

BUSINESS BOOKS

To retain workers, keep them engaged

Three books offer ideas on how companies can help workers feel valued and respected, which will then enhance their productivity and reduce employee turnover.

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BY RICHARD PACTER

rap@WordsonWords.com

The days of having and holding a job for most of one's career are long gone. It still happens, but many people have at least a half-dozen jobs throughout their careers.

I'm not surprised. Many firms seem to treat their workers as commodities, shrinking and expanding their numbers as market conditions fluctuate. Reassigning them, changing their responsibilities and expecting them to stay engaged, motivated and productive is a fairly common practice at many companies. Along with diminished or disappearing benefits and a widening disparity between executive compensation and the rest of the staff's salaries, it's no wonder that workers have come to believe that they're on their own. With few exceptions, they cannot rely on their employers' commitment to them. With the unwritten contract between both parties now dissolved, employers' attitudes and actions toward workers and their fears of high worker turnover become self-fulfilling.

Yet some firms still actively seek to cultivate and retain great employees over the long-term. Here are three new books that address the problems and offer remedies.

One Foot Out the Door: How to Combat the Psychological Recession That's Alienating Employees and Hurting American Business. Judith M. Bardwick. AMACOM. 240 pages.

Bardwick is a psychologist and takes a mostly psychological approach in assessing and diagnosing the problem of employee disengagement. She recommends that employers seek ways to make their workers feel valued by communicating with them and not just assuming that because they are paid, they will do their best. Tailoring responsibilities according to interests, skills and affinities is another method of ensuring that workers, especially younger members of the team, remain actively committed to their jobs.

Examples of dysfunctional and successful work environments are given with ample statistical support, as well as financial data demonstrating the value of Bardwick's approach in dollars and cents.

Giving Notice: Why the Best and Brightest are Leaving the Workplace and How You Can Help Them Stay. Freeda Kapor Klein. Jossey-Bass. 240 pages.

Klein looks at the problem from the angle of diversity. It's an extremely worthwhile approach, since not taking individuals' needs and backgrounds into consideration is a sure way to communicate to them that they do not matter. I once visited a firm that had a Christmas display featuring stockings with names for each employee in that office, with one exception: a non-Christian. They chose to just not include her, which was possibly well intended, but sent a message of exclusion, nonetheless. Considering that they had gone to great lengths to recruit this person for the position, a bit more thought should have been given to the matter. Kapur cites similar instances in which ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation issues impeded the career development of individuals and affected firms' abilities to retain talented and productive workers. She proposes a number of common-sense remedies, most of which involve consideration and communication.

Growing Great Employees: Turning Ordinary People into Extraordinary Performers. Erika Andersen. Portfolio. 304 pages.

Anderson uses the metaphor of a garden to discuss how companies can develop and nurture employees as a means of cultivating competitive advantage. It's an apt metaphor, and fortunately for readers, she recognizes its limitations and doesn't force it too much. She presents a number of very worthwhile ideas, including establishing agreements between managers and employees to define goals, tasks and expectations, and ways to measure and define these things.

Overall, her message is the same as the others': Engage and involve; provide everyone with a genuine stake in the success of the company above and beyond their financial compensation, and the results will be greater productivity and improved employee retention.

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