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RUNNING A BUSINESS

Readers, Experts Talk About Employee Retention

The [Nov. 19 Small Business Link](#) looked at ways small companies can retain and motivate top talent.

We asked Mark Wilson, president and chief executive of Ryla Teleservices Inc., and Tom Gimbel, CEO of The LaSalle Network, to be guest moderators on a WSJ.com reader forum about ways that small companies can hold on to good employees.

[Mr. Wilson found a way to hold the line on the departure rate](#) at his 350-employee company in the high-turnover telemarketing industry. [Mr. Gimbel seeks to foster a social atmosphere](#) at his small recruiting and staffing firm to help prompt the mostly twentysomethings who populate his office to stay.

Below are edited excerpts from the discussion.

MR. WILSON: I have found that having an unrelenting focus on leadership establishing "connection" with their associates has yielded results for our company. People feel as if [they make an important contribution toward] achieving our goals.

Conversely, we have found that initiatives that are incentive-based rarely do much to effect long-term, sustainable retention.

MIKE VAN HORN OF SAN RAFAEL, CALIF.: Small companies have many advantages in attracting [and retaining] top people. Here are a few.

DISCUSS

What do you think are the best low-cost ways small companies can keep their top talent from jumping ship? Share your thoughts on our [Reader Forum](#).



Flexibility. "Yes, we can bend your schedule around your kids' soccer games."

More diverse responsibilities.

[Employees] often take on a greater variety of projects.

Working directly with the principals. Small companies may be headed by more innovative and leading-edge people.

Less corporate bureaucracy and politics.

Un-retired opportunities. A growing trend: Senior people retire from a corporation, then go to work for smaller companies. [They often swap] less money for lower stress and flexible hours. The oldest guy working with us is in his late 70s.

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But many small business owners discover that the people they've lured away from large organizations aren't a good fit. These people may be accustomed to narrower duties, superiors telling them what to do (thus uncomfortable with initiative), having a lot of support staff (not resourceful). But by far the worst quality is exhibiting an "employee mentality" rather than the "entrepreneur mentality" needed in a small, dynamic firm. And I'm talking about top-level managers.

WSJ READER: I went from a too-big software firm to a small, privately-held manufacturing company with under 20 people.

At the software firm, the exit interview was a few minutes. When I [told the human-resources manager] that I was tired of finding out who my new boss was via email, he apologized for that happening once. When I told him the latest email was one of three "Your boss is..." emails, he stuck out his hand and said, "Been nice working with you."

At the smaller firm, the boss realizes that my skills cross traditional departmental boundaries. With experience in design engineering, writing, computer-aided design software, and marketing I get to do a lot. ...Best of all, the boss encourages me to do more.

MR. GIMBEL: The one thing that you can't rely on alone to retain top performers is money. Many people think you keep talent through salary increases and bonuses, but if the person doesn't like their job, they either won't perform or they'll leave.

MR. WILSON: I agree. If a person feels connected to a company and its leadership, the less likely that person is to leave. It has been our experience that focusing on company culture and personal relationships has kept our turnover numbers low.

MR. GIMBEL: I have found that people want to work with and for people who they believe care about them. [When the CEO and their managers invest] time to get to know them, employees respond with loyalty and passion.

MR. WILSON: The more the topic of employee retention is discussed and more information is shared about what it takes to keep people, the more there will be a shift in human-resources practices at companies.

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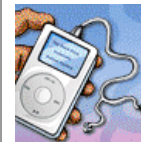
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