



Science
Societies

Flexibility key for early career employee satisfaction and retention

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Early career employees across the United States are entering a work environment different from the one their parents and grandparents entered. The days of staying with one company for an entire career are over. In fact, based on a survey by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics ([2020](#)), only a quarter of workers in their mid-thirties are with the same employer they had at the beginning of their career 10 years earlier. With the rate of technological development across all industries, many employees joining the workforce today will retire from jobs that do not yet exist.

Employees in this quickly evolving professional world move between jobs every 4.4 years (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, [2020](#)), a number that drops to 2.3 years for high performers in their early-thirties (Hamori et al., [2012](#)). When surveyed about the reasons for job changes, a lack of career growth was the second most common reason for leaving a job. Additionally, a third of employees said they quit because they were not learning new skills (Akhtar, [2019](#)). Maintaining flexibility as both an employer and employee is key to mitigating these concerns about career growth opportunities and skill development, which increases employee satisfaction and retention.

Take Advantage of Opportunities Early On

Oftentimes, the greatest growth curve for a professional is at the beginning of a career when experiences come into play and begin to narrow down interests and passions.

Early career employees should focus on taking advantage of opportunities within their function and elsewhere in the company in preparation of a potential pivot as they evolve professionally.

If job shadowing and cross-training are available, employees should sign up to participate. If they are not, an excited young employee would be a great advocate for suggesting to management that they should add such a development program. It can seem overwhelming to attempt to cover a broader skill set early in a career, but the benefits are twofold. First, it is important for employees to find out what aspects of the industry they like and dislike early in their career, before limited experiences pigeon-hole them into a specific job. Secondly, if the employee's professional interests are not developing synergistically with their current position, they will have the skill set and network connections to make a horizontal move into a more suitable role.

As a manager, it is especially important to stay flexible with early career employees. After investing time and money to train new employees for a specific role, it can seem counter-intuitive to give them the opportunity to spend time learning a different job. In reality, cross-training for early career employees is a positive for both the employee and employer. In addition to decreasing day-to-day monotony and increasing employee adaptability, cross-training can improve company culture. Gaining firsthand experience of co-workers' responsibilities builds team camaraderie and increases

employee adaptability during peak times. Additionally, participating in a process from beginning to end helps employees understand how they fit into the organization's overall goals. Formalization of an interdisciplinary training program can be tailored to fit an organization's mission and can be a great selling point when recruiting top young talent. One example of a company-supported program is "3 × 3 cross-training" for which an organization commits to training every employee to be proficient in three different jobs and has three employees trained to step into each role (DeLong, [2015](#)).

If buy-in to a formalized program is low, or time away from expected responsibilities is restrictive, managers can focus on coordinating less-intensive development, like job shadowing and interdepartmental interactions. Taking time to ensure that early career employees understand job opportunities within the organization will decrease attrition rates in favor of horizontal movement, especially in organizations where employees tend to have long tenures and vertical movement is limited.

Advice for Those in Academia

For early career professors and those in the academic realm, the level of professional flexibility can fluctuate based on grant availability and may be more difficult than in industry. Taking on a graduate student or post-doc with interests that vary from the group's traditional research agenda can be one way to expand the knowledge base as a new professor. It is also important to remember that taking a support role in a grant or collaboration is a good way to get a foot in the door of a new area of interest. Joining or starting a transdisciplinary research affinity group is another way to expand connections in an area of interest and develop across disciplines.

In the academic realm, validation of a new employee's desire to cross-train may come from a mentor rather than a manager. Mentors and senior leadership can encourage

development by facilitating networking opportunities between departments and disciplines. Additionally, tenured faculty can step into mentorship roles with young faculty who are looking to branch out from their previous specialties and become involved in new projects. While it may be less structured than in a corporate setting, intellectual cross-training is easily accessed at educational institutions through seminars, guest speakers, and access to expansive libraries.

Regardless of the sector, it is important that managers and mentors note an early career employees' interest in development and respond positively. They should be flexible enough to allow employees to explore their options within the organization and develop as professionals. To early career employees, an organization's investment in development and training is indicative of a long-term commitment to their career. Employees should reciprocate by taking advantage of opportunities to explore other roles within the organization, network with their coworkers, and build their skill set in preparation to pivot within the organization as needed. This broad flexibility by both employees and employers is mutually beneficial as it allows organizations to retain employees they have already made a significant investment in while allowing the employee to develop their career internally.

Dig Deeper

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