

How to Enhance Associate Retention through Training and Development

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What do you think are the biggest factors in reducing associate turnover in the work place? Is it higher pay, better benefits, more healthcare insurance coverage, or more time off? It might be surprising to find out that the answers to these questions have less to do with pay or fringe benefits and more to do with the following key factors:

- (1) training and development program¹, and
- (2) associates' relationships with their immediate supervisor²

In this article we focus on training and development; the importance of management and associate relationships will be discussed in a future article.

The reality is that we are well aware of the importance of training and staff development, since organizations budget millions of dollars on this each year. Unfortunately, most organizations focus on providing task/skill training only (e.g., how to load a washer, how to fold properly, how to fill out time sheets, how to create work schedules, or how to monitor production schedules), and pay much less attention on explaining to associates the purpose of the training in the first place. While task training is important because it helps associates and managers understand how they can do their work well, it often does not result in better retention because it does not help them understand why they are doing what they are doing.

When associates and managers do not understand why they are doing certain tasks during the training, they often find very little meaning in what they do. Why is such individual meaning so important? Because meaning at work helps enhance commitment to the organization, which in turn, increases retention. For example, a study conducted by Richard Steers (1977) found that "highly committed" associates were found to have a higher intention to remain with the company, a stronger desire to attend work, and a more positive attitude about their employment. Similarly, a study conducted by Patrick Owens (2006) concluded that associates who had a high level of commitment were less likely to consider leaving their employment for better opportunities. Others studies have reached similar conclusions (Arthur, 1994; Brum, 2007; Green, Felsted Mayhew and Pack, 2000).

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So how do we make use of an associate training and development program to foster meaning, enhance commitment to the organization, and increase retention rates? As mentioned earlier, although task-based training helps employees understand how to perform certain tasks, it is not enough to increase associates' knowledge of their daily tasks. What research and experience have shown is that associates must understand the linkage between the training conducted and the desired strategic outcomes for the associates as well as for the organization. In support of this assertion, Bartlett's (2001) study with 337 registered nurses found that when the training and development program is linked to a more global human resource strategy within the organization, associates' commitment would grow and retention would increase.

In this article the term "associates" refers to non-management personal, including supervisors, front line workers, and technicians.

The bottom line is this: Associates need to see why they are trained to do certain tasks. The best training and development programs not only provide greater levels of task knowledge but also help associates achieve a clearer understanding of how what they do will help themselves, their customers, and their organization. Only then will associates and managers find their work meaningful, feel committed to what they do, and are more willing to stay at the organization and maintain performance over time.

As an example, consider a customer service training program for your associates. The training would include information on scripting, how to interact with customers, and how to maintain proper body language, etc. You may even want to video-tape your associates to review their service performance and enhance their comfort in delivering customer service with their clients. All of these are important skills to learn and will lead to a stronger skill set for the associates. You can then take this training a step further and increase the associates' commitment to the organization in two ways.

First, make sure that all management levels are in complete support of the training and development program. This reduces any ambiguity and gets everyone to buy-in to the program. When everyone from all management levels supports training and development, it signals to associates that management values the program. This helps provide a sense of meaning in what associates are trained for, because it is tied to the success of the organization.

Second, you need to tie the customer service training to associates' individual goals in addition to the organization's strategic goals. In other words, the customer service training program must include specific reasons how the training benefits the individual. For example, during the training and development program, you can deliver a presentation on how correct customer service helps provide more positive feedback from customers, which leads to greater customer loyalty to the organization, more positive references, and increased future business. This type of focused training helps individuals work on personal development in needed areas and provides a sense of meaning in what they do, enhance retention, and stay ahead of competition.

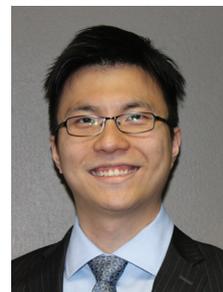
Training and development provides an answer to higher levels of retention if you do it right: provide quality training and linking such training directly to their personal development as well as to the overall strategic improvement of the organization. Ultimately, the goal is to provide associates a sense of meaning in what they do in order to lower their desire to leave the organizations.

- ¹ Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; Delahoussaye, Ellis, & Bolch, 2002
- ² Mossholder, Settoon, & Henagan, 2005

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