

Employee Retention

Your Company Needs a Process for Offboarding Employees Gracefully

by David Sturt

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Summary. Leaders put a high priority on recruitment and onboarding. And for good reason. But how you offboard employees can be just as important. When people leave, you should show them the same kind of appreciation and support you did when they were part of your... [**more**](#)

When I left my job at O.C. Tanner to help create a tech startup in Portland, Oregon, 19 years ago, I had no intention of returning. I had loved the job but was moving on to other opportunities. At a farewell lunch with my team at a local restaurant, we were all surprised and admittedly a little tense when the CEO walked in and asked to say a few words. He explained that he wanted to personally thank me for the work I'd done and told me I had an open invitation to come back to the company if things didn't work out. Then he reached into his jacket pocket, handed me a one-way airline ticket from Portland back to Salt Lake City, and said "I mean it."

The encounter was unexpected — I hadn't interacted much with the CEO during my years at O.C. Tanner — but it left an indelible mark. I didn't end up using that return ticket, but when he called me two and a half years later, just as the startup I had joined was taking off, I listened. And, when he offered me the position held by my previous leader, I took him up on it.

Leaders put a high priority on recruitment and onboarding. And for good reason. Those first few days or weeks can be quite influential. In fact, research we conducted as part of our 2018 Global Culture Report, which surveyed more than 15,000 workers across a dozen countries, shows that when onboarding is successful — centered on training, connecting the new hire to purpose, and recognizing early accomplishments — there is a 70% increase in an employee's sense of belonging, a 50% increase in their engagement, and a 37% increase in their understanding of organizational purpose. Conversely, a bad onboarding experience can leave the employee feeling uncertain about their decision to join, the importance of their role, or their future at the company. Turnover is expensive, and studies show that up to half of new employees leave soon after starting — within 120 days for hourly employees, and within the first 18 months for senior hires. Nearly a quarter of the U.S. workforce has been at their current position less than a year.

As important as onboarding and building loyalty is, we need to devote similar energy to what we do when employees leave. It can be easy to write off people who are departing, but there are many reasons to instead appreciate and support them.

First, as my story shows, rehiring is a real and often smart option. Companies who bring back former employees benefit from their deep familiarity with culture and processes, saving the expense of having to train an entirely new hire (at a cost of as much as six to nine months of the departing person's salary). The rehire also brings with them the experience, expertise, and contacts they have gained while away. When I returned to O.C. Tanner, for example, I found the lessons I had learned building a successful startup helped me considerably in my new, broader role. And it's been exciting to watch other returning employees come back better than they were when they left.

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Retention



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Even if you don't end up rehiring a former employee, you will find other advantages to giving them a positive and meaningful offboarding experience. They can be valuable resources during the transition — and more likely to help if they're not left with a bad taste in their mouth. Those who remain will see that the company cares about its workers as people, not just as cogs in a machine that are easily ignored or discarded when they cease to be useful. And employees who have been sent out on a supportive note might just recommend your organization to talented workers they meet in the

future, creating a new network of talent from which to draw.

Here are a few ways to better offboard valuable employees:

Really listen

When someone tells you they are leaving, listen to what they have to say about why. Respect the fact that they've initiated this difficult conversation and are sharing the reasons for this potentially disruptive change to their life. Are they leaving their job, team, or manager; or are they leaving for the opportunity? You might discover there are issues about which you were previously unaware, and, while this conversation may have come too late to keep this particular employee from leaving, you may be able to improve the workplace — and retention — for remaining employees.

Show appreciation

You want to have a candid, honest, and appreciative conversation with a departing employee. This is your opportunity to call out specific ways the person has contributed to the team and your company's success and to point out talents and abilities that they might not have noticed themselves but will serve them well in their new job. Think of this as a goodbye gift.

Stay in touch

Your efforts shouldn't stop after an employee walks out the door. Keep in contact. Drop them the occasional line asking how they are. If you see them at industry events, or on social media, reach out. If you happen to visit their new city, offer to take them to lunch. These kinds of touch points show that even when they're off the payroll, they're still a valued member of the company's extended community. It's another chance to show genuine caring.

A few years ago, I was able to put this learning into practice. When a talented director on my team let me know he was leaving, I was dismayed. But I understood the value of the career choice he was making and thanked him for what he had done for us. I made sure he knew the door was open for him to return but that I supported his

growth and development even if he never chose to do so. Interestingly, he just reached out to me a couple of months ago to see if there was a spot back on our team.

We all know how important it is to show employees that they are valued. But more companies and managers should extend that appreciation to people long past their last day of work. When you give offboarding the same care and consideration as onboarding, your team and organization are better positioned to thrive.

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