

Going the Way of Reverse Mentoring

Knowledge sharing is no longer a one-way street.

Mentoring is not a new concept where organisational development initiatives are concerned. Many companies have put into place mentoring programmes, both formal and informal, to pass on experience and knowledge within the organisation.

However, recent technological advances and the revolution of communication using web 2.0 tools have prompted organisations to reassess existing mentoring models, other HR related initiatives and even business processes. In response to such changes, organisations are turning to their younger, junior employees to spread technical expertise to their senior executives.

Spreading knowledge all around

Information sharing is essential in a knowledge- based economy. As businesses evolve with the changing landscape and technology, companies are more aware that knowledge no longer comes from traditional sources. The main goal for any organisation should be to utilise knowledge within to its full advantage.

Reverse technology becomes an effective and integral tool of an organisation's training and development programme. While traditional concept of mentoring involves a more senior executive sharing knowledge and experience with a junior executive, reverse mentoring – as it suggests – sees junior staff teaching the “old dogs” new tricks.

Embracing reverse mentoring

Like most corporate initiatives, proper planning is required to ensure the success of a reverse mentoring programme. At the foremost, defined targets and goals must be set, and these clearly communicated to and understood by participants involved. A structured curriculum could be implemented to encourage employees to participate without being compelled to skip session due to an overwhelming workload. In this case, a mutually accepted arrangement is best.

The programme, whether conducted informally or formally, should be documented and measured for effective assessment. On HR's part, a set up of performance indicators ensure relevant issues are monitored, addressed and revised. Most importantly, the programme is supported by top management and line managers.

And in any mentoring programme, mentors should be patient while mentees should check their egos at the door, and be open-minded. It is a mentor-mentee relationship that may take time to adjust. Nevertheless, reverse mentoring is a mutual learning experience where each is able to leverage off one another's knowledge and skills.

The best of reverse mentoring

While reverse mentoring is commonly applied in organisations where technology is a fundamental part of the work environment – Jack Welsh, former CEO of General Electric first used reverse mentoring to train his managers and himself in the ways of technology – it is also relevant and, at the same time, beneficial to many other organisation initiatives.

It sends a strong message to potential employees that they are valued and that management or senior employees are willing to listen to younger staff. It indicates to senior executives the organisation remains committed in their professional development.

In addition, reverse mentoring demonstrates that the company values diversity. This encourages alternative perspectives from younger and less experienced staff, which can help improve business processes and drive innovation.

In essence, reverse mentoring is a powerful talent attraction and retention tool; it promotes employee engagement and advocates workplace diversity. It cultivates and strengthens workplace relationships, enhancing workplace dynamics where employees acknowledge the roles each play in one another's success.

Retain your best people

Employee retention is key to long- term health and success of an organisation

Higher life expectancy of older workers coupled with declining birth rates mean that employers today are facing a serious talent crunch. Companies agree that such situations stress the magnitude of not only attracting the right people, but keeping them as well – especially since talent retention affects many organisational issues such as transfer of knowledge and skills, staff morale and resources invested in recruitment.

But why do companies still lose valuable talent?

The hard cost of employee attrition

Losing capable people is expensive. It may cost 30%-50% of the annual salary of entry level staff and 150% of mid- level employees, but it costs up to 400% for high level executives. On top of the value of employee compensation and benefits, resources are expended to hold exit interviews, place job advertisements, interview prospective employees, and hire and train new staff. In addition, more money is spent to hire temporary workers as the search for permanent replacements take up some time.

The loss of good talents is not only of expertise, it is also erosion of team morale and loss of productivity and of existing and potential customers. One may argue that some employee turnover is unavoidable, even desirable. Some turnover is required to replace marginal or under- performing employees with more productive ones who could also bring in fresh ideas and new expertise. However, high turnover is unnecessary.

Keep valuable talent from leaving

It is important for managers to find out what drives their staff to succeed as this in turn will affect organisational success. There are several organisational issues which they can take note of to boost employee retention:

Set proper key performance indicators (KPIs) and clearly communicate expectations. Changing expectations or worse, no KPIs communicated to staff may leave staff confused and uncertain of what is expected of them. This encourages unhealthy stress as they become insecure of their jobs.

Recognise and reward. Staff rewards do not necessarily have to come in monetary form, even a simple thank you goes a long way. Appropriate raises that are tied to accomplishments help retain staff.

Have good managers. The quality of leadership can greatly affect staff retention. As the corporate adage goes, people do not leave organisations, they leave bad bosses. Anything a manager does that makes an employee feel unvalued will result in a turnover. And when managers show respect to their employees, it encourages a more conducive work environment.

Employees should be seen and heard. Employees should be encouraged to give ideas and feedback for the better of the organisation, and feel their contributions matter. Otherwise, they would simply hold their tongue and leave.

There should be fairness and equitable treatment. Playing favourites or treating some as “more equal” than others is a sure way to kill motivation, erode morale, respect and productivity.

Share information. Make employees feel part of the organisation by informing them what is going on in the company. Information sharing is important at all times, but critical during period of change such as downsizing, mergers and acquisitions. Keep communication consistent as well.

Promote work- life balance. Work- life balance policies focus on performance rather than the number of hours employees put in working behind their desks at the office. It allows staff to better cope with family responsibilities without sacrificing performance at work.

Train and develop talent. Having suitable training policies and mapping out career paths demonstrates the employer’s commitment to developing staff skills and knowledge. It also shows how much the employer values them.

HR takeaways

Employee retention is one of the primary indications of the health of an organisation. It is a collaborative effort between managers and the HR department to retain talents. Gathering information from exit interviews with departing employees and conducting staff satisfaction surveys from time to time will help give management an indication of the state of things in the organisation. Such information will also be helpful in refining staff retention practices and policies.

And while compensation and benefits will always be an important factor in retaining staff, applying effective training, career paths and succession planning plans is key in attracting and retaining top talent.