

Employee Turnover

By

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Abstract

The researcher offers a history of worker turnover and retention tools for modern human resource capital. Today, businesses and industry, governments, and nonprofits face a severe economic climate that challenges their human resources. Sound hiring practices and new worker orientation are smart investments that can aid worker assimilation, thus, eliminating turnover. By working to establish trust and a collegial work environment, employers can help employees feel more confident in their new environment. This can create a mutually beneficial experience where the worker sticks with the new position and provides years of productivity for the organization.

With the understanding that a new-hire does not begin to recover the cost of recruitment and hiring costs for an employer until they are on the job for about one and one-half years, recruitment and retention practices should become a strategic component of an organization's human resources agenda, with the worker being seen as a human capital investment.

Introduction

Looking back more than a century ago to the modern industrial age, and now to the "silicon," computerized age, employee turnover has plagued management in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors in the form of both voluntary and involuntary separation. It presents a constant challenge to management and labor in terms of lost productivity, diminished morale, and worker replacement costs.

As Fred Colvin (1919) shares from his experiences with machinists in the early 1900's, "... the actual cost of hiring and firing a man may run from \$20 to \$2,000 depending on the kind of a man and the importance of the job" (p. 1). That was the cost leading up to the first World War as some Detroit plants experienced close to 600 percent worker turnover (Colvin, 1919).

Today, employee retention and the costs of turnover remain a top consideration for human resource managers across employment sectors. The surplus of workers surges daily with news of plant closures, government lay-offs, and nonprofits unable to secure revenues to continue.

The contrast in worker turnover nearly 100 years ago to today is reflected in tandem with the passage of laws to protect workers and their rights. This paper is a retrospective on worker turnover and laws and legal challenges that set a new tone for worker fairness, and it provides tips and techniques in strategic human resources management that emphasize organizational loyalty and some of the best practices used to entice good workers to remain with an organization. Treating workers as human capital investments is a prudent workplace strategy that can reap positive results to the bottom line on an organization's balance sheet.

Worker Tenure, Turnover, and the Times

Selecting, hiring, and keeping quality workers who “fit” well in an organization is vital to an employer in achieving results and objectives, and it saves money. As plant managers in Detroit found in 1912 and 1913, turnover in workers is expensive. At the time, replacement costs ranged between \$20 and \$2,000 depending on the type of employee needed (Colvin, 1919). Entering the 21st Century, cost estimates of employee turnover range between one and three times a worker's annual salary (CPA Practice, 2008; Cascio in Pearson and Porath, 2005, p. 10). Cheney (2001) summarizes from an employer survey of business across the U.S. that, depending on the level of an employee, turnover costs can range from “... 33% of an employee's base salary to as high as 250% “ (p. 6). Strategic human resource management practices that include precise job analysis, superior recruitment and hiring practices, and relevant training and development for workers—who are considered human capital assets, can be satisfying to

employees and help to build worker loyalty within the agency or organization. Many believe that these strategies increase retention, and contain costs associated with employee turnover.

Unlike 100 years ago when an unskilled factory worker's tenure was two weeks – for children, women, and men alike – as workers floated from factory to factory looking for better pay and better working conditions (Colvin, 1919), the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2008) reports that in January 2008 the median tenure with the same employer was 4.2 years for men and 3.9 years for women. The worker profile varies by sector, age, gender, level of education, and occupation. By far, public sector employees enjoy the greatest tenure on staff—averaging seven years of service between local, state, or federal employment (Bureau, 2008). Across all public and private sectors, younger workers ages 25-34 in 2008 averaged 2.7 years with the same employer, where those at 45 averaged 7.6 years, followed by 9.9 years tenure for those 55 to 64 years old (Bureau, 2008). The increase in tenure is reflected consistently by gender and one's level of education. Across the age groups, women continue to lag behind men in tenure—with the exception of young women ages 25-34 with a Master's degree (Bureau, 2008). However, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2009) reports that, since the start of the recent recession in December 2007, unemployment in the United States has nearly doubled—rising by 7 million to 14.5 million in the number of displaced workers. This high level of involuntary turnover may be due in large part to foreign outsourcing, plant closures, downsizing, and reorganization. The worker tenure profiles may ebb and flow due to economic conditions, but there is no doubt that they have changed considerably over the past 150 years. The profile of women in the workforce, for example, is dramatically different.

Where women had worked side-by-side with men on the family farm, going into the 20th Century they were working in the private sector in factories, offices, and as domestic staff, and

as clerks in the public sector (Guy, 2004). World War I shepherded women into jobs that freed up men for military service (Colvin, 1919). The Great Depression heralded the New Deal and the growth of public services that included the need to increase the numbers of expert public administrators and support staff (Filipova, 2009; Box, 2004). Long hours, harsh working conditions, and meager wages plagued workers without regard to gender or age throughout the 1800's and the early 1900's. This compelled workplace reform, giving the organized labor movement fodder for development within both the public and the private sectors (Filipova, 2009; Box, 2004; Colvin, 1919).

So, what really changed in the past century and a-half to influence worker turnover? One thing is clear, the shift from an agrarian to an urbanized, industrial society in the later part of the 1800s dominated commerce and prompted essential changes in the workforce (Filipova, 2009). Increased commerce triggered the need for more high skilled workers, and the growth of regulations required more government oversight in trading (contracts and finances), transportation, and protection for workers (Box, 2004; Carter & Harrington, 2000). Training programs, apprenticeships, and public education emerged along with the growth and diversity in commerce as businesses grappled to maintain a competitive advantage at home and abroad (Colvin, 1919). Managers, having absorbed the time and costs of training employees, were not pleased if workers went to a competitor (Colvin, 1919). On the other hand when work was plentiful, workers lacking incentives, and organizational loyalty, were eager to change.

Along with a changing economy and private workforce, the country's leadership needed a strong public sector to administer the growing regulatory functions of government (Filipova, 2009; Box, 2004; Carter & Harrington, 2000). The profile of public administrators evolved from the elite and learned men of high character, to patronage placements through a "spoils system"

aimed at political responsiveness. It eventually rebounded with a public uproar of cronyism and the assassination of President Garfield that led to a higher demand for the technically qualified expert (Filipova, 2009; Nigro et al., 2007; Box, 2004). The growing cadre of expert public administrators, and merit-based policies, emerged after the period of patronage to ensure fairness in hiring, promotion and retention, based on qualification and merit in federal civil service (Filipova, 2009).

Condrey (2005) concludes "...the organization of public human service management follows a pattern that is tied closely to the evolution of personnel systems themselves...[that continues to demonstrate the contrast and conflict between] ... opposing roles of civil service protection and management effectiveness" (p. 52).

A Changing Workforce Brings Complementary Laws and Legal Decisions

As workforce and management needs evolve, so, too do laws and legal decisions. The Pendleton Act (1883) signifies the end of the "spoils system"—it prevents termination based on one's political affiliation and introduces the merit system to ensure selection and promotion based on one's qualifications (Filipova, 2009). The U.S. Civil Service Commission created by the Act later splits into two agencies – the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board and the Office of Personnel Management (Filipova, 2009; Berman et al., 2006; Condrey, 2005; Box 2004). To further protect workers, the Lloyd-La Follette Act (1912_a) codifies "just cause" standards that require reasons for termination (Filipova, 2009). It defines "just causes" as those that would promote the "efficiency of the service." The Act provides whistle-blower protection for public employees who share information with members of Congress (Lloyd-La Follette Act, 1912_b). Under the law, employees facing termination or an adverse action are entitled to at least 30 days'

advance written notice, an opportunity to respond and to furnish documents or other evidence in person and in writing (or to a hearing depending on agency regulation), to be represented by an attorney or another, to be given a timely written decision, and the right to an appeal (Lloyd-La Follette Act, 1912_a). Enactment of the Hatch Act follows in 1939—it specifically prohibits federal employees from political activity, the mini-Hatch Act arrives in 1940—extending the “Hatch” to state and local civil servants where federal dollars are utilized, and an amendment to the “Hatch” in 1993 allows employees to participate in political campaigns, but further restricts their involvement in political campaigns while working on the job (on or off premises), at the office, and on government property (Filipova, 2009; Berman, 2006; Box, 2004). It protects workers from being terminated for refusing to participate in electoral politics as “volunteers” or in failing to make financial contributors to candidates.

Over the years, due process rights for public employees facing termination receive added scrutiny and are further defined by various U.S. Supreme Court rulings including *Board of Regents v. Roth* (1972)—to establish a worker’s property interest, and, therefore, rights to a hearing in cases of termination and adverse action, and *Cleveland Board of Education v. Loudermill* (1985)—that affirms the requirement for pre-termination hearings in cases of adverse action against public employees (Berman, et al., 2006).

The gains in worker protections from wrongful termination in the public and private sectors also help to prepare a strong foundation for fairness regarding employee retention in the nonprofit arena. Labor unions deserve a great deal of credit for improvements made in the wages, hours, and working conditions for workers across sectors, since the mid-1800s.

A series of landmark U.S. Supreme Court cases chronicles the struggle between management and labor that bolstered protections from discriminatory acts and involuntary turnover in the private sector.

In *Lochner v. New York* (1905), the High Court favored a bakery owner in his claim that a state law violated his property rights, representing his 5th and 14th Amendment rights to due process (U.S. Constitution). The Court overturned the New York State Bakeshop Act (1896) that had limited the working hours of bakeshop employees, claiming it interfered with the owners and workers, who both had rights to enter into contracts. This “substantive due process” was a departure from the traditional understanding of due process aimed solely at government procedures that follow rules of fairness (Carter & Harrington, 2000).

The *Lochner* decision did not stop the labor movement. On the heels of the Great Depression, the Wagner Act (1935) established minimum wage and hour parameters for workers—with some exceptions like railroad and agriculture workers, domestics and contractors—and, it established the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). In *NLRB v. Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation* (1937), the Pennsylvania steel company argued that Congress, under the commerce clause, lacked power to regulate labor/management issues in private corporations, claiming that the Wagner Act violated the due process clause that had previously protected “liberty of contract” (via *Lochner*) between employees and employers (Carter & Harrington, 2000). The Court sustained the Wagner Act as a constitutional exercise of Congress’s commerce power and ruled that it did not violate the Constitutional due process clause of the 5th Amendment. This enhanced workers’ power to collectively bargain through a democratically-elected labor union (Carter & Harrington, 2000). The case was significant in that it changed the labor-management dynamic, prompting the growth and power of labor unions as a

major influence in improving wages, working hours, and the conditions. It established the supervisory role of the Courts in administrative law and was seen as a tremendous victory for President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR)—as the case was argued a week after the President had threatened to “pack the court” by expanding the number of justices sympathetic to his New Deal plans (Carter & Harrington, 2000).

Following the Court’s decision affirming the constitutionality of the Wagner Act, in 1938 Congress enacted the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) “...to regulate minimum wages and overtime pay and to restrict ‘oppressive child labor’ practices in the workplace” (Condrey, 2004, p. 388). The Act covers those involved in private commerce and the production of goods, as well as most public employees at all levels of government (Condrey, 2004).

The series of laws and legal challenges set a new tone for worker fairness in the workplace. It is important to chronicle as it also establishes the standard for future acts and case law to protect workers from discrimination in hiring and wrongful termination that, in most cases, allows 1st Amendment protections for freedom of association and freedom of speech, 4th Amendment protections guaranteeing privacy, and 5th and 14th Amendment protections of substantive due process and equal protection under the law.

Perhaps the most significant law to protect workers from illegal and discriminatory hiring and firing practices is the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Title VII of the Act “... prohibits employers from failing or refusing to hire or to discharge any individual, or to discriminate against or segregate them based on race, color, national origin, religion, and gender in all terms and conditions of employment” (Filipova, 2009; Civil Rights Act, 1964). Some of the significant

laws enacted over the next three decades aimed at protecting public worker rights in selection, hiring, and retention include:

- Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967
 - Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972
 - Rehabilitation Act of 1973
 - Viet Nam Era Veterans Readjustment Assistance Act of 1974
 - Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978
 - Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986
 - Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act of 1989
 - Americans with Disability Act of 1990
 - Civil Rights Act of 1991
 - Congressional Accountability Act of 1995
- (Filipova, 2009; Nigro, 2007; Condrey, 2005)

In most policy areas, laws were extended to the private sector as a condition of federal contracts, and, in many instances, states followed suit and passed similar state laws (Filipova, 2009).

Civil rights issues involving gender, race, age, disability, veteran service, and options to have families and careers—by necessity or by choice, have implications for workers and human service managers that have not gone unnoticed or unchallenged. Such challenges are inclined to remain as business, government and non-profit needs, and the workforce to meet those needs, continue to evolve. As Nigro and others (2006) point out:

Public sector recruitment, hiring, training, and career development programs are by necessity adjusting to a labor market that has experienced profound demographic changes since the 1950s. A quick scan of the American workplace shows, among other things, a growing diversity of ethnic and cultural groups, more working mothers, and a steady erosion of the traditional family background and lifestyles assumed by traditional public personnel policies and practices. (p. 14)

The changes in demographics are reflected across more than 18 million public service employees who span federal, state and local government, and reflect about 13 percent of the civilian workforce in 2002 (Nigro et al., 2006). As the workforce and workplace change,

contemporary trends appear to reflect greater flexibility in public agency hiring and employee accountability (Filipova, 2009). However, more downsizing and government restructuring could increase privatization, part-time, seasonal, and contract employment, with less consideration for professional workers. It may, in turn, have greater implications on worker productivity and an agency's ability to maintain a competitive edge if technical and expert employees are lost and not replaced. It could affect the efficient, effective, and fair delivery of public services and government regulatory oversight. Public human resource managers may wish to be mindful of this trendy paradox in workforce planning as it can cost agencies dearly when a fully trained, public servant leaves to accept a job in the private sector.

Strategies for Employee Retention and a Competitive Edge

Government does not operate in a competitive market like private business, yet it must remain competitive to attract the best and the brightest to its jobs (Tompkins, 2002). Public employers have large numbers of union workers who fall under Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs) in contrast to those in the private and non-profit sectors, and, therefore, in many instances lack the flexibility in human resources decisions shared by those sectors (Tompkins, 2002). To increase competitiveness in the public sector, Tompkins (2002) suggests harnessing strategic human resource management by "... developing staff expertise in job design, organizational development, change management, employee motivation, and human resource theory" (p. 104), to achieve vertical and horizontal integration of personnel policies and practices that meet organizational goals, while maintaining alignment and harmony between functional units (p. 104). The plan envisions human resource staff as counselors providing information to assist employees from a service orientation, rather than as policy enforcers (Tompkins, 2002). Workers are respected as intellectual capital and treated as a strategic capital

resource used to enhance organizational performance. Strategic human capital resource management emphasizes upfront job analysis to develop a job or position description that matches the job, recruitment and selection techniques that more accurately match employees to fit the job and agency, training and development that is relevant to the job as an investment in the employee, and cultivating worker loyalty and commitment to the organization to increase retention (Filipova, 2009; Selden, 2009; Tompkins, 2002). These elements together share significant support as sound practices with proven results in increased worker retention (e.g., Selden, 2009; CPA Practice, 2008; Tompkins, 2002; Cheney, 2001; Griffeth et al., 2000).

Strategic human resource management practices emphasize that the culture of an organization is critical to employee retention. According to a 2008 report by the Partnership for Public Service and management consultants Booz, Allen, Hamilton, "... 90 percent of employees decide whether or not they will stay at an organization or look for a new position within the first six months on the job" (Getting on Board, 2008). Therefore, getting new hires oriented and quickly assimilated into an organization is vital if they are to feel of accepted and committed enough to stay with the agency. To meet that goal, the Partnership (2008) and Booz, Allen, help integrate and engage new civil servants from the time the worker accepts a job through their first year of service by using a technique called "onboarding." Efforts to successfully "onboard" employees during their first year of service makes them more engaged, increases retention by as much as 25 percent, improves performance and ultimately accelerates time-to-productivity (Partnership, 2008).

Bertelli (2006) also conducted a study of employees at two agencies within the U.S. Department of Treasury, who were surveyed by the Office of Personnel Management in 2002,

and found a positive, strong association between staying in a job and “friendship solidarity”—where a bureaucrat likes his or her colleagues in a friendly work environment (p.244).

Organizational commitment is fostered when employees get along and feel trust. This “cohesion strategy,” according to Tompkins (2002), breeds camaraderie through planned staff activities that help to form trusting relationships (p.107). Another tool to foster loyalty is called the “investment strategy.” It involves an investment in training and development of employees that has also proven to help create a bond between the worker and employer (Tompkins, 2002). This is also referred to as the “social exchange theory” that suggests if one party benefits from another party’s gift or action, an obligation is created to reciprocate (Schnake et al., 2007). Schnake and others (2007) did a survey of employees’ attitudes and behavior, and employee use of career management practices (i.e. training, career planning, and counseling). It was conducted in three state departments of a southern state, and found a significant, positive relationship between the use of training and other services, and job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and employee retention. The theories of worker investments and cohesion are further supported by results of a joint survey of 10,000 workers across 32 countries conducted in 2000 by the Hudson Institute and Walker Information. The survey shows that employees consistently identify three key factors in their loyalty to their employer: trust, fairness, and an opportunity to grow (Cheney, 2001, p.6). When workers are in a friendly environment where trust is reciprocated, their commitment to the organization increases. Another study of 155 workers also found that “... commitment had a very strong negative effect on turnover intentions—the lower the commitment, the higher the propensity for the employee to leave” (Elangovan, 2001).

In addition, the principle of justice or mercy in discipline outlined by West (in Hays & Keaney, 2002, p. 304), relates to the values of an organization and its ethical environment and

treatment of employees. If employees are treated unfairly, it can devastate the morale of the entire organization. That is why researchers recommend human resource managers focus on strategies to increase commitment through methods like those itemized in this paper to reduce staff turnover (e.g. Moynihan & Pandey, 2007; Bertelli, 2006; Cascio, 2006; Harris et al., 2005; Cheney, 2001; Elangovan, 2001; griffeth et al, 2000) .

The issue of fairness is one that strikes at the very core of worker values dating back to our founding fathers (Box, 2004). It is reflected in the struggles of workers in regard to wages, hours, and working conditions that generated legal tests and Congressional actions previously mentioned in this paper (e.g., Berman et al., 2006; Radin & Werhane, 2003; Colvin, 1919). Fairness is a reflection of both cohesion and investment strategies and two other human resource strategies outlined by Tompkins (2002) – the “retention strategy” that satisfies needs such as “...great benefits, pay at or above market rates, a friendly and positive work environment, and family-friendly policies like flextime and child day care assistance,” and the “involvement strategy” that empowers workers through greater autonomy and responsibility (p. 107). The values represented by these strategies relating to fairness and one’s commitment to the organization include empowering employees, satisfying employee needs (benefits, pay, positive workplace, etc.), human development, and trust (Tompkins, 2002). These strategies provide a proven pathway for human resource managers to follow in fostering an employee’s commitment to the organization.

Conclusion

Today, businesses and industry, governments, and nonprofits are dealing with severe limitations due to a severe economic climate that demonstrates challenges that are both domestic

and global. Therefore, it stands to reason utilizing good hiring practices, and bringing associates into the culture of the workplace community as quickly as possible, can aid in a worker's acclimation and positive assimilation, thus, eliminating turnover. Moreover, having a solid training and professional development agenda, along with a proven retention program, can add greatly to building the confidence of the new employee, help establish trust and a collegial work environment with colleagues, and create a mutually beneficial experience where the worker sticks with the new position and provides years of productivity for the organization. With the understanding that a new-hire does not begin to recover the cost of recruitment and hiring costs for an employer until they are on the job for about one and one-half years, recruitment and retention practices should become a strategic component of an organization's human resources agenda, with the worker being seen as a human capital investment.

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