

MENTORING WORKS: An Avenue for Retention

Human Resource Management enhances organizational effectiveness by providing systems to help the organization have the right number of people, with the right behaviours and skill sets, at the right time. We want to attract an optimal blend of people to the company, but we must also concentrate on retaining them. This becomes a greater challenge with the current demographic shifts in Canada. Statistics Canada tells us to expect a 50% increase in the number of retirees over the next five years, compared to the last five, with fewer young people entering the workforce during that time. Youthography Inc.'s recent survey tells us that 85% of the "under 29" group in Canada plan to change employers within the next two years. We are faced with a period where long-term knowledge and experience is going to leave at a faster rate, and scarce new talent will be less loyal and less likely to remain.

The impact for Human Resources will be an increased emphasis on retention, to decrease "voluntary turnover" where good performers leave for reasons that an employer could have controlled. This means creating a healthy organization, where people will want to remain. It also means creating an environment where older workers will feel valued and more willing to ensure that their organizational wisdom does not disappear when they leave.

A retention-oriented culture can be enabled through coaching, with managers helping employees to maximize their strengths and contributions, or through developmental mentoring programs. These programs allow experienced older workers to share their insights and experiences with younger ones, helping them to grow and increase their opportunities. Such programs have been shown to have a positive link to increases in productivity, employee retention, and job satisfaction.

Successful mentoring programs tend to:

1. make mentoring a strategic imperative by adjusting the mentor and mentee's other responsibilities to provide time for developmental activities
2. match skill sets and style of the mentor with those of the mentee to maximize knowledge transfer and to allow a trusting relationship to develop
3. set stretch goals for the mentee, and provide support through access to appropriate tools and opportunities
4. focus not only on technical skills, but also on "organizational citizenship" behaviours that lead to success, such as understanding expectations, and networking
5. reward and recognize mentors

Mentoring works by recognizing that regular interactions within a workplace are not always sufficient to enable the knowledge and experience of older workers to be transferred before they retire. It works by sending a message to these workers that they are appreciated and can still contribute. It works by sending a message to young workers that they are valued and that joining your organization can provide them with the growth they seek. Although we cannot change the demographic reality, mentoring can help us to change its impact on our talent pool.

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