

Building a loyal employee base should be your top post-pandemic priority

The union bosses of the 1800s who organized workers to fight low wages and unsafe working conditions couldn't have dreamed of this one: A day when the onus is now on companies to make their staff as happy as possible or risk having no employees at all.

That's possibly the single biggest and most long-lasting effect of a pandemic that sidelined tens of millions of employees for a year or more. But in many cases, they weren't just sitting on the couch collecting double benefits and binge-watching Netflix.

They were reevaluating their priorities regarding the work commute, the face time, work satisfaction, and their quality of life. Which is why the biggest problem for many companies now is not any of those that might come to mind: Not supply chain interruptions on everything from computer chips to lumber, not a lack of truck drivers and shipping containers, not over-reliance on critical materials imports or the momentary shutdown of things like the hospitality or cruise industries. The problem is building a loyal labor force for the future.

According to a study by mega-staffing company Robert Half International, even for employers now trying to create the environment workers want, that's an uphill battle. The report states that the number of workers quitting is rising as employees reevaluate their priorities, which can range from child care challenges to wanting to work for a company that better fits their personal values. And there are still concerns about masks or about careers they feel were derailed by the pandemic.



Particularly hard is finding and retaining staff in lower-paid jobs.

The answers? Although paying sustainable wages is one element that also uplifts whole communities, money alone won't always do it: Another survey shows a great many workers would decline a big raise if they couldn't work from home.

Other strategies companies will have to consider range from a future commitment to remote working in some capacity to increased benefits to making every day a bring-your-pet-to-work day and figuring out a way to give staffers a sense of purpose and self-esteem, such as involving them in public service opportunities or choosing the charities the employer will support. Companies that find those solutions will be at the forefront of their industries.

In any case, businesses need to get creative about what they're delivering and how, which sometimes means harnessing technology to reduce the number of workers needed, from warehouse robots to driverless Uber cars and Domino's deliveries. But many jobs simply can't be done by R2D2s: Think everything from nurses and police officers to HVAC repair people, much-needed construction workers, and moving company staff.

A Success Story

I personally witnessed one local company that has clearly found a winning formula, the Baltimore-area moving company Perry Moving & Storage. During a recent move that I hired them for, the workers were not just fast, hard-working, and service-oriented, but described days where they willingly worked dawn to dusk on multiple jobs, because they felt valued and fairly compensated, so they want to come to work every day.

So therein lies the opportunity: finding solutions to attract — and keep — workers at a time when there are so many vacancies and workforce dropouts, even if it means largely untried things like training and hiring ex-cons.

I've been involved in a similar solution, an urban nonprofit that finds homeless vets, most of whom are on drugs, gets them clean, finds them housing, and trains them for the workforce. In this case, a whole new business opportunity was created to meet the need, one that's in demand and pays well: rodent infestation. The outcome? The vets developed a work ethic and self-esteem and make good money.

So, there's your homework for his month: Find a way to turn those disruptions, including those in the work force, into opportunities that will make owners and investors satisfied, make workers happy — and maybe get rid of some metaphorical rodents while you're at it.

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