

Red Flags: Are Your Employees Job Hunting?

By Max Messmer

Max Messmer is chairman and CEO of Robert Half International, parent company of Accountemps®, Robert Half® Finance & Accounting and Robert Half® Management Resources. Robert Half is the world's first and largest specialized staffing firm placing accounting and finance professionals on a temporary, full-time and project basis. Mr. Messmer is author of *Managing Your Career For Dummies*® and *Job Hunting For Dummies*®, 2nd Edition. His most recent book is *Human Resources Kit For Dummies*®, 2nd Edition.

For smaller firms, the loss of just one employee can have a major impact. With fewer personnel to cover the workload, your response to customer needs may suffer until the position is filled. In addition, hiring and training a replacement is typically costly and time-consuming.

A certain amount of turnover is to be expected in any organization, of course, and much of it you have no control over: People relocate or leave the workforce to raise families, go back to college, or for a variety of other reasons. But when valued performers decide to leave primarily because they're unhappy at your firm, there is action you can take if you learn of the situation early enough. If you're observant, there are a number of red flags you can spot. Here are some common warning signs that your employees are job hunting and what to do about it:

1. A change in attitude.

Take note if normally satisfied individuals suddenly become vocal with complaints, or staff who regularly share feedback and ideas at meetings no longer participate. They may feel that they're half way out the door at your company and don't care as much about their actions anymore. If no obvious factors seem to be contributing

to the change in behavior, such as periods of particularly heavy workloads or a personal issue outside of work, an abrupt change in attitude can be a tip-off that an employee is unhappy in his or her job.

2. Increased time off.

People who are dissatisfied and potentially job hunting are likely to begin using up personal or vacation days in uncharacteristic bursts. Watch for a noticeable rise in absenteeism.

Also pay attention to a growing number of long lunch breaks or changes in normal arrival and departure times. Interviews tend to be conducted around business hours, so employees may be tardy due to these appointments.

3. Mistakes on the job.

No one is perfect, but if you're noticing more errors and missed deadlines from individuals who were formerly good performers, consider it a red flag. Increased mistakes can be a sign the employee is no longer engaged.

4. Different social patterns.

Some indicators that employees are job hunting are more subtle. For instance, you may notice that individuals who used to regularly join in on group lunches are now going solo or spending the time behind closed doors. Or they might skip birthday or holiday celebrations at work. This, of course, could also be due to work-intensive projects, but absent that cause, you may want to take a closer look.

Taking action

If you become aware of these or other signs, don't hesitate to schedule a meeting with employees exhibiting unusual behavior. While you may be tempted to ask directly if

someone is looking for another job, remember that most people will be hesitant to tell the truth. A better approach is to start off by commenting on the changes you've noticed. You might say, for example, "You haven't been as enthusiastic about taking on new assignments lately, and I'm concerned you're unhappy in your job. What can I do to improve the situation?"

In many instances, just the fact that you're offering a willing ear will prompt individuals to open up to you. Together, come up with potential solutions. Be careful not to go overboard, however. Even if the employee is a top performer, you can create more problems that you solve if you promise someone perks you don't offer to other staff.

Also discuss future opportunities at the firm. Be clear about potential career paths and ways your organization can support professional goals. Sometimes employees don't realize their prospects are bright with an employer until it's too late, so make sure you leave no room for misunderstanding.

Despite your best efforts, you may still not be able to persuade everyone to stay. Even then, there are things you can do to prevent further turnover. Try to learn what you can from exit interviews so you can make modifications that encourage loyalty among remaining staff.

Unaddressed, employee turnover can affect your entire team and ultimately damage client relationships. Uncovering the fact that an employee is unhappy at your firm should serve as a wake-up call that there is room for improvement in such areas as management, work environment, and compensation and benefits. By taking this input seriously, you can help to keep your entire workforce satisfied and boost retention rates.