more techs for their operation in Seattle and Portland, with 55 techs in August 2004.

Rewarding the “best of the best” filters down to a company’s lowest level and training always invigorates a company. Adapting to a changing environment is sometimes a challenge, but a healthy one. If pay and compensation adapts to a new corporate order for the best managers that includes innovative incentives to build the company and an organization that is learning-based, enhanced sales, service and page counts should follow.