

Winning the war for talent

Becoming a Leader of Choice

How do you focus and keep talented people?

This issue of retaining talent is among the biggest challenges for many of today's leaders.

In the 21st century, talented professionals are increasingly mobile, have highly transferable skills, are internet-literate, well informed, and above all, sought after. Many managers and leaders are currently struggling to find and keep these valuable individuals.



By Dr. Bastiaan Heemsbergen

Consulting firm McKinsey & Company indicates that we are in the middle of a war for talent.¹ According to a year-long study conducted by McKinsey & Company, talent is the strategic asset of the 21st century and the availability of talent is decreasing.

A tight labour market, changing workforce demographics such as the shrinking of the most desirable labour pool (25- to 34-year olds), and the impact of downsizing on employee loyalty, have also led corporate Canada to search for answers to recruiting and retaining the strategic asset of the twenty-first century: **talented people**.² According to a 1999 Mercer/Angus Reid poll of 307 Canadian CEOs, 23% reported that attracting and retaining high caliber employees was their most important priority (second only to profitability, at 30%).³

How do you build strong loyalty among the most productive and talented people in the workforce? The Gallup organization has an answer. Gallup research

shows that people join companies, but they leave managers.⁴ Their findings suggest that keeping your people starts and stops with the manager. An individual may join Nortel, General Electric, or Disney because of their generous benefits package and their reputation for valuing employees. However, it is the relationship with their immediate manager that will determine how long people stay and how productive they are. "In the end, these questions tell us that, from the employee's perspective, managers trump companies."⁵

Gallup's meta-analysis was performed on data from approximately 200,000 individuals in 36 organizations and across 21 different industries. An associated research effort, in which Gallup studied more than 80,000 managers, focused on discovering what great managers do to create quality workplaces.

Gallup's analysis revealed the following six key elements for retaining talent:

1. "I need to know what is expected of me at work."

First, do your people know exactly what is expected of them? Are they able to measure how well they are doing with respect to the achievement of their goals? If people know what is expected of them and are

measured according to their contributions, they are more likely to see a link between their efforts and their performance. If managers' expectations are consistently unclear, people are more likely to seek opportunities where this is not the case. It is difficult to hold people accountable for their work unless expectations of them are made clear.

2. "I need the materials and equipment to do my work right."

Are you providing the right support, resources, and tools to enable your people to use their talents and capabilities? Are your systems and work processes facilitating the accomplishment of work or impeding goal attainment? If the tools and resources aren't in place, people tend to get discouraged and may perceive expectations as unrealistic. These factors may then become sources of demotivation.

3. "I need to do what I do best every day."

Do your people find that their talents, knowledge, and capabilities match the demands of their jobs? All talent is not created equal. Talents can be very specialized and narrow, and therefore knowing each individual's strengths and limitations is critical in maintaining optimal health in the workplace. For example, a chartered accountant has different role demands than a public

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speaker. It is possible that some individuals can do both well, but the competencies that are demanded of people in these roles are very different. Know the key competencies required in each role and ensure that they match the individual's capability.

4. "I need to know that my manager cares."

Do your people know someone who demonstrates compassion for them – preferably their manager? If they don't, you may find it difficult to retain them. The relationship between you and your people is critical. Do you truly listen to the ideas and concerns they express? Do you send encouraging messages that don't discount people? Talented, productive people thrive on being respected, appreciated, and recognized for what they have contributed. A weak or diminished relationship with you directly affects their staying power.

5. "I need to feel that my team members are committed to quality."

Do you recognize the real contributors and put them on teams with other people with similar standards? Everybody in your business unit knows who the real contributors are, and who the non-contributors are. If the leader tends to recognize the real contributors, and put them together with other team members who strive for quality, results tend to follow. Talented individuals set high standards and depend upon those around them to support their growth toward excellence. On the flip side, arbitrarily placing individuals on teams, or not dealing with people who consistently perform below expectations, can be demotivating for other team members. Gallup results find that team members want others to share their commitment to quality, and want to be part of an organization that challenges and enables them to excel.

6. "I need opportunities to learn and grow."

Do you create an environment that encourages people to improve, innovate, and create new opportunities? Or are your people afraid of making mistakes and taking risks? The challenge is to create a work culture that supports the exploration of new ways of "doing things" without fear of rejection or retribution. Individuals also need to know that opportunities to improve their competencies are available and encouraged.

According to Gallup's research, there is nothing very complicated about retaining great talent:

- ❖ Be clear about what you expect from people and measure their contributions
- ❖ Provide individuals with the materials and tools they need to perform their jobs
- ❖ Provide individuals opportunities to do what they do best, every day
- ❖ Ensure that people have a manager who cares about them
- ❖ Surround talented individuals with people who have a similar drive for quality
- ❖ Provide opportunities for individuals to learn and grow

Leaders who do these things are much more likely to be successful in keeping their most talented individuals. Those who are unable to do these things are likely to continue to lose talent, and their goal to become a "leader of choice" will continue to elude them.

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