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Mentoring your way to improved retention

By SUZAN BUTYN

Supporting employee career development is gaining popularity in the drive to reduce turnover. And mentoring programs are a cost-effective strategy that also keeps skilled employees motivated, loyal and committed to the corporate cause.

Mentoring is a leading strategy companies can use to retain employees, explains Rey Carr, president of Peer Resources Inc., a not-for-profit company that helps businesses and other groups establish mentoring programs.

"It is a much cheaper solution than the cost of replacing a worker at two times their salary plus lost productivity, lost revenue, comprised customer service and reduced employee morale."

Mentored employees are more self-confident, productive, report greater career satisfaction and often experience faster career growth, Carr says.

"You can imagine," says Carr, "how valued new employees feel when more senior and experienced employees show an interest in them and what they have to say." He believes that the very experience of being selected can be a real boost to the employee's self-esteem and helps them feel important and significant in a large organization. "Mentors can often act as a catalyst and catapult the mentee's career," he notes.

"When we surveyed the top 2,000 productive corporations in 2000 we found that 70 per cent of them had either an informal or a formal mentoring program," Carr says.

Informal mentoring occurs when two employees (a junior and

a senior) naturally pair up instead of a more systematic, organized and documented approach.

Formal mentoring can take many shapes and sizes. "There is no such thing as one size fits all," Carr explains. Each mentor program must be custom designed for each organization and its culture. It can include job shadowing where employees learn how to do a job by watching each other, and can occur between intermediate level staff at different stages. It can involve a tag team of two mentors and two "mentees" for two months, or a mentor team and mentee team. Meetings can be held in person through scheduled meetings, casual conversations, by phone or e-mail.

There is also a term called "reverse mentoring" when young techies teach older, senior executives how to use computer technology.

Accenture Canada, a management consulting and technology services firm, has entrenched formal mentoring.

"Every employee deserves to be mentored," says Alex Cocq, manager, recruiting and resources at Accenture Canada, "and all of our executives are also career 'counsellors' (sometimes to an average of 10 employees). We make a commitment to our employees to help them grow their careers, so part of our system requires educating both our 'counsellors' and 'counselees.'"

Accenture's mentoring program helped it earn a ranking on *Report on Business* magazine's 2003 survey, the *50 Best Companies to Work for in Canada*.

Organizations usually implement three types of mentoring programs:

- new employee mentoring;
- leadership succession; and
- building on diversity (social responsibility) mentoring.

These programs accelerate employees' learning of what is important to the company, its values, ethics, culture and organizational structure, and builds loyalty and greater productivity.

Fiorella Callochchia, principal of consulting firm HR Impact, argues that the more formal the program, the better the payoff for both the organization and the employee. With labour in short supply, she says a good mentoring program will make an organization more marketable among its competitors to skilled employees.

An effective formal program sets out criteria with goals and objectives and makes the right match between participants. "Not everyone will be a good candidate for a mentor or a mentee," Callochchia cautions. "The best mentors are those people who have the confidence to be willing to let go of information. They're not afraid to share their mistakes and they have a 'we' approach." In her experience, the worst mentors are people who are insecure, worried about losing their jobs, or who can't handle being "shoved off the pedestal."

Being selected as a mentor is a very prestigious role and helps the career of the mentor as much as the mentee, so participants should be chosen with care. "True mentors learn as much as they teach," says Callochchia.

But mentoring is more than just the transfer of technical knowledge. Basic mentoring courses should be given to mentors to ensure they develop communication, coaching and relationship-building

skills, learn how to build management support, learn the key principles of effective mentoring and how to overcome potential obstacles.

To successfully establish a formalized mentoring program, Callochchia suggests the following steps:

- Determine the business objectives of establishing a mentoring program in order to tie it back to business successes.

- Outline key criteria for the selection and recruitment of mentors and mentees (job descriptions, expectations, capabilities) to be considered as part of the pool.

- Mentees should be assessed on their appetite for risk, handling mistakes and their mindset.

- Determine the type of training participants should receive.

- Make sure there is an effective process for optimum matching between participants.

- Determine what the success factors will be. How will you be able to measure success?

- Decide what the rewards of being involved in the mentoring program should be.

- Establish a concrete timeline for the mentoring relationship. Most mentoring relationships average one or two years.

- Build in a feedback loop for continuous improvement to ensure a viable and dynamic mentoring program.

Ultimately an effective mentoring program should dovetail with the corporate strategy to ensure its long-term survival by retaining its future leaders. Mentees have that most elusive and prized trait among today's employees in the shifting workplace — loyalty.

Suzan Butyn is an Ontario-based freelance writer.