

6 Tips for Happy Employees

You've got a great idea for a technical service or logistics business, your business license is in place and you're hunting your first contract. How do you get employees and then keep them engaged?

In most part of the country, anyone with a job is fair game for a deluge of job applications from prospective employees who are grossly over qualified, hundreds who are qualified, and probably thousands who are underqualified. In other words, finding employees for real jobs is not a difficult prospect. But here in Huntsville, Alabama, we have lots of good paying jobs with great companies going unfilled. Why? There aren't enough qualified engineers and contract management employees in town to fill all the open jobs. Some of these jobs are a result of the 2005 BRAC where many armed services jobs were consolidated from different places into a more local/regional arrangement. Some of the openings are a result of small company growth. Whatever the reason, the end result is that we have more jobs than we have qualified applicants. (NOTE: If you're reading this and want to move to Huntsville, shoot me an email and I'll put you in touch with the proper folks in the Workforce Development group at the Chamber of Commerce. They would love to discuss jobs and the Huntsville area with you.)

Employers in this part of the country tend to trade employees as contracts expire and new companies assume responsibilities, or they raid from each other or the Army or vice versa. So what's a small company to do against the giants in town like Lockheed-Martin, Raytheon and Northrop Grumman? In order to compete with the giants in the contracts world, you'll need really good people who are engaged in the company, their work and want to succeed. So how do you find these people?

1. Don't pay too much.

Pay a competitive rate for the job at hand. Jacking up the pay rate will only lower your profitability over the term of your contracts and won't necessarily get you the best people. It will mostly get you people who are motivated by money. While that's not necessarily bad, it's certainly not necessarily good. Wanting more money is a trait found in every worker, not just good workers.

2. Engage people in the work process.

Good employees want to feel like they are making a difference in their company. In a giant company, it will never happen. But in a small company, you can create an environment where your employees can be part of the process, not just a cog in the process wheel. As you discuss the work your company and its different departments, get your employees involved in designing the work, the systems and the improvement process. Create a feedback or suggestion system that actually considers employee ideas. You don't have to implement every idea that an employee has, but if you give ideas careful consideration and involve the employee in the feedback and discussion loop, they'll be thrilled. All employees have ideas. Find a system to get them up the ladder to department heads and management so they may be considered.



3. Get the right people in the job and get out of their way.

You've spent several months hiring just the right project manager for the new contract you just won. You even pay a signing bonus and moving expenses to get the employee to town and settled in. You have complete faith in their ability to properly manage the new contract. So get out of their way and let them do their job. Don't look over their shoulder and second guess every decision. Don't micromanage a good employee into submission. If you didn't think they could do the job, why did you hire them in the first place? As an employee, nothing is more frustrated than being micromanaged by an owner or other manager who doesn't have a clue how to do the job you were hired to do. Don't be one of those managers or owners.

4. Communicate your plan.

Nothing is worse for an employee than to be completely in the dark about the company goals and objectives and plans for getting somewhere. They don't have to know every detail, but do inform them about your latest strategic planning and how it will affect the direction of the company. Employees know when you're working on plans and they just want to know what's going on.

Make sure every employee has a physical copy or at the very least access to your mission and value statement. Explain to every new employee how this moral and business directive should affect how they engage the customer, how they interact with vendors and how it affects the way they do their job. This core company value statement is a powerful tool for communication with your employees. Your people want to be part of something grand and visionary. Make sure they behave according to your core values and reward excellence in achieving those values.

5. Get rid of ridiculous hiring practices.

If you want to compete with the giants for the very best employees, streamline your hiring process and make it employee friendly. Most employee hiring systems are fraught with ridiculous requirements and cumbersome steps. While huge companies need a robust software system for sorting out the thousand of applications they get daily, small companies don't. Think of potential employees as potential customers. How would you manage this system if these were customers rather than employees? I'll bet you wouldn't create a system with 28 steps just to make an application. I'll bet you wouldn't have them come in for an interview and then not communicate with them again for 30 or 45 days. Whoever created the systems in use by most large companies today clearly wasn't interested in recruiting the best people. What excellent employee prospect, with lots of opportunities and plenty of competition would pick your company with this stupid system? If you treat them as mindless robots before you hire them, how much worse will it be once they become actual employees?

Create an application system that's convenient for the applicant. I heard a college admissions administrator tell of high school students trying to fill out 12-page admissions applications on an iPhone. Set a realistic resume acceptance time and stick to it. As you cull applicants, let them know they are not being considered. As soon as the time expires, pick the ones you want to interview and get them in. If you need a second interview, schedule it within a week of completing the first interview process. Don't



tell me that your people are busy and we can't seem to get the interviews scheduled. Do you need employees or not? If you do, make it a priority. Make a decision and extend the offer. The entire process shouldn't take more than 75 days and in many cases can be done in 30 – 45 days. If you don't find a suitable candidate, tell them so and start over.

6. Allow your employees to take pride in their work.

While this may sound simplistic, it's difficult to achieve, especially in a contract or manufacturing environment. Create employee project teams to consider new ideas and how they might be implemented to reduce costs, improve quality or increase sales. If new ideas pan out, implement them in your company.

In survey after survey, employees tell researchers that money is not the most important aspect of their motivation in the workplace. Employees want to do work that matters and feel good about what they do for a living. While everyone wants to feel that they are fairly paid, it's meaningful and contributory work that makes people happy. In a now famous quote from William Manchester describing his experiences as a foot soldier during World War II, he said "A man wouldn't sell his life to you, but he would give it to you for a piece of colored ribbon."

Get rid of meaningless processes and procedures that don't add value to your company. Create an environment where your employees can take pride in their work and they'll never leave.