

Call Center Café

Community For Call Center Professionals

Finders, Keepers: Retaining Good Employees Long-Term

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July 10, 2008

It's a familiar lament that you have heard or experienced many times: **Good employees are hard to find.** Although there is no shortage of workers, finding employees who are dedicated to doing the best job they can—and who are in it for the long term is, at best, like finding a needle in a haystack. After 20-plus years of managing a small, niche industry call center business, I have learned some tactics that have served us well in finding “keepers” – in other words, recruiting and retaining quality employees.

These tried-and-true strategies have been honed over the years, some by design and others by sheer happenstance. Together, they have helped us to create a culture that has resulted in one of the lowest attrition rates in the call center industry. I believe they will serve you well when it comes to keeping the best employees you are lucky enough to find.

Do the Math

Why is it so important to keep the quality employees you already have? Besides the need to provide the highest level of service to your call center customers, the cost of replacing an employee is astronomical. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that it costs nearly \$14,000 to replace a solidly performing employee. Some higher estimates range from 29 percent of yearly salary to several times an employee's annual pay. When you factor in lost productivity and the negative impact on worker morale, employee turnover becomes a very high-ticket item indeed.

I have found that the real secret to keeping stellar employees is two-fold: hire well and create an environment that makes them want to stay. We have many strategies that help us achieve these goals; here are just a few of them.

Hire Well

Because Beryl specializes in health care – serving hospitals, ambulatory care centers and clinics – we are on the look-out for a certain type of employee. For us, call center experience is not the most important quality in a potential employee – compassion is! Our call center advisors deal with people when they are at their most vulnerable: when they need medical attention for themselves or a loved one.

For that reason, our screening process is weighted heavily toward behavioral-based questions that query on the type of response that would display a candidate's compassion and empathy. We utilize scenario-type interviewing to reveal what a potential employee would do in certain circumstances. At Beryl, we hire for compassion and then train for skill. In fact, we prefer candidates that have not worked in a call center before.

Hiring decisions are also a team effort. It is not unusual for a candidate to be interviewed three or four times, first by human resources and then by various team leaders. Multiple interviews are instructive because each interviewer sees different qualities in the candidate. We have also found that the longer

the day of interviewing goes, the more potential employees let their guard down and show their true colors. We do administer more traditional tests, as well, such as call center data entry, typing and spelling.

The screening process doesn't stop at hire. It continues through the four-week training program, which focuses on behaviors, compassion and ability to do the job. Each new employee will receive a minimum of two weeks of classroom instruction. Exercises are highly interactive; emphasizing how compassion in all interactions is key to handling a call well.

These scenarios also help us assess how well people will fit in. We talk about “customer service” moments. Because we believe that past performance is the best indicator of future performance, we have no problem saying “you're not a good fit” if we feel the employee will not represent Beryl values well during caller interactions.

Make Them Want to Stay

Most full-time employees spend more waking hours at work than they do with their loved ones. Creating an office environment that employees want to come to each day is not just a nicety, it is good business. And, it's surprisingly rare. Far too many of the new hires at Beryl admit to criminally demoralizing environments at former places of employment. Low morale leads to high turnover and increased replacement costs. We've documented the financial rewards of cultivating an employee-

friendly work environment at The Beryl Companies for two decades.

We have found that investing in the company's most valuable asset – its people – pays off in bottom-line returns. I call the relationship between employees, customer loyalty and profitability the “Circle of GrowthSM.” Investing in people leads to happy employees who feel good about what they are doing and translate that feeling to customers. That inspires customer loyalty, which channels profits back into the business. Those profits are then reinvested into people, and the cycle starts again.

So how do we create an environment that makes employees want to stay? The five principles for accomplishing this are *open communication, the personal touch, maximizing resources, employee involvement* and *fun*. Here's a look at some of the strategies that support these five culture-building areas.

1. Open communication

Two-way communication is essential to building trust and employee loyalty. Town hall meetings, informal lunches with top management, and regular newsletters mailed to employees' homes all help keep coworkers informed. An open-door policy for senior executives lets employees know that they can have a conversation with company leaders whenever they feel the need. Not only does that telegraph that employee opinions are valued, it can also provide upper management with valuable intelligence from those who are on the “front lines” serving callers.

Open communication also means sharing company financials, strategic goals and progress toward those goals, for better or worse. When employees see the good and the bad, they are more likely to understand decisions that are made and support the company in sunshine or rain.

2. The personal touch

Voicemail, e-mail, text messages and IM have changed our work landscape. We rely so much on technology to make things happen faster and more efficiently, it is easy to lose sight of

the value of building relationships through personal connections. But reaching out to our employees shows we value them as individuals. A handwritten note to an employee establishes that personal connection.

Encouraging employees to acknowledge each other for a job well done also fosters camaraderie. Helping employees through a personal hardship – such as an illness, loss of a loved one or financial setback – goes a long way toward earning employee loyalty. And leaders should make it a point to be visible in the hallways, even if that's not their style. Not every employee feels comfortable approaching the executive suite, but many will pull me aside when they see me in their work space.

3. Maximize existing human resources

We have found that investing in employees allows us to reap big dividends down the line. How? Tuition reimbursement programs enable staff members to accomplish their goals, grow professionally and help build the company. In-house training helps employees develop their skill sets and contribute in ways they couldn't without additional mentoring. And whenever possible, promote from within. It shows you value your employees and the expertise they have developed, with your help.

4. Employee involvement

Employees respond best when they are involved in the development and execution of ideas. That's when true “buy-in” is earned. Tap the opinions of front-line staff members, who intimately know the day-to-day interactions with your customers. These employees often can brainstorm ways to deliver services more efficiently or cost-effectively. Or consider having your employees participate in creating your organization's mission statement and core values. Solicit their suggestions on ways to live those values every day.

5. Fun

A little levity can relieve stress, build relationships and spark creativity. We have put considerable effort into

organized events such as potlucks, movie nights and ice cream socials, which help staff escape the mundane and encourage socializing. We've proclaimed themed events such as a Hawaiian Day or Country Hoedown, and marveled at how creative employees can be in dressing to match the theme. And remember, senior executives set the tone for the entire organization. By showing a sense of humor and their lighter side, company leaders make themselves far more accessible to employees.

Keeping Keepers

Beryl's track record proves that when you treat your people like true contributors, it does the business tremendous good. Employee referrals bring in about 30 percent of our new hires, reducing recruitment costs. Almost all of our new hires are currently employed, which means they're leaving another company to work for Beryl and are thus more marketable. All of the work we have put into keeping keepers has paid off, both in higher retention and in the business press.

For four years, the *Dallas Business Journal* named Beryl one of the “Top Ten Best Places to Work” in the Dallas/Forth Worth market, and the Texas Department of Business has ranked us twice on their roster of best employers in the state. Most recently, we were chosen as the number two best medium-size company to work for in America by the Society for Human Resource Management.

If recruiting and retaining quality employees is at the top of your priority list, remember: finding keepers comes down to hiring well, and making them want to stay. It's just good business. Our ability to nurture the best employees provides exceptional value to our clients and their consumers. Our recruitment, hiring, training and culture practices allow me to feel confident that my coworkers will serve as the best extension of our clients' brands.